

*Words and Deeds: The Root of Our Authority*  
*By Jason Huff*  
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*Psalm 20; Luke 10:17-24; Acts 19:11-20*

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Acts 19:11-20. May God open our ears to hear His perfect, marvelous, holy Word. “God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them. Some Jews who went around driving out evil spirits tried to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who were demon-possessed. They would say, “In the name of Jesus, whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out.” Seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this. One day the evil spirit answered them, “Jesus I know, and I know about Paul, but who are you?” Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and overpowered them all. He gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding. When this became known to the Jews and Greeks living in Ephesus, they were all seized with fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor. Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed their evil deeds. A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas. In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.”

Do you ever plug your phone in to charge at night, and you wake up in the morning, and you’re almost to zero or you can’t even turn the thing on? Don’t you hate that? At first, we’re like, “What’s wrong with my phone?” But almost every time, when I look carefully, I find that something’s not plugged in right. Somebody unplugged the charger from the socket, or the phone fell into a position where the plug came loose. It’s crazy frustrating, but we totally understand what happened. If you’re not connected to the power, you’re not going to charge.

We know we’ve got to be plugged in to get the electricity we need. But on Mother’s Day, we can also all remember what our parents told us about not playing with the light socket, right? How did that go? Something like, “Don’t stick that silverware into the socket!” You think we’d be smarter than that, but at a young age, we don’t recognize that misusing power can be dangerous. At the pregnancy center, we have those little plastic tabs over all the outlets that a child could potentially get to. Power has to be used correctly in order to be safe and helpful.

Today’s passage is all about power and authority. It’s a hard passage because it goes against modern thinking. It’s also hard because if we misinterpret it, we might fear what happens here. But this passage is meant to show us that God is the root of our authority, how the Holy Spirit makes power available to believers, and how we should understand supernatural power – how we must be “plugged in” to the Holy Spirit in order for us to expect God’s power to be working in our lives.

So the passage starts with the phenomenal story of God’s power working through Paul, that even things he touched were somehow blessed by the Holy Spirit and had the power, through faith, to heal and to overcome evil spirits. Amazing, right?

This is an extremely rare situation. At times, some people have believed in “relics,” items owned by special saints that can cure disease or some such thing. Think about the stories about the Holy Grail in medieval times, stories that God would grant life to those who drank from it. A lot of stories about relics are kind of ridiculous. Yet in this case, it was true. The Spirit worked even through items Paul touched to heal the faithful and those they loved.

Luke is very clear about what is and isn't going on here. In his gospel, Luke says Jesus does miracles. But here, Luke says that “God did extraordinary miracles through Paul.” God works through Paul, and that's awesome. Paul makes himself available to the Spirit, willing to be used as the Spirit desires. He pursues holiness so that he can be a pure vessel for the Spirit. Paul's willingness to follow every day means that God can and will use him for these amazing works. But it's God doing miracles through Paul. Paul is not conjuring up miracles out of his own power. People receive miracles through Paul, but all the glory goes to God.

So is there something supernatural about these handkerchiefs or towels? No. The people who touched them had confidence in Jesus and confidence that Paul was working in Jesus' name. Remember how one woman believed all she needed to do was touch the hem of Jesus' cloak to be healed. A centurion knew if Jesus just said the word, his servant would be healed. Their faith wasn't in the cloak or the words; their faith was in God who makes miracles happen.

Now that's where things go south in this passage for the Jewish exorcists. Let's talk briefly about these guys. The Old Testament is very clear that there is a spiritual reality that we cannot see, of angels and spirits. However, it rarely talks about evil spirits or possession or anything like that. There are no rituals or formulas in the Bible on how to deal with them, and it's plainly not something the Israelites talked about or dealt with much. Evil spirits were primarily the realm of the other nations that worshipped false gods.

In the New Testament era, the spiritual world is stirred up by Jesus' coming. These evil spirits knew their time was short, that the redeemer of humanity had come, and they are upset that their doom is now certain. Jesus' ability to drive out spirits proved His authority from God the Father. The powers of darkness know they are defeated. So they try to stir things up.

These Jewish exorcists are probably trying to make a profit from it, and they think they might have found something powerful in the name of Jesus. Jewish exorcists were well known because Israel's religion was ancient and Hebrew prayers sounded mystical to the Greeks; whether or not they were effective, we don't know. Now Jesus has come, and people really are being healed. Just a word of Jesus' grace from Paul or the touch of his hankie, and people are being freed from whatever they faced. These Jewish exorcists think, “Hey, that's something we haven't tried before...the name of Jesus.”

But there's a problem...they don't believe in Jesus as the Son of God. They are thinking magically, that the *name* of Jesus has power in and of itself apart from Jesus *Himself*. They treat the name of Jesus like a spell to learn; say the magic words and poof! No more problem! But that's not the way God built the universe to work. There are no special formulas that make God to do something for us, no special words that force His hand. You cannot say The Lord's Prayer and expect that God will do something for you just because you said it. That's not how it works!

These exorcists learn this the hard way. This spirit that the exorcists try to cast out answers them. Like every evil spirit put to the test, it acknowledges Jesus – Jesus has power over this thing. And because Paul is Jesus’ servant, he’s also known to this spirit. But who are *these* guys? There’s a sense of humor in the way Luke writes this. The possessed man jumps them – and they wind up running through the streets naked and bleeding, which to the modesty of the Jews was like the worst thing that could happen to them.

Word spreads, and everyone becomes fearful and holds Jesus in high honor. In this one incident, the magical beliefs of this city, a city known as an occult center, come crashing down around them. These respected Jewish mystics have no power, no spells, no incantations that can help them. But those who know and love and preach Jesus have genuine power through the Holy Spirit – power to heal, to set things right, even power over the supernatural.

This is huge because the ancient world was steeped in mysticism and superstition and magical ways of thinking. Pagans offered sacrifices to all these different gods to get them on their side, to influence and appease them. They paid money for spiritists to come to their homes and say incantations to ward off evil because they were afraid, because they didn’t know the power of God. In a world full of false gods and spiritual con men, where modern medicine was non-existent and the reality of death and suffering were always in front of you, you looked for any possible way to make things a little better. For the people of Ephesus to start recognizing all of their magical thinking was false was amazing.

It’s even more amazing when we hear that believers started coming out of the woodwork confessing that they had attempted magic too. And as they confessed, they burned all their magical junk, their scrolls and materials. This stuff was expensive. And a drachma was a day’s wage. If you think of minimum wage at about \$8 and 8 hours a day of work, what they burned was worth no less than \$3,200,000.

The word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power. The people of Ephesus were changed by the work of the Holy Spirit through Paul. They learned that a relationship with Jesus is the only place we find spiritual power and authority. But through Jesus, we have access to God the Father, access to the Spirit, and we can receive the richness of His blessings.

I want to spend our final few moments here today thinking about what this all means for us. While it seems far removed from our era, there’s so much here that we should unpack. The first thing the passage relates to us is this: ***Christians rely exclusively on Jesus for strength, not superstition or magic.*** In previous times, that was more obvious. Witchcraft wasn’t tolerated and superstition was strongly frowned upon. Now, they are making a comeback. People still have all those fears and worries and concerns the ancients did, and without God in the picture, people want to have some sense of control or influence over the unknown.

Wicca and various pagan religions are returning. Tarot cards are a hip thing, just like Native American dreamcatchers. Horoscopes and eastern mysticism are becoming more popular. In the absence of faith in Christ, a desire for power over our circumstances is compelling. And if you’ve dabbled in any of those things, throw them away. Get rid of them. You don’t need the spiritual oppression of those things in your life.

That doesn't mean we can't celebrate creativity and imagination. I'm not condemning "what-if" kinds of stories that make us think about our own world. Harry Potter and Narnia and Middle-Earth were all created by Christians. They use stories of myths and legends and magic to give us insight into the real world God created. They aren't harmful as long we understand that magic in those imaginary worlds is very different from the way magic exists in our world. In our world, magic is not from God; it is never a force for good, only a pursuit of self-centeredness and personal gain that tries to manipulate evil spirits – not something we ever want to do.

Most of us have no idea about these things; that's good. That's why I want to move on to the most important thing to learn here: ***the Holy Spirit bestows authority and extraordinary gifts of power to the saints for the glory of God and the service of others.*** Now don't be disappointed that your towel doesn't cure cancer. The extraordinary power described here is mentioned sparingly, and only of a few other apostles like Peter. Not every believer has these extraordinary gifts.

Yet God continues to do the extraordinary through us, and we should expect that it will continue to happen. I do not believe that the Spirit has discontinued giving spiritual gifts to believers. I hear about the power of the Holy Spirit showing up in unexpected places. Go to Africa and hear of villages so blessed by learning about Christ that the local witch doctor becomes a pastor and burns all his old supplies. Go further east and hear about dreams that tell Muslims that Isa, their name for Jesus, is the true Messiah and not Mohammed. Go even further and hear of healings, of a church that stands strong despite huge persecution by the Chinese government because the Spirit has given them to withstand the constant attacks. The Spirit is alive and well and moving through believers around the world.

With the Holy Spirit, so much is possible. My good friend Lynn at Compassion told me how several years ago, her sister was close to death and in fact flatlined for thirty seconds. She took authority and prayed and told her sister to live, and you know what? Her sister is still alive today. I have a friend Ed in California who I meet with online for accountability. He tells of how he prayed for a gal with huge health issues in the checkout line of a grocery store. Two weeks later, she came back and the doctors found nothing! It's not just overseas; it's here and now that we have the Spirit working through us.

I've never done this before, but there's something from last week's sermon so important that I'm going to quote myself: "You have power. Power to do the Lord's will. Not in your own strength, but in the perfect power of the Lord that He promised you and has given you. What the Lord wants you to do, whatever that is, you have power to do."

You are given authority, too...the authority to do God's will. In 2 Corinthians 13, dealing with some hard issues in the Corinthian church, Paul says that he doesn't want to be harsh in the use of his authority, but that authority was given to him by God to build up the church. In his first letter to the Thessalonian church, Paul talks about how he instructed them by the authority of the Lord Jesus. Paul encouraged the elder named Titus to "encourage and rebuke [believers] with all authority." And Jesus Himself gave authority to the apostles for the work they did, to overcome evil and to heal every disease and sickness. He is the One our authority comes from; He is the One who gives us the Spirit to overcome the world in His name.

So why don't we see more of the miraculous taking place? First, I don't think we realize that the power is even available to us. You don't try to plug in a lamp when you don't think there's a socket. Second, we fear testing our faith. What if we pray and nothing happens? What if we ask for power we don't receive? There are answers to that, but it can be frightening to have your faith proven true. When you are completely and totally convinced of the reality of God, it can be scary because we realize we truly are sinners in desperate need of God's grace. And thankfully, He's promised that grace to all who believe.

Why else doesn't the miraculous happen? James, the brother of Jesus, is blunt about it: "You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures." Remember how magic is was about self and control and manipulation to get ahead, not asking God, not about proper motives. We don't want to have magical thinking. We need to come to God with the right attitude, one desiring His will and glory.

The power of the Holy Spirit and the authority we are given are for the glorification of God and the well-being of others. When we pray, the question at hand is, "Does this request glorify God and is it His will for this person, for their well-being?" That question helps us understand why we do not always see the answers we want. Only if both of those questions are a "yes" will God work. Paul pleaded with God to take away a thorn in his side – we think it was probably failing eyesight – and God said, "My power is made perfect in weakness." It could have glorified God for Paul's problem to go away, but it was God's will that God would be glorified through Paul despite whatever issue Paul had.

There's also the simple issue of obedience. James also writes, "Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective."

I've hardly been anywhere, any church, where this happens. So I'm going to encourage us to begin doing that. At the end of the service today and at regular times throughout the year, I'll make some time available so that if you'd like prayer for healing, the elders and I will do that for you together like James says. We want to walk in faith and obedience, so my thought is, let's obey the clear teaching of the apostles.

We have seen the power of God in our lives, whether or not we've recognized it came from Him. I believe God has worked through many of us at different times to bless others. But what would it be if we anticipated that God will work through us if we are willing to serve rather than to be served? Would our lives change if we expected God to work in powerful ways through us? We have authority in God, Paul says, and are given weapons that have divine power to demolish spiritual strongholds. Will we use it to give glory to our God and Savior?