

Mob Mentality

Acts 19:21-41

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If there is something I've learned from working with teenagers for many years (and having been a teenager myself), it is that while a teenager by themselves might be perfectly rational, responsible, and sane, when you get a group of them together (particularly teenage boys) all bets are off. There have been many occasions over the years where I've been shocked at the things students have done or said when they got around others who were not a great influence on them.

Of course, as adults we grow out of that behavior and never allow our judgment to fall by the wayside in order to go along with a crowd. Obviously, if you have been to any sort of sporting event where adults are, you know that also isn't true. Normally sane, rational, even kind people can suddenly become nasty and hateful when surrounded by others who are doing the same (I'm aware of how easily I can fall into this pattern too!)

The truth is, mob mentality is a common part of the human experience. We like to imagine that most of us have grown out of the phase where "peer pressure" really affects us, but it is just as powerful in our lives today as it was when we were kids. Modern advertising, social media, "influencers", and pundits are aware of this and seek to tap into this very common tendency.

In our passage this morning, we're going to look at an extreme case of mob mentality that happened in the city of Ephesus. While it is tempting to laugh at the absurdity of what went on, if we are thoughtful about it, we'll probably see much more in common with ourselves than we would like to admit. My hope is that as we examine this strange chapter in Paul's ministry, we can learn some lessons about how we should conduct ourselves today.

Paul's Decision to Leave

Last week we left Paul on a triumphant note. He had spent more than two years in Ephesus diligently serving and teaching the people. He had been tireless in his efforts. God had allowed his ministry to expand its reach by enabling Paul to do some pretty unusual miracles. All these things attracted the attention of the people of Ephesus. But it was an event that had nothing to do with Paul directly that really convinced people that the God Paul was preaching was real. After the seven sons of Sceva were attacked by a demon-possessed man, the people of the city were cut to the heart and repented of their wicked ways, even choosing to burn their old spell books, and choosing instead to follow Christ.

After all of this, Paul seems to have felt that he had completed his mission in Ephesus, and decided it was time to move on.

²¹ Afterward Paul felt compelled by the Spirit to go over to Macedonia and Achaia before going to Jerusalem. "And after that," he said, "I must go on to Rome!" ² He

sent his two assistants, Timothy and Erastus, ahead to Macedonia while he stayed awhile longer in the province of Asia. (Acts 19:21-22, NLT)

Paul intended to head back to Jerusalem and then had his sights set on Rome. He wanted to head to the capital of the empire to see what kind of impact the Lord could make through him there. Before heading back to Jerusalem, however, Paul planned to return to Macedonia and Achaia, areas he had visited during his second missionary journey. He sent his assistants ahead of him to get things ready while he tied up any remaining loose ends in Ephesus.

The Instigators

While all of this was going on and Paul was making preparations to leave the city, there were other, more nefarious plans being made as well.

²³ About that time, serious trouble developed in Ephesus concerning the Way.

²⁴ It began with Demetrius, a silversmith who had a large business manufacturing silver shrines of the Greek goddess Artemis. He kept many craftsmen busy. ²⁵ He called them together, along with others employed in similar trades, and addressed them as follows:

“Gentlemen, you know that our wealth comes from this business. ²⁶ But as you have seen and heard, this man Paul has persuaded many people that handmade gods aren’t really gods at all. And he’s done this not only here in Ephesus but throughout the entire province! ²⁷ Of course, I’m not just talking about the loss of public respect for our business. I’m also concerned that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will lose its influence and that Artemis—this magnificent goddess worshiped throughout the province of Asia and all around the world—will be robbed of her great prestige!” (Acts 19:23-27, NLT)

We mentioned last week that Ephesus was home to the temple of Artemis, which was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It was a massive structure, four times larger than the Parthenon in Athens. Artemis was a fertility goddess, and the people worshiped at the temple by using temple prostitutes and engaging in all manner of sinful activities.

The people of Ephesus had great pride in their city and their temple. It was central to their identity as citizens of Ephesus.

A number of years ago, the US Mint decided they were going to release new quarter coins that had images representing each state of the union on the back side of it. There were design contests for each state, as every state tried to decide what best represented them. South Dakota would have Mt. Rushmore on it. Delaware touted their status as the first state of the union. Georgia’s coin featured a peach. Illinois proudly showed Abraham Lincoln on it.

If Ephesus had participated in this, their coin would have unquestionably had a picture of the Temple of Artemis on it. The people were proud of their temple.

There was a problem, however. As Paul had been preaching in Ephesus, and people had begun to believe his message, they were repenting of their worship of this false goddess. They were no longer going to the temple to worship. And for the people whose livelihoods depended on people worshiping at the temple, this became a major problem.

Demetrius was a silversmith who was part of a guild of other craftsmen who made idols used in worship of Artemis. He argued that with Paul's influence, their profits were dwindling and if they didn't do something, they would soon be out of business entirely!

Notice a couple of important points here. **First, genuine faith reorders people's priorities.** As people became Christians, they began changing their priorities. They stopped devoting their time and money to the worship of Artemis, and instead focused their efforts on Christ. If you claim to have faith, but it isn't impacting the way you live, the way you spend your money, the way you spend your time, the things you watch and read, and the way you talk, then you should probably question whether it is genuine faith or not. Genuine faith results in genuine change. Even outsiders should be able to see a difference. The pagans in Ephesus could see that the Christians were different, even if they didn't really understand why.

Second, people are tolerant of faith until it affects them. Demetrius and the other craftsmen didn't have any issue with Paul and his teachings...until it began to affect their bottom line. We see this same thing played out today. People are perfectly ok with you practicing whatever religion you want, as long as it doesn't affect them. The moment your religious beliefs even slightly inconvenience them, they will begin to attack you.

We see this in many cultural issues. People claim that they don't care that you are a Christian, but they will mock you or attack you when you don't participate in the same things they do. They become offended when you oppose something they care about. They believe in your freedom, provided it doesn't affect theirs.

And that's what happened with Demetrius in Ephesus. Demetrius was concerned that Christianity was affecting their bottom line. But he was smart. He understood the importance of putting the right spin on an issue depending on the audience. When speaking to the other craftsmen, he pointed to the financial issue. But he also emphasized that Paul's teachings would diminish the glory of their city and their great temple and the great goddess Artemis! This must not be allowed to happen!

One commentator summed up Demetrius' plan in this way,

It seemed to be a perfect plan—the craftsmen would be able to guard their economic interests, and the Artemis-worshiping citizens of Ephesus would see themselves as heroes for the sake of their land and beliefs. Religious fervor, nationalism, and materialism make a volatile combination.¹

¹ Barton, Bruce B., and Grant R. Osborne. *Acts*. Life Application Bible Commentary. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1999.

What was true in Ephesus in the first century remains true everywhere else in the twenty-first century. The tactics haven't changed in 2,000 years.

The Riot

Demetrius and the other craftsmen decided it was time to incite a riot. They worked themselves into a frenzy and sought to get others worked up as well. This group of craftsmen began chanting with one voice, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" They began shouting with great fervor and moved out into the city. Others heard them and joined in. In fairly short order, they had a full-blown riot on their hands.

The crowd rushed into the amphitheater in the city. This was a massive structure that had space to seat 24,000 people. We have no idea how many people were in the structure that day, but we can certainly imagine it was a significant crowd.

Luke tells us that everyone in the stadium was shouting, but it was pure chaos. Some didn't even know why they were there; they were simply caught up in the fervor of what was happening.

When I was in college and was doing street evangelism with a group on a mission trip, someone made an interesting statement: a crowd draws a crowd. When we would set up a spot to do evangelism, we would start with several of our team standing around listening to the speaker. When people saw a crowd listening to someone, they would stop to listen as well, because the crowd gathered made them think something important was happening.

We see this same thing happen consistently with the media in our culture today. When something happens, differing factions immediately begin shouting and sharing their views, hoping to gain a crowd. They tell their followers to share the story, because it will attract attention. For many, simply seeing a large number of people worked up about something will convince them it is important and that they should care about it as well. It's not a new tactic.

Late-night talk show hosts have begun to recognize this fact and mock those who are part of a movement but really are uninformed. They love to ask people why they are upset at protests. The answers are all over the place. All they know is that they are supposed to be mad, but they haven't really considered things for themselves. As believers, we must be aware of this tendency and be the voice of reason in the room. Instead of being quick to jump to conclusions and get worked up over things because our favorite news outlet, podcaster, or pundit says to, we should pause, gather information from a variety of sources, and try to look at issues through the lens of scripture. More often than not, we will find that the mob isn't leading the right direction.

That was the case in Ephesus. Paul wanted to go in and try to calm the crowd (and probably preach the gospel to them!) But his traveling companions wisely recognized

that this crowd was not interested in hearing what he had to say. After all, that is not the nature of mobs. So Paul stayed outside the fray.

The Jews ended up trying to push someone forward to speak. They were likely afraid of being lumped in with the Christians and wanted to make it clear that it was the Christians who were the problem, not them. But when the crowd realized the Jewish speaker wasn't one of them, they shouted him down. They continued to shout ever louder, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" There was no argument, there was no depth, there was no content or even meaning to their position. But there was plenty of volume. They turned up the volume in hopes of drowning out anyone who might have a contrary view.

The Dispersal

The mob continued their chanting and shouting for over two hours! Imagine the utter insanity of this scene. Everyone was worked up, but no one really knew why. I suspect they each filled in the gaps themselves to convince themselves their fervor was warranted.

Eventually, the mayor of the city managed to get a chance to speak.

³⁵ At last the mayor was able to quiet them down enough to speak. "Citizens of Ephesus," he said. "Everyone knows that Ephesus is the official guardian of the temple of the great Artemis, whose image fell down to us from heaven. ³⁶ Since this is an undeniable fact, you should stay calm and not do anything rash. ³⁷ You have brought these men here, but they have stolen nothing from the temple and have not spoken against our goddess.

³⁸ "If Demetrius and the craftsmen have a case against them, the courts are in session and the officials can hear the case at once. Let them make formal charges. ³⁹ And if there are complaints about other matters, they can be settled in a legal assembly. ⁴⁰ I am afraid we are in danger of being charged with rioting by the Roman government, since there is no cause for all this commotion. And if Rome demands an explanation, we won't know what to say." ⁴¹ Then he dismissed them, and they dispersed. (Acts 19:25-41, NLT)

The mayor's position was pretty clear. First, the Christians hadn't said anything about Artemis. They hadn't attacked her or even said anything about the religion. There was no basis to level charges against them. And the mayor made a second point: if Demetrius and his companions did have reasons to bring charges, there was a court system set up to handle just such issues. He said rioting solved nothing, and in fact, would create even greater problems for them with Rome. And he pointed out that he wouldn't even know how to explain what was going on to the Romans if they asked!

In just a moment, a bit of rationality made its mark on the crowd. They realized everything the mayor had said was true, and they had all been caught up in a fervor that really had no basis. So the crowd dispersed and went home.

Conclusion

As you read this passage, I hope you see that the playbook really has not changed much in 2,000 years. Our society continues to engage in the same approach. We pull together a mob, we chant slogans, and shout down anyone who disagrees with us. We have lost the ability to have a civil dialogue with others who view things differently. Sadly, I find this is often as true of Christians as it is of those outside the church. My hope is that we can see the absurdity of this approach and follow a different path.

With that said, let's draw some applications from this passage. **First, Christians should make an impact on the world by the way we live.** The people of Ephesus had begun to take notice of the Christians because they were living differently. The quiet behavior of these Christians was making an effect on the culture. Sadly, there are many things we lament in our culture today, but we fail to see they persist because we support them! The reason we have youth sports on Sundays is because Christians go to the events! The reason we have gratuitous sex and violence in movies and TV is because people watch them! The reason the political parties create such division is because we allow them! As Christians, we should march to the beat of a different drum than the world. We should be willing to stand on principle, even if no one else will do it with us. We should be willing to stand firm on what we know to be right, even if we are ostracized or even punished for it. Living for Christ will often cost us something in this world. Last week, we saw it cost Ephesian believers millions of dollars, but they knew it was worth it. The Christians in Ephesus had made an impact simply by being consistent in living out their faith. We should strive to be consistent as well.

Second, we must avoid the temptation of mob mentality. As much as we'd like to believe we aren't affected by the mobs at work in our world today, the sad reality is that we are. Our world demands immediate, extreme responses to almost everything. Anyone that mediates or pauses to gather more information, or tries to give a more nuanced stance is attacked as weak, uncommitted, or unchristian (or even worse, unamerican!) We need to be aware of the tactics of our world and refuse to be caught up in the mob mentality around us. When you feel your anger rising, ask what you're responding to. Take a step back and engage your brain. Ask yourself if this level of response is truly warranted. Do you have the whole story? Are there other perspectives you might not be considering? Think about how you would engage someone who has a different view from you. We should be thoughtful, not reactive.

The people of Ephesus understood that if you say something loud enough and long enough people will start to believe it. This should not be the approach we take as Christians. Instead, we should point people to the truth. Engage their minds, talk to them, listen to them and seek to understand them, and then find ways to show them the truth of scripture. Truth is the remedy to falsehood. It is the truth that sets people free, not our slogans or shouting. We should constantly look for ways to point people to Jesus—not only with the things we say, but also with the way we live.

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