

Who Are You Following?

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Acts 19:1-7

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In 1978, an unfathomable event took place in Guyana, a small country to the east of Venezuela. A group of around 1000 Americans had settled there from San Francisco, California after fear spread through the community that their religious rights were being threatened. The leader of the group additionally feared an oncoming apocalypse due to the threat of nuclear war. The religious group, known as the Peoples Temple, had many good-hearted people in its congregation. In fact, according to Jean Clancey who worked for the Temple Newspaper, “The people were incredible,” they were “people who were capable of committing themselves to something outside of their own self interests.” The leader of the group had created a community where “devoted and hard-working people performed altruistic deeds for the community, and some of them turned their lives around by getting off of drugs and crime” (David Chui, Rolling Stones Magazine, May 29, 2020).

On November 18, 1978, this religious group followed their earthly master, Jim Jones, as he convinced a group of 900 to drink a Kool Aid-like liquid laced with cyanide. This group of altruistic people followed their leader to an earthly grave. The overwhelming devastation of life in the Jonestown community was not

caused by people who were evil or destructive. The members of this group were people who wanted to remove racial divide and do good in their communities. Many had turned from their destructive lifestyles and had become upstanding citizens-- but they were following the wrong person. We are challenged today to keep our eyes on the Lord, rather than earthly leaders who lead away from Jesus and toward themselves and their earthly values.

In today's reading from Acts, we get a glimpse into another set of "disciples" who were following the wrong person. The Apostle Paul had just returned to Ephesus and must have observed some things that weren't quite right because as he met with these 12 disciples, he asked a very poignant question, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?"

When we consider Paul's question in today's scripture, there are several points that are worth exploring. The first one addresses Paul's ability to recognize a difference between these 12 disciples and other disciples who had been filled with the Holy Spirit. In other words, what was so different about these disciples that would cause Paul to stop and question them about the Holy Spirit's presence. We may want to explore what was that Paul was looking for in these disciples. Then, since they were "disciples" but lacked the Holy Spirit, who were they

following and what would be the consequence of following that leader? This will lead to the final point that we should consider today: Who or what are we following? Let's begin with what the Apostle Paul found noticeably different in those who did not have the Holy Spirit dwelling within them.

At the time, Paul was in the process of planting churches throughout the major cities of Asia Minor. After completing his work in Jerusalem, he was able, through the will of God, to return to Ephesus. During Paul's first visit to Ephesus, he engaged many people, including Priscilla and Aquila, who were baptized in the name of Jesus and received the Holy Spirit. They continued Paul's work in Ephesus and helped Apollos by teaching him of Jesus and the resurrection. Apollos would then go out to strengthen the church in Corinth.

On this second visit, however, Paul encountered a group of 12 "disciples." These appeared to be good men who were called disciples. But who were they disciples of? The answer can be found in verse 3 when Paul asks, "Then whose baptism did you receive?" and they respond saying, "John's baptism." Paul probably then observed their actions and interactions. He may have heard them express their beliefs, or maybe he heard them refer to Jesus as only a prophet or someone who had an unfortunate event at the hand of Pontius Pilate. Maybe, they spent time

speaking of the repentance that was necessary when they were baptized in the way that John baptized people. At this point, we don't know exactly what clued Paul into the absence of the Holy Spirit, but it was evident through his questioning that he didn't believe they had accepted the Holy Spirit. This makes us perhaps wonder what Paul was looking for that would reflect the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in these disciples.

Paul knew that when believers received the Holy Spirit, they would be different people. The Apostle Peter tells of this action in Acts 2:38. "Peter replied, 'Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'"

When the Holy Spirit enters us, there is a transformation that takes place and a drive to become more like Christ. If we think back to the Parable of the Sheep and Goats that Gary Waterson presented in Sunday School last November, we see one of the reasons that Jesus used sheep as his animal of choice in the parable. When we turn ourselves over to Christ, like a lamb to a shepherd, we will become followers of Him and seek to walk in His footsteps.

The Reverend Billy Graham helps us better understand what Paul may have been seeking when he shared the following through these excerpts from his book *Does the Holy Spirit Shine Through You?*:

First, the work of the Holy Spirit is to convict us of our sin. Jesus said, "And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment" (John 16:8). The Holy Spirit uses a mother's prayers, a tragic experience, a pastor's sermon or some other experience to convict us of sin and of our need to turn our lives over to Jesus Christ. He points to us and says, "You are a sinner. You need to repent." We don't like to hear that, but that is the work of the Holy Spirit. Without that work we could never have our sins forgiven. We could never be saved. We could never go to Heaven.

Perhaps Paul was looking for these kinds of behaviors. Graham further writes that:

...the Holy Spirit gives new life. The Bible says that we are dead in sins and trespasses. Our spirit within us, made in the image of God, is dead toward God. Mankind needs life. All have sinned. Therefore, all are dead toward God. The Holy Spirit gives us new life in Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "Unless one

is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). You must be born again. And the Holy Spirit is the One who does the work of making you a born-again person. It is a supernatural act.

Graham’s continues indicating that

...the Holy Spirit indwells us. Many of you are spiritually dead and are completely immersed in our hedonistic culture. God says, “I will put my Spirit in you. I will come to live in you.” Your body becomes the temple where God dwells by His Holy Spirit.

Finally, Graham says, the Holy Spirit gives you power to serve Christ.

“You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me” (Acts 1:8). Graham says, “I couldn’t do the work I am doing without the power of the Holy Spirit. I am a communicator of God’s message. He called me and gave me that gift. What counts is the message that—according to Scripture—Christ died for our sins, He rose again, He is coming back again and He is ready to come into your heart by the Holy Spirit and make you a new person. That is the Gospel.

Once we have given our lives to Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit is part of our being, there is going to be a change and this change will be noticeable. Paul must have been looking for this in these disciples.

We may wonder how it would be noticeable. Think about these words: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, self-control. These words describe the fruit of the Spirit as Paul describes in Galatians. He also tells us what we have “traded in” as part of our past selves: fornication, impurity, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing.

Paul is pointing out that when we accept Jesus and the Holy Spirit comes to live in us, that we will move away from our earthly “desires of the flesh” and we will work toward those ideals that were given by Jesus throughout His life on earth.

This brings us to our second point: Who were these disciples following and what would be the consequence of that choice?

These twelve “disciples” were not following Jesus, but they were following a man of God, John the Baptist. In fact, if you recall the words of the Angel Gabriel in Luke 1:14-15 concerning John, he states, “He will be a joy and delight to you, and

many will rejoice because of his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great in the sight of the Lord." John the Baptist is great in the sight of the Lord. From an earthly standpoint, John the Baptist would be one of the most upstanding people in all of history. According to biblestudytools.com, "Apart from Jesus Christ, John the Baptist is probably the most theologically significant figure in the Gospels."

Many of you probably know the bullet points of John's story: John the Baptist was born to a barren woman, Elizabeth. He led an obscure lifestyle in the desert. He ended about 400 years of prophetic silence. He not only introduced Jesus to world as the "Lamb of God," but he baptized him which served as the cue for God to descend upon Jesus and mark the beginning of Jesus' ministry. All in all, it seems that John the Baptist would be a good person to have as a leader.

However, being a follower of John...or any other human being, besides Jesus Christ only leads to one destination: hell. As Jesus said in John 14:6, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the father but through me."

John the Baptist was acutely aware of this fact as shown in his words in John 1:7-8, "And this was his message: "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." John the Baptist knew

that his baptism was not enough to bring about our salvation. He was always pointing away from himself to Jesus Christ. And Jesus says the same thing in Matthew 28 when He give us the great commission, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

Romans 8:9-11 also speaks directly to the inhabitation of the Holy Spirit,

“You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. 10 But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. 11 If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.”

This understanding allows us to come into fellowship with Jesus and causes our lives to be changed. For these twelve “disciples,” it happened in this manner, “And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying. There were about twelve men in all.” (Acts 19:6-7). At this point, you might be questioning whether speaking in

“tongues and prophesying” are important indicators of having the Holy Spirit in you. I don’t believe so, but having the Holy Spirit within you will cause a change. That change should cause us to be so filled with the joy of Christ that it disrupts our lives and tears down who we are. It brings to life a new confidence through the Holy Spirit who is willing to boldly proclaim the Name of Jesus as the way and the truth and the life. And that there is no way to the Father, except through Jesus Christ.

Now, we are at the tough part of today’s sermon. What would the Apostle Paul conclude about us if he were to spend time observing us as we go to work, shop at the store, watch our choice of TV shows or read our books, interact on the internet, go out hunting or fishing, listen to our phone conversations...in other words, see who we really are. Would he walk up to each of us and have to ask the question, “Have you received the Holy Spirit since you were baptized?” Or, would your life show who you belong to?

Some people’s evidence of the Holy Spirit is incredibly faith inspiring. There was a couple in my previous church, named Steve and Joy Wiley. When they had both retired, Steve came to know Christ and committed his life to Jesus. Their next reaction was to put their home and all their belongings up on the auction block.

They literally sold everything they owned and became missionaries in Sudan, Africa. Their journey has taken them to orphanages within Sudan where they are sharing God's love and His story of salvation. They have been sent home twice due to the violence, but they continue to seek to return to ensure that others are introduced to the Savior and have the opportunity to be saved. The Wileys listened to the Holy Spirit, committed to his guidance and direction, and moved off their place of comfort to fulfill the Holy Spirit's desire for their lives. However, if you met Steve and Joy, you wouldn't know that they have been on great adventure, doing the heroic work of "going and making disciples of all the nations." Their humility makes the Holy Spirit the star of the show in their lives.

Will the Holy Spirit ask all of us to be missionaries in Sudan, Africa? Probably not. However, I do believe that the Holy Spirit has a purpose for each and every one of us. According to 1 Corinthians 12:4-7:

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them.

There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.

I love this passage as it describes our individuality and our purpose. First, it points out that we all are gifted with “different kinds of gifts.” Notice that the verse does not say that “some” are gifted, it says that “all” are gifted. Second, each gift is the work of God and, therefore, will fulfill the purpose of God. We can say that a person is gifted in many worldly things; however, if the gift isn’t being used to advance God’s kingdom, then we are missing the point. Third, our gifts should work toward the common good, not our own fame, riches or selfishness, but the common good.

Today, we have discovered, through the eyes of Paul, the need to have a clear focus on following Jesus, not great people, not even John the Baptist, but Jesus himself. Paul makes it clear that there is a difference between a person with the Holy Spirit and one without. This difference is evidenced in our actions. Hopefully, this will cause each of us to take some bold steps in the future:

1. Choose to follow Jesus and only Jesus from this day forward.
2. Commit to listening to the Holy Spirit and to following His leadership in your life.
3. Go and boldly proclaim the name of Jesus as the Son of God and the only one who can provide salvation.

And all of God's people said...😊