

The sermon

Intro

The Ouija board is alleged to be able to answer questions about the past, present, and future. It's been marketed as a magical device and fun family entertainment. When the movie *The Exorcist* came out in 1973, people were scarred off. Ouija boards make you demon-possessed.

Before I was a Christian, I found myself living in a fraternity house. At one point, there arose an interest in Ouija boards.

There was also a belief going around about a sorority girl who died in the building years back. I didn't research the matter. But our building was previously owned by a sorority. Some believed that her spirit still lived in the building.

I had no interest in these matters and laughed them off.

When the Ouija board started being used, some became fearful. Am I living in a haunted house? There was a report of one fraternity brother seeing a flame where a flame shouldn't be. And someone thought they were being chased by the girl's spirit.

The concern was so great that a vote to remove Ouija board came up at a fraternity meeting. After a period of discussion, the vote came down and the Ouija board was banned from the property. Yes, a group of drunken college boys wanted nothing to do with a Ouija board! Fear was the driving factor.

What should we make of spirits and haunted houses? Should we be afraid? Should we think it's a hoax?

READ PASSAGE

Body

Passage Focus

Three points on power. Powerful God. Powerless exorcists. Powerful gospel.

Point 1: Powerful God (19:11-12)

And God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, ¹² so that even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were carried away to the sick, and their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them. – 19:11-12

God's the one doing the miracles, not Paul. Paul's just the instrument.

People in Ephesus owned handkerchiefs and aprons. They brought these to Paul. The handkerchiefs and aprons touched Paul's skin. The people brought these handkerchiefs back to their sick friends and family. These friends and family were healed of diseases when they made contact with these handkerchiefs and aprons.

The same goes for demon possessed people (evil spirits). Handkerchiefs and aprons came into contact with demon-possessed people and demon(s) came out of them.

If you recall, Paul was preaching the gospel daily. People were making connections between Paul's power and Paul's gospel. Maybe we should pay attention to what this guy is saying?

This was a superstitious culture that believed in spells and magic and gods and goddesses. They believed in things they couldn't see and feel.

God's power

Yes, this really happened.

We might hear this and think this is crazy. We don't attribute powers to handkerchiefs. When you have cancer you don't bring a handkerchief for me to touch.

But there's nothing unbelievable about it if we understand who God is.

"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." – **Genesis 1:1**

And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. – **Genesis 1:3**

God speaks things into existence.

God sent a flood on the whole earth (Gen 6-8).

In Exodus 14:21, *"the LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided."*

God rules over the seas. He moves the waters wherever he desires.

Hebrews 1:3 says, Jesus *"upholds the universe by the word of his power."*

The stars and the planets are ruled by Jesus' mouth.

My point?

People may have a hard time believing the flood and the parting of the Red Sea. Not to mention the resurrection. But they forget the creation. Creation testifies to the power, the ability, of God.

If God can create the sea and the ground and the stars and us, in all our complexity, how easy is it for God to use handkerchiefs to heal sick people?

Extraordinary miracles

These miracles are extraordinary in that they're rare. This doesn't happen repeatedly in the Bible. A woman was healed by touching Jesus' garment (Matt 9:20-22). People were healed by Peter's shadow (Acts 5:15). This was extraordinary. Real and unique.

Application

The lesson isn't I should buy a TV prosperity preacher's miracle handkerchief. Yes they're out there.

The lesson isn't if I have enough faith I too can become a handkerchief miracle worker.

So how should we respond? God is all-powerful. He can heal with handkerchiefs. Or anything else he chooses. God has power over demonic forces and sickness. We belong to the one in power. We serve the one who rules over all things. Respond with confidence in God's power.

Point 2: Powerless exorcists (19:13-16)

Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists undertook to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, "I adjure you by the Jesus, whom Paul proclaims." – 19:13

Some were inspired by Paul's handkerchief ministry.

Some traveling Jewish demon hunters. Jesus was just the name Paul proclaimed. Not someone they believed personally.

Paul spoke about Jesus. And Paul successfully cast out demons. Maybe we should use Jesus' name?

Evidently they could detect a demon-possessed person.

What is an evil spirit?

I use the word demon. Evil spirits are demons. They're invisible, spiritual beings. Before Adam sinned, there was a fall among the angels. Satan rebelled and some of the angels joined with him in opposition to God. We call these rebel angels demons.

Our passage reveals demons indwell people. What we call demon possession. Effects include seizures, inability to hear, isolation, self-harm (cutting), unusual strength. Demons exercise a level of damaging control over a possessed person. Intensity varies from person to person.

Only non-Christians can be demon-possessed. 2 Timothy 2:25-26 says that when we come "to a knowledge of the truth" we "escape from the snare of the devil." The presence of the Holy Spirit in a Christian prevents demon-possession. On the other hand, Christians can be influenced by demons. Can't be controlled. Can be harassed.

In short, demons do what Satan does. They deceive and torment unbelievers. As for Christians, demons attempt to deceive us (false teachers), they tempt and entice us to sin (one being division in the church), they accuse us (you're not worthy of God's salvation?), and they stir up persecution against the church.

Demons are more powerful than humans, but powerless to withstand God's power. If there are spirits walking around fraternity houses, they're not human spirits. They're demons. After death, the spirit of the non-Christian goes to Hades. The spirit of the Christian goes to the presence of God.

Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this. ¹⁵ But the evil spirit answered them, "Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?" – 19:14-15

We know Jesus and Paul, but you're totally foreign to us. Their command falls flat.

Evidently it isn't the name that's spoken that drives the demon out. It's the identity of the person who's commanding the demon. When those who have authority over demons tell a demon to come out, the demon must come out. Jesus had that authority. Paul had that authority. The sons of Sceva did not.

And the man in whom was the evil spirit leaped on them, mastered all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded. – 19:16

Controlled by the demon, the demon attacks the exorcists. This is control, not influence. The demon provides supernatural strength. The sons of Sceva are powerless to fight back.

Wounded indicates some kind of mark on the men. Some scratch or gash or bruising. Assaulted and naked. That's the work of demons.

Assessment

The sons of Sceva were powerless, unbelieving frauds. They thought Jesus' name was a magical word. A "spell." Kind of like Harry Potter where a wizard moves a wand and speaks a word to produce supernatural effects.

Application: elsewhere

Demons are real. Demons are like the wind. You don't see the wind. But you see and feel its effects. Whether a cool breeze or wind that rips the shingles off your roof. The wind is real. Even if you don't see it.

Non-Christians can do miracles when empowered by Satanic forces. If I were Satan, I'd empower a prosperity preacher to heal. The "*man of lawlessness*" performs signs and wonders because he's empowered by Satan (2 Thess 2:9). In Revelation 13, the "*beast rising out of the earth...performs great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in front of people*" (Rev 13:11, 13). In Exodus, Pharaoh's magicians were able to match some of Moses' signs.

Some witch doctors are frauds who do it for the money. But we shouldn't think it far-fetched for a witch doctor to be demonically empowered and do things like heal the sick or inflict pain on people. There are places in the world where people turn to witch doctors when medical doctors have no means to heal.

If demons can cause negative physical effects is it not possible they could cause positive physical effects (e.g., cure cancer)? If demons inflict wounds on people, couldn't a demon work in tandem with the witch doctor's curse? Could demons manipulate the intensity of the suffering and make it look like healing?

In regions where people believe in evil spirits, the gospel shines in power encounters where God upstages Satan's work. That's what happened in Ephesus.

One thing demons can't do is possess, control Christians. Another thing demons can't do is tell the future. Only God knows what he's planned to do. And demons can't do anything unless God permits them to do it. God has authority over demons.

Application: America

Our culture generally doesn't give demons much credit. If you suggested a person's sickness might be demon related, what response would you get? If you suggested a person's depression or mental health might be demon related, what response would you get?

Power encounters apparently aren't so prevalent here because we don't live among a people who believe in spells and curses and magic and evil spirits.

But we do see the effects of demon influence. How else could you explain a culture that encourages elementary school age children to reconsider their gender and champions men competing against women in college swimming? Could you ever have imagined our nation would have gone in this direction? You never saw it coming. Unimaginable, unheard of, innovative, shameful acts are pressed upon our young people. In America, we're inventing new ways to ruin human lives and we're passing it off as progress. And we're proselytizing the nations to do the same. It doesn't make any sense.

How do you explain it? I suggest we're a culture influenced by demons. Satan has infiltrated the thought lives of influential people (celebrities, singers, politicians, college professors). They've passed it on to the common people. Satan entices and influences. This is what our nation has been enticed into.

This isn't the America you envisioned in the 80's, 90's, or 2000's. Demons are alive and well in America.

Point 3: Powerful gospel (19:17-20)

Demons are powerful. God is stronger. The gospel is stronger.

And this became known to all the residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks. And fear fell upon them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was extolled. – 19:17

Ephesus caught wind of the assault on exorcists. The result? A fearful city. And *“the Lord Jesus was extolled.”* I’m guessing we’re a little fuzzy on extolled. The basic ideas are enlarged or praised. Power encounters caused Jesus to be enlarged and praised.

When the people heard about a demon attacking reknowned exorcists, they’re afraid. If that’s what happened to exorcists, what will the demons do to me? On the other hand, maybe there’s something to this Jesus fellow Paul preaches? Some listened. Some believed. They praised. Power encounters and gospel preaching resulted in a growing church.

Also many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices. – 19:18

These new believers were affected by Paul’s teaching. So they confessed that they’d sinned against God and stated what their sins were (practicing magic arts). That’s awareness of sin. That’s public confession. Specific, not generic confession.

And a number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted the value of them and found it came to fifty thousand pieces of silver. – 19:19

That’s voluntary repentance. That’s a public statement that encourages others to take sin seriously and obey. At great cost to themselves. John Polhill estimates the cost of these books to be 137 years wages.

So there were a considerable number of books. And a considerable number of converts. And the Ephesian church was composed of people who practiced the magic arts, John the Baptist’s disciples, and Jews from the synagogue.

So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily. – 19:20

This is Luke’s editorial note.

New believers burning up their valuable magic books is essentially the gospel moving in power. It’s gospel increase and gospel victory (prevailing).

This burning party is a work of the gospel. This is the fruit of Paul reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus. This is what the gospel does. When the Holy Spirit accompanies gospel preaching.

Application: be rid of your sinful stuff

This wasn’t legalism. This was wise obedience. Burning books meant I can’t use them ever again. And no one else will either.

The converted drug dealer flushes his cocaine. He doesn’t sell it so he can give more to the church while others are ruined by the drugs.

The man with a 70’s porn stash doesn’t sell the stuff on Ebay so others can be enslaved to sin.

Application: powerful gospel

This is what the gospel does. It turns drug dealers into saints who long for an honest living. It turns porn users into men who love their wives and value the purity of women.

Last week I made a big deal about Paul’s reasoning with non-Christians. The power is in the gospel, not the logic of our arguments.

The gospel informs the ignorant. Silences doubts. Convicts seared consciences. Uproots self-righteous pride. Opens blind eyes. Warms the heart of the indifferent. Brings hope to the hopeless. Rescues enslaved people from addiction.

Speak directly. Speak clearly. Reason with Scripture.

We don’t have because we don’t ask. We don’t see converts because we don’t speak the gospel.

Gospel

The gospel is the good news of rescue in Jesus Christ. Rescue from our own hearts: enslaving desires, enslaving addictions, lies we believe, hatred, greed, jealousy, unforgiveness. Rescue from the punishment our sins deserve.

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. – John 3:16

The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead." – Acts 17:30-31

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. – Matthew 11:28-29

Christian, do you believe in the power of this book?