

## THE DANGER FROM SPECIAL INTERESTS

### INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Senator Tammy Baldwin from my home state of Wisconsin has this statement on her campaign web site: **“Tammy is putting Wisconsin first and standing up to big corporations and powerful special interests who want Washington to keep working for them--- not Wisconsin.”** The term “special interests” is a dirty word in the world of politics. It is associated with other negative things like lobbyists.

According to an outfit called Open Secrets, Big Pharma has 1,854 lobbyists who spent \$382 million on lobbying the federal government for their special interests in 2023. Supposedly there are 12,112 registered federal lobbyists in Washington, which amounts to over 22 lobbyists for every member of Congress. (RepresentUs, 10/27/2025)

An organization called RepresentUs defines a special interest group as **“an organization of people or entities that share a common interest or goal.”** Defined in that way “special interests” does not seem to be so inherently negative. Economist Thomas Sowell observes, **“The secret of these verbal fireworks from all parts of the political spectrum is that only the groups supporting one’s opponents are called special interests. Politicians do not call their own supporters special interests. Therefore every candidate can be against special interests...:”** (*Jewish World Review*, 2/3/2004)

The truth is that all of us are part of special interest groups, and special interest groups are just part of politics. We are pro-lifers or pro-choicers. We belong to unions or are small business owners or have connections with corporate America. We have handicaps or are senior citizens or are concerned about family values or are defense workers or get government assistance. When our voices are heard in government, that is legitimate political expression. When the voices of others are heard, that is the influence of special interests.

The passage before us today describes what happens when special interests get their toes stepped on and blame Christians for their pain. I hope that we will learn something from how the Christians in this story respond, and I hope that we will be challenged by considering the special interests that we have that may hinder us from being what God would have us to be.

(PROJECTOR ON--- THIRD MISSIONARY JOURNEY) In our ongoing study of the Book of Acts we have been looking at the third missionary journey of the Apostle Paul. We have seen that he has spent the bulk of his time on this trip at Ephesus. (EPHESUS MAP) Paul spent more time in this city than in any other place he visited on his missionary travels. His efforts in preaching the gospel were bearing much fruit. We saw last week that Ephesus was a center for practicing magic and divination and fortune

telling. (EPHESUS RUINS) But God performed some amazing miracles through the Apostle Paul, and many people were becoming Christians, not just in Ephesus, but in the surrounding area as well.

I.

As Paul approaches the end of his time in Ephesus, we find in vv. 21 & 22 of Acts 19 a lesson about KEEPING RIGHT PRIORITIES IN A WORLD OF SPECIAL INTERESTS.

(I. KEEPING RIGHT PRIORITIES...) Two weeks ago we looked at the tremendous stresses that Paul faced and how he focused on Biblical principles and life goals in making decisions. We saw from his example the importance of not letting immediate circumstances have undue influence on the choices that we make. Now again we find a stress on proper priorities.

Paul has been at Ephesus about 2 1/2 years. The church that was planted there was growing and thriving in the face of opposition. We might wonder if it was tempting for him to settle down in Ephesus. After all he had paid his dues. He had taken his shots. He was getting up there in age. Perhaps it was tempting for him to consider settling down here.

God, however, had supernaturally directed the Apostle Paul to be an evangelist and to be involved in bringing the gospel to parts of the Roman Empire where the gospel had not been preached. About this time he wrote in #15 v. 20 (ROMANS 15:20) of his letter to the Romans, “...and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else’s foundation...” So Paul didn’t allow relatively more settled circumstances to determine his direction in life. He acted on the basis of life goals and God’s Word and God’s direction in his life.

Luke writes in vv. 21 & 22 (PROJECTOR OFF) in our passage, “**Now after these events Paul resolved in the Spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem, saying, ‘After I have been there, I must also see Rome.’ 22 And having sent into Macedonia two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, he himself stayed in Asia for a while.**” The “spirit” here could mean either Paul’s human spirit or the Holy Spirit. It doesn’t make a great deal of difference. It seems clear that Paul’s human spirit was being guided by the Holy Spirit.

Paul wanted to go to Rome to preach the gospel and to encourage the Christians who were already living there. Luke mentions only this part of Paul’s plan because he was writing this book, or historical account, to a Roman official living in Rome. But in Paul’s letter to the Romans in #15 Paul explains that his longer range goal was to stop at Rome en route to Spain at the other end of the Roman Empire. Whether he ever made it that far, we don’t know.

The reason that Paul wanted to go to Jerusalem first is not explained here. But in 1 Corinthians #16 vv. 1-4 and 2 Corinthians #8 v. 1 we learn that there was a famine in the Jerusalem area. Jewish Christians were especially hard hit because their new

religious faith cut them off from help from the Jewish authorities. So Paul was getting the churches in this part of the world to take up a collection to help these fellow believers. This would have not only practical benefit to individual Christians, it would also serve to promote the unity of the church as a whole. For these were largely Gentile Christians who would be helping mostly Jewish Christians. Remember that some of the Jewish Christians had been insisting the Gentile Christians could not really be right with God unless they became Jews. It would be hard for these Jewish Christians to have any kind of negativity toward these generous Gentile Christians when Paul showed up with this nice gift from them in a situation of real need..

We can imagine that the Ephesian Christians were not so thrilled to have Paul leave them for any reason. He was the founder of their local church. He did miraculous deeds. He had a hotline to God. Their special interest would have been to have him stay.

After looking at these two verses, then, we can see that Paul had two priorities. First, he had a priority placed on evangelism. We may not have the same spiritual gift that Paul had. We may not have the same forceful personality that he had. But all of us who are Christians are called upon to be witnesses. We also have a responsibility to use our spiritual gifts and natural talents and resources for the advancement of God's kingdom.

A second priority that comes out in this passage is the importance of caring for fellow Christians. Jesus told His followers that the world would know that they are His followers by the love that they display toward each other. As we see here, that love includes more than just words. It should include practical, tangible displays of concern for fellow Christians.

## II.

Next, from vv. 23-29, we encounter a lesson about EXPECTING OPPOSITION WHEN THE FINANCES OF SPECIAL INTERESTS ARE THREATENED. (PROJECTOR ON--- EXPECTING OPPOSITION WHEN...) Ephesus, besides being a center of the practice of the occult, was the center for worship of the goddess Artemis. In Greek mythology Artemis was the goddess of the hunt and the protector of animals. The Artemis of Asia Minor was different. (ARTEMIS) She had been worshipped before the Greeks ever showed up in Asia Minor. This Artemis was regarded as the goddess of fertility. She was a kind of mother figure. [As you might guess from the overabundance of a certain body part,] this goddess was regarded as having a role in providing and sustaining children and in providing an abundance of crops.

(EPHESUS TEMPLE ARTEMIS) The temple to Artemis in Ephesus was a major tourist attraction. It is regarded as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It was four times the size of the Parthenon in Athens. This is what a guy named Antipater of Sidon said about it a couple of centuries earlier: **"I have set eyes upon the wall of lofty Babylon on which lies a chariot road, and the statue of Zeus by the Alpheus, and the hanging gardens, and the Colossus of the sun, and the huge labour of the high pyramids, and the vast tomb of Mausolus; but when I saw the temple of Artemis which rose to the clouds, these other marvels lost their brilliance, and I**

**exclaimed ‘Lo, apart from Olympus, the sun has never looked upon aught so grand.’”** It sounds like he thought that this was a pretty impressive structure.

The temple of Artemis functioned as a regional bank. It was a religious shrine. There were prostitutes who did their thing in the temple in connection with religious worship. Also the temple precinct was a safe haven for criminals. This means that Ephesus was a sanctuary city. And you thought that sanctuary cities were a new concept.

As difficult as it would be for us in the twenty-first century to imagine, there were actually people who tried to make money off of this crowd. There were innkeepers and food vendors and souvenir makers. One day the Ephesus Chamber of Commerce had a meeting and the head of the silversmiths guild stood up and voiced a complaint. According to vv. 25-27, **“These he gathered together, with the workmen in similar trades, and said, ‘Men, you know that from this business we have our wealth. 26 And you see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost all of Asia this Paul has persuaded and turned away a great many people, saying that gods made with hands are not gods. 27 And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis may be counted as nothing, and that she may even be deposed from her magnificence, she whom all Asia and the world worship.’”**

The issue, you see, is jobs. It’s the economy, stupid. Imagine what would happen if a modern day Paul showed up in Las Vegas and initiated a revival such that a significant number of people stopped gambling, stopped buying alcohol, stopped going to the wilder entertainment venues in town, and stopped showing up at title loan companies. There would be a lot of push back. Much of state and local tax revenue comes from these sources. Our taxes might go up.

Sometimes the appeal to the pocketbook sounds a little too selfish. We have to get the government on our side. Or we have to get people outside of the Ephesus Chamber of Commerce worked up about the issue. So we appeal to patriotism and religion. The well being of our great city is being threatened by Paul and these Christians. This character is assaulting and speaking out against the goddess who has been the focus of our worship for centuries. God and country are being threatened.

Abortion clinic operators make a lot of money in their businesses of aborting babies. But to object to political attempts to limit or restrict abortion for the reason that their profit margins would be affected just wouldn’t be very effective in political debate. So an appeal has to be made to that sacred document, the US Constitution. “We are defenders of the sacred right that a woman has to choose what is done to her body.”

There are only two instances in Acts where Gentiles are portrayed as opposing Christianity. One is here. The other happened in Philippi when Paul cast a demon out of a girl, and her masters got upset because they couldn’t make money off of her any more. In both of these cases it was the finances of special interest groups that resulted in opposition.

When Demetrius got done presenting his case, he had a tremendous response. According to vv. 28 & 29, **“When they heard this they were enraged and were crying out, ‘Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!’ 29 So the city was filled with the confusion, and they rushed together into the theater, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul's companions in travel.”**

Ephesus today is still a tourist attraction. (PROJECTOR ON--- EPHEBUS AGORA) Visitors can still buy statuettes of Artemis. They go for anywhere between \$10 and \$50. All that remains of their ancient Main Street is ruins. It may well be that the Chamber of Commerce people spilled out onto this Main Street and gathered a mob of people as they headed for the Ephesus theater. (EPHEBUS THEATER) That ancient theater still exists. Experts say that it could hold 24,000 people and perhaps more.

A riot situation began to develop. Whenever you get a mob of people together with strong emotional pressures at work, dangerous things can happen. The initial leaders of the mob wanted to get Paul, but apparently they had to settle for two of his missionary friends. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The primary lesson from what happens here is that we can expect opposition from special interests when we speak out on Christian issues. When we speak out about abortion or transgenderism or pornography or gambling or violence on television and the media, we should expect opposition. Often the opposition will come from those who have a financial stake in the business that is threatened. They may couch that opposition in patriotic and philosophical terms. But often the real motivation involves issues of personal financial benefit.

The further danger for American Christians living in a materialistic culture is that we may find our security and self-esteem in life from our possessions. God often blesses His people materially. The test comes when we are tempted to sacrifice what is right for the sake of what is financially beneficial to us.

### III.

In vv. 30-40 we are going to look at THE BENEFIT OF GOOD RELATIONS WITH SPECIAL INTERESTS. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. THE BENEFIT OF HAVING GOOD...) When Paul heard about this mob that had gathered in the Ephesus theater, he wanted to go there and speak to them. Perhaps he was partly motivated by a desire to rescue his Christian friends. Being an evangelist at heart perhaps he couldn't resist the opportunity to speak to such a big crowd. Whatever his motivation his fellow Christians and some people called Asiarchs managed to restrain him.

The Asiarchs were part of a unique group in that province of Asia Minor. There is nothing that is exactly comparable to them in our culture. Perhaps the closest thing would be a group like the American Legion. This first century group was dedicated to promoting loyalty to the Roman emperor and to the empire. They would preside over patriotic festivals. About eighty years earlier a temple had been built for the Roman

emperor in a nearby city. A pro-Roman group developed out of this which built temples to the Roman emperor in other major cities in the area, including Ephesus. Each year an election was held among the members of the group whereby an official from each city with a temple and one official representing the entire province was chosen. These officials were called Asiarchs. Even after they left office they were still called by this term. These Asiarchs had no official government position, but they had a lot of political influence. They tended to come from the wealthier and more educated and more influential families. They were Roman patriots, even to the point of professing to regard the emperor as a god.

The fascinating thing is that v. 31 says that some of these Asiarchs were Paul's friends. It is possible that they were Asiarchs who had converted to Christianity. But the fact that the text makes no reference to their spiritual status and simply calls them friends suggests to me that they were unbelievers. If that was so, then their professed philosophy was very much at odds with Christianity. Yet Paul and these Asiarchs were friends.

The implication for us is that it is possible to have friendships with those whose philosophies of life are diametrically opposed to our Christian beliefs. We can oppose unbiblical philosophies and still care for and love those who espouse them. Gary Habermas is a Christian philosophy professor. He had a number of debates concerning the evidence for Christianity with Anthony Flew, an English scholar who identified as an atheist. Habermas argued strenuously against Flew's position, but he also sought to maintain and cultivate a friendship with him. A few years before he died Anthony Flew announced that he had become a theist, largely as a result of arguments pertaining to Intelligent Design. Such was the approach that Charlie Kirk took with his ideological opponents.

In our story Paul was friendly with people of significant political influence. He was not the type to compromise the gospel. But he apparently saw value in treating those who did not accept it with respect and tact, even to the point of developing friendships with them. When people in positions of power see Christians live a consistent Christian life, it should happen at least some of the time that we gain respect through the hard work, the integrity, the compassion, the social concern, and the honesty that we display in our lives.

Meanwhile, in this meeting v. 32 says, **"Now some cried out one thing, some another, for the assembly was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together."** Luke saw the humor in this situation. It was a mob scene, and most people didn't even know what prompted this meeting. The Greek word for "assembly" here is *ekklesia*, which is most often translated in the New Testament as "church." Originally the word was used to describe large meetings, held especially for political purposes such as we have here. But the early Christians adopted *ekklesia* for use in describing meetings of Christians and then for the group of Christians as a whole.

The unbelieving Jews in Ephesus also heard about this meeting in the theater. They were concerned that the Ephesians might associate them with the Christians. They didn't want to be blamed for what the Ephesians were upset about with Paul and the members of the Way, as they were called. So some guy named Alexander was put forward to make sure that the Jews didn't get blamed for their anger. Keep in mind, though, that the Jews were also theologically opposed to idols and idol worship.

This poor guy, however, never got a chance to say anything. The crowd was in a foul mood. Most of the people didn't know why they were gathered together. Many recognized Alexander as being Jewish. Probably he was known as a leader in the Jewish community. The Gentiles knew that the Jews were opposed to idol worship, and there was some resentment over the fact that their religion was legally protected by the Roman government. We also know from historical records that earlier governors of the Roman province of Asia had exempted Jews from military service and had made rulings protecting their observance of the Sabbath. So redneck idol worshippers and Artemis devotees who tended to harbor resentment against the Jews and who didn't even know why the meeting had been called shouted down this Alexander and spent two hours yelling, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!"

After a couple of hours of this the town clerk managed to quiet the crowd. The town clerk was more like the mayor of the city. Ephesus was a free city in the Roman Empire. This meant that they had a considerable measure of freedom to govern their own community. At Ephesus there were town meetings in the theater in which most all of the citizens could come and vote on local issues. The town clerk was the leader of the assembly, and he served as the liaison with the Roman officials of the province. His special interest was keeping the peace and maintaining local government control in Ephesus and staying on good terms with the Romans.

This guy begins his talk by speaking about the fact that Ephesus can proudly claim to be home of the temple of the great goddess Artemis and "the sacred stone that fell from the sky." The original word here for "sacred stone" was used often to describe meteorites. So scholars speculate that this Artemis cult got its start centuries earlier when a meteorite landed on or near Ephesus. A whole worship system came out of it.

This image kept in the temple was treated as representative of the gods. It was ironic that these Ephesian Gentiles were resisting the message of Paul about a living representative of the one true God who came down from heaven to live among men and reveal God's plan to them. Instead many of the Ephesians chose to worship a rock.

In vv. 36 & 37 the town clerk continues his remarks, saying, **"Seeing then that these things cannot be denied, you ought to be quiet and do nothing rash. 37 For you have brought these men here who are neither sacrilegious nor blasphemers of our goddess."** The charge lodged against the two Christian associates of Paul dragged into the theater and against Paul himself was apparently that they were guilty of robbing the temple and blaspheming Artemis. The only sense in which the Christians were guilty of robbing the temple was in the sense that the Christian movement had resulted in a

decrease in temple business and in the number of people who were showing up to worship there.

As for the charge that the Christians were blaspheming the goddess it is surprising that this secular ruler defends the Christians against the accusers. I would not have been surprised if the Christians had been saying things critical about Artemis and worship of her. But the town clerk claims that it isn't true. Isn't that interesting? Paul was an honest and straightforward individual. I am sure that when he was holding classes in the school of Tyrannus in Ephesus and someone asked him what he thought of the worship of Artemis, he said something to the effect that it was wrong and that this image thing was just a hunk of rock and nothing more. But apparently the public message that Paul preached in Ephesus was a positive message. He didn't focus on criticizing the worship practices of the Ephesians. He focused on telling the positive story about Jesus.

In vv. 38-40 the town clerk continues, **"If therefore Demetrius and the craftsmen with him have a complaint against anyone, the courts are open, and there are proconsuls. Let them bring charges against one another. 39 But if you seek anything further, it shall be settled in the regular assembly. 40 For we really are in danger of being charged with rioting today, since there is no cause that we can give to justify this commotion."** Then the town clerk dismissed the meeting.

The town clerk's primary concern is with the reaction of the Romans to this meeting. The Romans were always willing to give people in the provinces a certain measure of self-government, as long as the peace was maintained. They didn't like reports about public disturbances. Thus the town clerk warned the people to cut it out. There were proper legal avenues available if anyone had a legitimate complaint. The clerk said basically three things: 1) The goddess doesn't need defending. 2) The Christians are not guilty of the charge lodged against them. And 3) this riot is a threat to our freedom.

The writer Luke may have been understating the danger of what happened in this situation. Many scholars think that Paul had this incident in mind (2 CORINTHIANS 1:8) when he wrote at the beginning of 2 Corinthians, **"For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself..."** In this dangerous situation God sovereignly protected Paul and the Christians. A key factor in their deliverance was the positive relations that Paul had established with some of the special interest groups, especially the governing authorities and the Asiarchs.  
(PROJECTOR OFF)

Our responsibility as Christians is always to present the gospel and to promote truth. In our inevitable conflicts with competing philosophies of life, we must disagree with that which is untrue. But it is possible to do that in a tactful and respectful manner. We can get mad at politicians, as most of us do from time to time, but we need to work at disagreeing with their policies without coming across as being disagreeable ourselves. We can be tactful and respectful of the officeholder, even though we may disagree with that individual's views. The same could be said of other people in our sphere of

influence with whom we disagree. We don't have to call everyone who disagrees with a fascist or a Nazi.

#### IV.

Then finally we need to consider THE DANGER FROM OUR SPECIAL INTERESTS. (PROJECTOR ON--- THE DANGER FROM OUR SPECIAL INTERESTS) There are two levels at which our own special interests can hinder us spiritually. In the first place we can be hindered from coming into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ because of the special interests to which we cling. We can find some things attractive about the gospel. We can buy the facts of the story about the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. We can find ourselves enjoying the company of Christian people. But we are kept from finally putting our trust in Jesus as our Savior by these special interests to which we cling.

Perhaps it is a particular addiction to which we cling. Perhaps it is a certain relationship with someone that we fear coming to Christ might mean that we lose. Perhaps it is a pursuit of money that holds us back. Perhaps it is just the fear of what it might mean to surrender control of our lives to someone else, to Jesus Christ. If this is what is keeping you from a commitment to Christ, keep in mind that Jesus told His followers, **"I have come that you might have life, and have it more abundantly."** (John 10:10) That is not a promise that life will be without conflict or difficulty. It is a promise that life with Jesus will be meaningful and purposeful and of eternal significance.

The second danger from special interests is posed to us who already are Christians. Perhaps we go to church each week and listen to the sermon or the Sunday school lesson and say "amen" to 98 % of what we hear. But there is this one area where our hackles go up when we hear it mentioned, because the pastor or the Sunday school teacher or the radio preacher is stepping on our toes. Maybe that sensitive area is giving sacrificially to Christian causes. Maybe it is a certain addiction that we have. Maybe it is a certain personality trait that we know isn't good, but we don't want anyone to bring up with us. Maybe it is this habit of gossip that we have. Maybe it is lack of self control in a particular area. As we close in prayer, let's talk to the Lord about that matter.