



uncommon
THE HOLY ONE OF GOD IS COMING

LESSONS:

1. Was Jesus just Common? (12/7)
2. He would be Compassionate and Holy (12/14)
3. His Birth would Announce His Kingdom (12/21)
4. His Childhood Among the Religious (12/28)
5. His Life Growing Up Among the Gentiles (1/4)
6. The Challenges of the Jewish Religion (1/11)
7. **The Challenges of Gentile Religions (1/18)**
8. The Creator Among the Created (1/25)
9. The Lord Against the Deceiver (2/1)
10. The Priest Among the Worshippers (2/15)
11. The King Among the Citizens (2/22)
12. The Hope of the Nations (3/1)

Lesson 7 | The Challenges of the Gentile Religion (1/18)

Objective | If it was “**at the right time**, Christ died for the ungodly” (Romans 6:6) and “**when the fulness of time came**, [that] God sent His Son.” (4:4), there is something helpful for us to understand the culture and the climate of the times in which Jesus lived. Of course, the most significant was the religious climate in which Jesus was born.

One basic assumption most have about Jews in the first century is that they kept themselves completely separate from Gentiles. Josephus said that Jews “did not come into contact with other people because of their separateness” (Antiq. 13:245-247; Apion, 2.210). But perhaps the situation was not as strict as many have made Josephus’ words to suggest. Gentiles were not totally excluded from Jewish worship because 1) there was a huge “court of the Gentiles” in the temple complex itself that gave Gentiles a place of access in the temple complex. However, the inner temple courtyards were enclosed by a guardrail, and at the entrances to it notices were posted in both Greek and Latin, warning foreigners and uncircumcised persons that crossing into one of the other courtyards was punishable by death (see image); And 2) While Jesus’ self-proclaimed focus was on Jews (Matthew 15:24), He healed a Gadarene (Gentile) demoniac (Matthew 8:28-34) and a Samaritan (a mixed race, half-Jew) where he remarked that only the foreigner returned to thank Him (Luke 17:12-19). He spoke to a Samaritan woman (John 4:5-42), and to a Canaanite woman whose faith was rewarded when her daughter was healed even though He said, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 15:21-18). He healed the servant of a Roman centurion (Matthew 8:5-13) after which Jesus turned and announced to the Jewish crowd: “Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith” (Matthew 8:10, ESV). And last, 3) Even in the so-called “sojourner laws” of Deuteronomy 5:14ff, non-Jewish resident aliens are given instructions and commands *while they live within the nation of Israel*, quite parallel to what James instructed at Jerusalem (Acts 15:24-29).



First century BCE Greek inscription from Jerusalem's Temple Mount forbidding the entry of Gentiles to the Temple precinct, reading “no foreigner shall enter...”

God made it clear in Deuteronomy 4:5-8 (and elsewhere, such as in Isaiah 49:6) that Israel was to be a witness to the world around them – and lead them to the God of Israel. But it will be Messiah who will draw all men to him. And so, the gospel was shared to the Gentiles by Peter – albeit with Divine urging (Acts 10). Paul is assigned by God to take the Gospel to places where it has not gone before. On the island of Crete he approaches even a Roman governor, Sergius Paulus, and in Lystra and Iconium he tries to preach the Gospel to Gentiles outside of the Synagogue. Jesus had said, “Into all the world” and early Christians did – but what was that world of Gentile religion like?

As noted before, Jesus’ hometown was near Sepphoris, a town that in his lifetime became a hub of non-Jewish life after Rome had destroyed it. According to historian Richard Horsley, Herod Antipas “cultivated the Roman-Hellenistic urban political-culture of a client-ruler who had been raised and educated in Rome” (*Archaeology, History, and Society in Galilee: The Social Context of Jesus and the Rabbis*, 35). And it would follow that more non-Jews migrated within Palestinian borders – even beyond the Decapolis, autonomous city-states, though dependent on Rome, that were located along Rome’s eastern front beyond the Jordan.

In His sermon on the mount, Jesus described Jewish practices he called hypocritical of alms-giving (Matthew 6:1-5), prayer (6:6-6) and fasting (6:16-18). Yet, when he spoke of prayer, He also defined the practice of “meaningless repetition” among Gentiles as something His disciples should not do (6:6-7). Of course that means, pagans prayed. And of course, that means they were indeed “very religious in all respects” (Acts 17:22). There was ignorance in it – for certain (17:23) – but it was religion.

First, in the prayer aspect, their prayers were notably full of “babbling” (CSB, “empty phrases” ESV or “meaningless repetition” NASB) and “many words.” The practice of “magic permeated countless ancient temples and Gentile cults... in amulets, talisman, rings, seals, and books” (Morton, 64). These incantations were focused on managing aspects of human life through the supernatural realm. They often used foods, oils, wine and feet of a gecko to cast these prayers and spells. The repetition of these formulas were believed to invoke the gods to their aid and to hinder the evil eye. It was self-serving religious action. The result was how pagan religion had permeated the minds of people that the gods were for manipulating to our purposes. One example, from Catholic practices: “Catholic tradition understands the source of prayer to Michael to be embedded in the “Leonine Prayers” spoken by Vincenzo Pecci (Lero, XIII). They include a prayer to Michael for protection from evil. From this late 19th century prayer, St. Michael medals are now worn to aid in praying the prayer. You can even purchase the medallion online by Vegas Abby with the description, “Archangel St. Michael Seal Protection Medal Christian Talisman Sterling Silver Pendant Necklace.” (quoted in Morton, 68-69).

In another example provided by Don Richardson in his book, *Eternity in Their Hearts*, the story begins in Athens, some 500 years before Paul arrives there in Acts 17, where they were facing plague and devastation from an unknown source. When no cure was in sight, they assumed a god had been offended and they sought ways to appease it. With hundreds of gods, this would be near impossible in a city that Richardson called the “god capital of the world,” a place so full of gods that the Athenians “must have needed something equivalent to the Yellow Pages just to keep tabs on the many deities already represented in their city.” They were advised by an Epimenides, from the island of Cyprus, with a game plan of taking a select flock of sheep who would not be fed until they evidenced hunger. They were led to Mars Hill, on what was a lush pasture, and were watched to see which sheep would do the unbelievable and *not eat* and lay down. Several sheep, to the amazement of those watching, did lie down. Altars were erected at each spot where a sheep lay down, dedicated to an “unknown god.” On those altars, the sheep which lay in that spot was sacrificed and according to the story, the plague subsided. Those most were forgotten, one was restored and preserved, in commemoration of the removal of the plague by calling upon the “unknown god.” Richardson connects Paul’s quote, “In him we live and move and have our being,” to Epimenides of Crete. Paul again quotes Epimenides in Titus 1:12 from his writing *Cretica*. The second quote, “For we are indeed his offspring,” is a writing by Aratus, a Sicilian poet, who lived ca. 315-240 BC.

Paul had been preaching and writing in the great work of sharing the gospel to the Gentiles. His writing was made in the thick of that battle. On the other hand, when Luke is writing about the Gentile invitation and the mounting challenges that Paul (and others met), it was in hindsight. Luke sees the spread of the gospel *all over the world* and through all cultures as inevitable. Peter’s vision that led to the conclusion that “God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” begins the sweeping movement to the Gentiles. So as far as Acts is concerned, the spread of the gospel to gentiles is something that happens in an orderly, Spirit-ordered manner.

Then in Acts 19, the Gospel meets Gentiles. The resistance to the gospel that grows violent is no longer Jewish. A silversmith named Demetrius speaks to his guild of silversmiths and caused them to rage and to revolt about the teaching Paul had been presenting (19:28ff).

What was it that precipitated it?

Acts 19:11 God was performing extraordinary miracles by Paul’s hands, 12 so that even facecloths or aprons that had touched his skin were brought to the sick, and the diseases left them, and the evil spirits came out of them. 13 Now some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists also

attempted to pronounce the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, “I command you by the Jesus that Paul preaches!” 14 Seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish high priest, were doing this. 15 The evil spirit answered them, “I know Jesus, and I recognize Paul—but who are you?” 16 Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them, overpowered them all, and prevailed against them, so that they ran out of that house naked and wounded. 17 When this became known to everyone who lived in Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks, they became afraid, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high esteem. 18 And many who had become believers came confessing and disclosing their practices, 19 while many of those who had practiced magic collected their books and burned them in front of everyone. So they calculated their value and found it to be fifty thousand pieces of silver. 20 In this way the word of the Lord spread and prevailed.

In verse 11, the teaching and working of miraculous healings was not a surprise. Not only had Jesus done this in both Jewish and Gentile people (as noted above) but so did the Apostles. By Acts 19, the gospel had been proclaimed in Asia. Yet, the manner in which Paul’s miracles worked here in Ephesus is unique and extraordinary. We are not told of all the miracles accomplished at the hand of Paul, but we are told that some miracles happened in some *secondary fashion*. Handkerchiefs or aprons which Paul had touched apparently were taken to those who were sick or demon possessed and they were made whole (verse 12). The “aprons” which were taken could have been Paul’s work aprons in tentmaking. These pagan hearers were hauling off anything which Paul touched, and when the infirmed came in contact with these items, they were delivered. In fact, some of the Jewish exorcists, seven sons of Sceva, are named by Luke as seeking to work the same miracles but without any success (19:14). As usual, these signs and wonders were accomplished to authenticate and to substantiate the words of the Gospel Paul spoke – as truly being from God (c.f. John 4:1-2).

Yet here in Scripture is a brilliant picture of what Gentile religion looked like in the first century. (And I do not want anyone to miss that Jewish teachers had become synchronized within the pagan mindset here). They burned their books of magic (19:18-20). These were not “slight of hand mirror tricks. These were the books of incantations and chants that pagans used in their battle against the dark lord of this world. Even Jews were engaged in the same. Yet here, the Gentiles’ religion was idolatrous and superstitious. Centuries later, Christians were argue through Councils (i.e. the Second Nicean Council) and upward to when the Greek Orthodox and the Roman Catholic church divided – though papal authority was the major divisive matter, one that led up to it was when Pope Gregory III excommunicated the Eastern emperor Leo III who destroyed the religious icons that he believed Roman clerics were presenting to people who were blasphemously worshipping them.

Still, let me emphasize that the Bible text said God was working miracles by the hands of Paul – it does not say he was blessing his facecloths and aprons. What looks like a carnival atmosphere, this was not Paul’s emphasis or practice. He did not throw his handkerchiefs into the crowds, as some would do today. Instead, because they were pagan in their religious practice when the gospel was first preached to them, the people grabbed for any article which Paul had touched. The fact that people were healed is explained, I think, purely in terms of the grace of God. These people, with their pagan background, knew of only this way of being healed. They acted in a very simple faith and God in His grace gave them evidence for their deliverance for what they sought by faith. And so, the word was given the divine stamp of authenticity and authority, and many came to faith.

Next Lesson: 8. The Creator Among the Created (1/18).
Read ahead: John 1:1-14; Colossians 1:13-17; Psalm 19, 139;
Compassionate Creator: Becoming Human For Me by Bruce Morton; Chapters 7-9
 Sold on Amazon and 21st Century Christian or other Christian Bookstores.