

ACTS 19:17-20  
“COST NOTHING, WORTH NOTHING?”

How valuable is your Christian faith to you? How valuable is the gospel? We're sitting in the breakfast room in the B&B on holiday; all of us as guests are sitting round the same, big table and we're introducing ourselves to each other. Inevitably, the question "what do you do?" is asked and there is a split-second anxiety because there is no place to hide round this table; what happens if everyone else round this table hates the church? God is good; the others round this table are all Christians and we enjoy good conversation about faith, Church and opportunities for Christian service. But it doesn't always turn out so well; there are times when owning up to being a Christian minister produces a very different reaction and out come stories of why people have turned away from the church and how they feel let down by the church and walked away from the church and their reaction to me as a Christian is very different. It cost me – what? Actually it costs me nothing more than a dented sense of self-esteem, that somehow they see me as sharing in the failures that have hurt them, and that somehow I should share the blame! How valuable is faith? How valuable is the gospel? These are the kinds of situations that make that question very real, for me in quite small ways, but for others these are life and death questions.

“A religion which costs nothing is worth nothing! A cheap Christianity without a cross, will prove in the end a useless Christianity, without a crown.” (JC Ryle *Holiness* p.72) JC Ryle was the bishop of Liverpool for 20 years at the end of the nineteenth century; he wrote a classic book on Christian growth and discipleship and this quote comes from that book. It is all about cost; what does it cost to be a Christian? You might need time to think about this principle: “A religion which costs nothing is worth nothing!” It is a big thought. This is a question about how valuable we consider our faith to be, how valuable the gospel. What would we give up for our faith? What would we give up to follow Jesus? If the answer to that question is “nothing!” then faith comes way down the value scale! Christianity is centred on the cross as something we believe; there are times when life is centred on the cross as the way we live too! There is no better time to think about that than during a communion service where the bread and wine are set out on the table reminding us of Jesus' cross.

God is on a mission. Today we are in Ephesus, the capital of the province of Asia, modern-day Turkey. Paul is there with his friends and he tells the people about Jesus. He does so in two places: first of all, he preaches in the synagogue for about 3 months, till some people began to oppose him. Secondly, he preaches in the lecture hall of Tyrannus, a school room. It seems as if Tyrannus would use the space in the morning to teach and in the afternoon rent it out to the Christian evangelist and Paul would preach and teach there and he did that for 2 years “so that...” (*Acts 19:10*) In the Church and out of the church Paul tells people about Jesus and they hear and believe. At the same time, there were extraordinary demonstrations of the power of God to overcome magic, superstitions, and evil spirits and some of these were quite violent; you can read them for yourselves, and they make exciting reading. By the preaching and by these extraordinary events, the word about Jesus spread: “When this...” (*Acts 19:17*) People thought better of Jesus by what happened and they grew in their faith.

“Many of...” (*Acts 19:18f*) Here's the cost of their faith; we call it repentance and it comes in two forms. First of all, there is confession: some people had been made very much aware of their faults and failings and perhaps as part of worship with the Church they stood up and made public confession of their sins. What does that do to their reputation? We try to cover up things that make us ashamed or embarrassed,

but as part of this extraordinary movement of the Spirit, they make this public confession of all that they had thought, said, and done that was wrong. Secondly there was the burning of books: some of these new Christians had been engaged in magic and superstitions and occult practices; there was a set of papers called “the Ephesians letters” which were written charms and magic spells and talismans. These new Ephesian Christians brought their magic handbooks and spells and formulae and burned them on the public bonfire. How valuable were these books? 50,000 drachma: the drachma was a day’s wage, a silver coin. I’ve done a rough comparison: that would be about £3.5m today. The Christian faith and the gospel were worth more to them than books worth £3.5m; they didn’t even sell them, but they burnt them as evidence that their conversion was genuine and their new Christian faith was real. What happened? Did the people laugh at them? Did they say “What a waste”? No! *“In this...” (Acts 19:20)* More and more people came to Christ and Christian faith because they heard these stories. How precious is the Christian faith.

How does the gospel make an impact on pagan Scotland in the twenty-first century? We tell people about Jesus; the “extraordinary miracle” bit is up to God! The temptation is to make the gospel easier, softer, more acceptable, or more palatable. “Jesus is your friend” we tell people; “Jesus loves you” we tell people and of course, both of these are right. He is our friend and He does love us. But Jesus is also Lord, Lord of heaven and earth, Lord of our lives, the Lord who makes demands on us. Jesus as Lord demands from us a sense of repentance, turning away from sin, expressing that repentance when we pray and when we worship; Jesus as Lord demands that every day we put off old ways like a suit of dirty clothes and put on new ways, becoming more and more like Jesus. These demands are uncomfortable for us and we are tempted to try to soft-pedal these demands to make the church seem a more acceptable place for people who don’t yet believe. The evidence suggests that churches which make these demands plain and obvious are growing; churches that make it plain that Jesus demands repentance and that Jesus demands loyalty – these churches are growing as people respond to that challenge. They see that the gospel is worth rising to meet these challenges.

Jesus is our friend; Jesus does love us; Jesus saves us completely. But it cost Him His life! The Communion service and its bread and wine are visible reminders of what it cost Jesus to be our friend, what His love demanded of Him. Jesus died on the cross for His friendship with us; Jesus was crucified because of His love for the world. Our salvation was more valuable in Jesus’ eyes than preserving His own life. The bread and wine talk to us of His broken body and shed blood; they talk to us of the value of our salvation; they talk to us of our value in Jesus’ eyes, that we were worth this sacrifice. The bread and wine reassure us that we are loved, and valued. But they also challenge us about our values: how valuable is all of this to us? Is there a spirit of repentance in us, confessing our sins and faults? Is there a day-by-day putting off of the old ways and putting on the qualities and character of Jesus? We’ve read of people today who considered it good value to send £3.5m of their old ways up in smoke for the honour of Jesus and *“the word...” (Acts 19:20)* “A religion which costs nothing is worth nothing!” What do you think?