

Closing the Gaps Acts 18:18-19:7

Introduction

When I was a kid we had an expression we used all the time whenever someone fell short of the mark,

“Close only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades”

Oh, how we loved to taunt the unfortunate person who claimed to have come close with that old cliché!

Another idiom we didn’t use quite as often but which is just as true is, “A miss is as good as a mile”

This of course means that the fact of failure isn’t affected by the narrowness of the margin – a miss is a miss

That reminds me of the time a physicist, a biologist, and a statistician went deer hunting

The three of them were hiding in the bushes when a big, beautiful buck walked out and stood about 70 yards in front of them

The physicist made some quick calculations of wind direction and speed, bullet drop, and so forth and he fired only to have his shot go 5 feet to the left of the deer

As the deer began to run the biologist quickly analyzed the deer’s physical structure and movement, aimed and fired only to have his shot go 5 feet to the right of the deer

Whereupon the statistician lowered his rifle and happily shouted, “We got him!”

Some of you will get the joke on the way home...

Seriously though, just as in deer hunting, missing the mark spiritually isn’t helped by averaging out the misses

We might wish otherwise but Jesus taught there is a narrow gate that leads to heaven and a wide way that leads to destruction and close isn’t going to cut it come Judgment Day

Today

Our passage today is a tough one because it tells us of people who were well educated and people who were sincere

They were people who appeared to have it all together but who were lost in their sins because they were only close to the truth and therefore were missing the mark

And whether one misses by an inch or a mile, missing the target spiritually means missing out on reconciliation with God because close only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades

We will be looking at **Acts 18:10-19:7** this morning

I have titled this sermon “**Closing the Gaps**” and in these verses we will see three different “gaps” in need of closing

First, we will see that Luke very hurriedly closes out **Paul’s second missionary journey** and then rushes straight away into his third

Second, we will be introduced to **Apollos and his incomplete education** – a gap that will be closed by Aquila and Priscilla

Lastly, we will take a look at a group of **disciples who were earnest but unaware** until Paul came and closed the gap in their knowledge

Let’s begin by opening our Bibles to Acts 18 and following along as I read verses 18-23 where Luke brings a quick end to what we know as Paul’s second missionary journey and launches his third trip out from Antioch

When we left off last week Paul had just been handed a victory in his trial before the proconsul Gallio in Corinth

Acts 18:18-23

After this, Paul stayed many days longer and then took leave of the brothers and set sail for Syria, and with him Priscilla and Aquila. At Cenchreae he had cut his hair, for he was under a vow. **19**And they came to Ephesus, and he left them there, but he himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. **20**When they asked him to stay for a longer period, he declined. **21**But on taking leave of them he said, "I will return to you if God wills," and he set sail from Ephesus.

22When he had landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church, and then went down to Antioch. **23**After spending some time there, he departed and went from one place to the next through the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples.

I. Paul's Second Missionary Journey

Luke runs through these final details very quickly and so will we as I want to spend most of our time today talking about the final two points

Unfortunately for us Luke glosses over some points which leave us with unanswered questions – such as what manner of vow Paul was under and why, why he leaves Ephesus so quickly when he was finally allowed to go there, and so forth

I will do my best to give plausible answers to those questions without spending a lot of time in speculation because where Scripture is silent speculation isn't terribly productive

First, we see that Paul stayed in Corinth ministering for "many days longer" before leaving for Syria which makes sense as he would be unlikely to be in a rush to leave having just gained a favorable outcome before Gallio

It would only be natural for him to linger and make the most of it before departing

And then we don't get the sense that he was divinely directed to leave but rather that he left on his own volition and headed back to Antioch from whence he had departed some 2-1/2 to 3 years earlier

We saw him return to Antioch in Syria after his first trip also and it seems that Paul's pattern was to go out and then to return to the church that sent him out with a report of his activities – and that seems natural enough

But Paul also seems to be motivated by this vow he had taken and the matter of the vow is a bit more cryptic

Scholars dispute over the type of vow that Paul was under but it seems that it was a form of a Nazirite vow which was taken as a matter of consecration of oneself – it was a vow of preparation through ritual purification

Perhaps Paul used the vow as a means of reminding himself to remain separate from the debauchery of Corinth if so then it makes logical sense that the vow Paul voluntarily put himself under was a Nazirite vow

Since Paul had already settled the issue of the nature of the Law he wasn't against things like vows and signs because he knew they were nothing

It would be like if some of us decided to observe Lent by refraining from something just to focus our mind on the things of God during that season

There is nothing wrong with doing so as long as we recognize that observing Lent isn't a means of acquiring grace from God

Anyway, when a man took a Nazirite vow he would not cut his hair for a period of time and would abstain from certain food and drink during the period of the vow

Then, when the time was up, he would cut his hair and present it as an offering to God in the temple in Jerusalem

Paul was under the vow while in Corinth and he cut his hair after travelling overland to the port city of Cenchreae (Sin'-cree-ay)

Typically, the vow was taken in Judea but it was possible for a man to bring the hair that was cut off to Jerusalem for offering if the vow were taken elsewhere and it seems plausible in Paul's case that this was what he was doing

Some scholars believe that Paul was trying to get to Jerusalem in time to observe Passover so that would also explain his haste in leaving Ephesus even though he had an audience that was eager to hear the gospel

It's generally agreed that this account took place in AD52 and Passover was in early April that year

And since the maritime law of Paul's day closed the sea lanes to travel until March 10th, Paul would have needed to make haste if he was going to arrive in time

So he left Priscilla and Aquila in Ephesus, presumably to continue the ministry in his absence, and headed toward Jerusalem and Antioch

He landed at Caesarea and traveled up to Jerusalem, presumably to offer his hair, and while there he met with the church before travelling down to Antioch from whence he started his journey

Luke doesn't tell us how long Paul remained in Antioch only using the term "some time" before he describes Paul striking out once again, this time alone, to visit and strengthen the churches that he and Barnabas had planted during the first missionary journey

From this we are reminded once again that Paul was more than an itinerant evangelist and church-planter

He was a disciple-maker who had a pastor's heart and he cared about the believers in the churches he planted travelling to visit them in person when he could and writing letters to them when he could not

And so in these six verses Luke very quickly closes out Paul's 2nd missionary journey and launches him on his 3rd

II. Apollos, Incomplete Education

Next we turn our attention to Apollos in **verses 24-28**

24 Now a Jew named Apollos, a **native of Alexandria**, came to Ephesus. He was an **eloquent** man, **competent in the Scriptures**. **25** He had been **instructed in the way of the Lord**. And being **fervent in spirit**, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. **26** He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately. **27** And when he wished to cross to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. When he arrived, he greatly helped those who through grace had believed, **28** for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus.

In these verses Luke gives us a very clear picture of the type of man Apollos was

In **verse 24** we see that he was a Jew who was a **native of Alexandria** in Egypt

Alexandria was an ancient city even in Paul's day having been founded by Alexander the Great in 332BC

Whereas Athens was known for philosophy, Alexandria was known as the capital of knowledge and learning

And Alexandria was home to the most famous library in the world which at its pinnacle contained an estimated 400,000 scrolls and attracted best minds of the day

And it was in Alexandria where the 70 scholars met to translate the Old Testament from Hebrew to Greek – what we know as the Septuagint

Apollos was no doubt educated in the finest classical tradition but he was also "competent in the Scriptures"

Just so we get a clear picture that word "competent" indicates that Apollos was powerful or mighty when it came to handling the Scriptures being also "instructed in the way of the Lord"

He was a passionate man who literally overflowed with enthusiasm as he spoke and taught accurately the things that he knew

And there is the rub because we see that for all of Apollos' education and ability – his knowledge was limited

For sure he knew about the coming of the Messiah and he knew well that John the Baptist had preached the imminent appearance of the Messiah as he baptized with the baptism of repentance

So that's what he taught and he taught it accurately and effectively as he was a great orator in command of the facts

In fact, there were some in Corinth who preferred Apollos' preaching to Paul's as Paul reveals in **1 Corinthians 3:4** and this was likely because he was a better, more dynamic speaker than Paul

Apollos was educated, enthusiastic, and eloquent but he was also lost because he did not know Jesus

He knew that John the Baptist had preached the Messiah was at hand but he didn't know that the Messiah had come

And that isn't too difficult to comprehend because even John didn't know Jesus was the Messiah until he baptized him – and we know that while John was in prison he was still asking if Jesus was really the Messiah

We see John's message in all four gospels and it was taken directly from Isaiah

Look with me at **Matthew 3:1-3**

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said,

"The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.'"

So, since Apollos had been a disciple of John's this would have been the message he heard

And if he left before Jesus' identity was made known he would have known only that the Messiah was at hand and repentance was necessary

When Aquila and Priscilla heard Apollos speaking boldly in the synagogue he was carrying on with the ministry of John the Baptist because he was passionate about getting his fellow Jews ready for the coming of the Messiah

But he wasn't yet a Christ-follower

As educated as he was Apollos was as lost as the most ignorant pagan who has ever walked the earth

Because his education was incomplete – he didn't know about Jesus or his birth and ministry, he didn't know about the cross and the resurrection, he hadn't yet been taught about the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and the birth of the church

Priscilla and Aquila

So when Priscilla and Aquila heard him speaking they must have looked at each other with some measure of amazement

It would be kind of like hearing someone talking about sending a letter by pony express today and us knowing about all the advances in communication

But I want you to notice what they did and didn't do

They didn't write Apollos off or dismiss him as hopelessly ignorant

They didn't ridicule him or embarrass him by challenging or correcting him publicly

No, they graciously took him aside privately and taught him what he needed to know

What a loving example of a Christ-like spirit

Really, I don't know who is to be commended the most in this situation

Aquila and Priscilla for their gentle attitude or Apollos for his humility and willingness to listen to two lowly tradespeople as they "explained the way of God more accurately"

I've heard it said that every man is superior to all others in that everyone can learn something from him and that was certainly true in this case

Apollos may have had the better education in many ways but the two tent-makers knew what was necessary

Apollos to Achaia

Luke compresses time again between verses 26 and 27 as Apollos likely spent some time learning and investigating about Jesus before heading to Achaia – that is to say Corinth which was in the region of Achaia

But when the time came when he wanted to go to Corinth to minister the brothers encouraged him and sent a letter of introduction with him

And Apollos became a very effective minister of the gospel there

Paul writes in **1 Corinthians 3:6** – “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth”

While Paul was travelling to and from Antioch there was Apollos in Corinth teaching the Corinthian believers and proving to the Jews through exposition of the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus of Nazareth

The word order is important in the final part of verse 28 because, like Paul, it appears that Apollos started with the Messiah and the prophecies concerning him and then showed how Jesus fulfilled those prophecies

He met them where they were and built upon what knowledge they had as he helped them connect the dots – just like Paul did

And Paul never saw Apollos as competition but valued him as a co-laborer for Christ and was grateful for him

Apollos had a gap in his education and Priscilla and Aquila closed it resulting in his salvation and profitable ministry

III. The “Disciples”, Earnest but Unaware

Now, turning to **Acts 19:1-7** we see the next gap in need of closure

And it happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the inland country and came to Ephesus. There he found some disciples. **2**And he said to them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” And they said, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” **3**And he said, “Into what then were you baptized?” They said, “Into John’s baptism.” **4**And Paul said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus.” **5**On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. **6**And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying. **7**There were about twelve men in all.

Apollos had left Ephesus and was busy ministering in Corinth when Paul completed his travels across the regions of Galatian and Phrygia where he had been busy strengthening and encouraging the churches and arrived back in Ephesus just as he said he would do if it was God’s will for him to do so

When he arrived, Paul encountered a group of “disciples” who had the same problem as Apollos

Luke says there were “about twelve men in all” who Paul dealt with and the label “disciple” shows that they were devout men but not disciples of Christ because it seems they too had a gap in their knowledge

They were **earnest but unaware** – they didn’t even know that they didn’t know

Donald Grey Barnhouse shared a story that illustrates the condition of these “disciples”

During the latter part of the eighteenth century many colonists left Virginia and started through the mountains to settle the valleys that lay far to the west. Fear of Indians, the death of a horse, or the breaking down of a wagon forced many to stay in the mountains. For over twenty years these settlers saw no white men at all, until a group of travelers straggled into the neighborhood. Naturally there was much conversation about the outside world. The travelers asked the mountaineers what they thought of the new republic and the policies of the Continental Congress. The others answered, “We have not so much as heard of a Continental

Congress or a Republic.” They still thought of themselves as loyal subjects of the British king and had not even heard of George Washington or the Revolutionary War.

Like Apollos, these men were disciples of John the Baptist and their knowledge stopped with his teachings

There is one phrase in their response that can be confusing so we want to make sure we understand that when they said “We have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit” they didn’t mean the existence of the Holy Spirit was unknown to them because the Holy Spirit was known in the Old Testament and was preached by John the Baptist

What they meant was that they didn’t know about the present ministry of the indwelling Holy Spirit – they were unaware that the Holy Spirit had already come

Upon hearing this Paul preached Christ to them and they believed and were baptized

And there was a sort of mini-Pentecost wherein the men were the recipients of the validating gift of speaking in unlearned foreign tongues and the spiritual gift of prophesy showing that now they were disciples of Jesus

Outward appearances concealing gaps

Looking at outward appearances most people likely thought Apollos and these disciples had it all together

Apollos was a dynamic speaker who knew his Bible well and even taught others

And the twelve men were earnest in their devotion and likely even mingling with the believers in Ephesus

But their appearances concealed gaps that kept them from a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ and the reconciliation that he offers

Conclusion

There is a sad reality that many people think that getting close to God is good enough to earn them heaven

All across the globe people sit and even serve in churches week after week and still never have a true relationship with Jesus

But close isn't going to cut it – a person isn't reconciled to God by proximity to the truth

It's not enough to know the truth or even to preach and teach the truth to others

Each individual must accept the truth of the all-sufficient death and resurrection of Jesus

Each person must rely fully and completely upon the shed blood of Jesus Christ as payment in full for their sins and then submit to him as Lord of their life

It's likely that the vast majority of the earth's population is living in ignorance of who Jesus is and will therefore go into eternity separated from the love of God – and considering how far the early church took the gospel in their day it's truly sad to know how poorly the church has done in the 2,000 years since

But as sad as that is, it's even sadder that a goodly number of people will have sat in churches under sound teaching from God's Word week after week while remaining just as lost as if they had never heard the message at all

And the truly sad thing is that they can probably tell you the entire plan of salvation because they know it cold

All because many have confused head knowledge with heart acceptance

The danger with preaching a sermon on a passage like this one is that it tends to result in people looking around at others trying to discern whether or not this or that person is truly saved

When it should result in looking in the mirror and making an honest assessment as to whether the person looking back from the mirror is truly saved

Now, I don't want to unnecessarily cause people to doubt their salvation but the reality is that it's likely that some who think they are believers have never actually been saved – no matter what their outward appearance might say

Let me ask you, what answer you would give to Paul's question, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?"

Would it be the academic answer, "Of course, the Bible says all people receive the Holy Spirit when they believe" or would it be an experiential answer that says, "Yes! I am experiencing the Spirit's presence and power in my life" or maybe it would be, "I'm not sure..."

It would be much more convenient if we had outward signs like the tongues like fire alight on us or if we all began to speak in languages as a sign when we received the Holy Spirit – but God has chosen otherwise

He has chosen to leave the witness of the presence of his Holy Spirit to the changed lives and testimonies of his people

So it is incumbent on each of us to be sensitive to the presence of the Holy Spirit and to show him forth in our lives by leading lives that display the fruit of the Spirit that can only be the result of the power of the Holy Spirit

If that were to become the norm it would mean the end of lifeless, listless, passive Christianity and the world would have to take notice

So the question you must answer honestly today is "Am I saved or only close to the truth?" because close isn't going to cut it

As we prepare to partake of the Lord's Table this morning, be sure that you have closed the gap between head knowledge and heart acceptance

It doesn't matter how long you have sat in these pews or how much Bible knowledge you have or how hard you work serving the Lord, ask God to reveal to you plainly the condition of your soul

Take this opportunity to ask him to make you fully aware of the Holy Spirit who indwells each and every believer

Allow yourself to see yourself as you truly are and, if need be repent of your sins and accept Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord of your life

And if you know you are saved but have quenched the Holy Spirit and are preventing him from working in and through you, ask God to correct that in you this very moment

As I close this sermon with prayer and the worship team makes their way to the platform, let me encourage you to take the time to prepare for the Lord's Table

Would the men who are serving also come forward as we sing?

Let's pray