



Catalog No. 1269

Acts 17:16-34

Twenty-seventh Message

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October 2nd, 2005

PAUL IN ATHENS: APPEALING TO INTELLECTUALS

SERIES: THE SPREADING FLAME

Resuming our studies in Paul's second missionary journey, this morning we find the apostle alone in the great city of Athens. Accompanied by some unnamed believers, he had left Berea due to conflict and Jewish opposition. These friends took him all the way to the coast, put him on a boat and safely escorted him on the 300-mile trip down to Athens by sea. They then returned home with instructions to send Silas and Timothy as soon as possible.

Although Athens was no longer politically important, having been conquered by Rome in 146 B.C., the city was still the intellectual center of the world. It was heir to the great philosophers: Socrates, Plato, Epicurus, Zeno and Pericles, men who had established patterns of thought that have affected learning for centuries.

There is something fascinating about Paul in Athens: the great Christian apostle amidst the glories of ancient Greece. He had known about Athens since boyhood. Everyone did. Now for the first time he visits the city he had heard so much about. He is alone in the cultural center of the world. What was his reaction? Luke records Paul's response to the great city, informing us of what he saw, what he felt, what he did, and what he said. This passage will give us insight into our own response to visiting or living in a city that is intellectually and culturally sophisticated, but morally decadent and spiritually dead.

Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him as he was observing the city full of idols. So he was reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and in the market place every day with those who happened to be present. (Acts 17:16-17 NASB)

Paul was waiting in Athens for Timothy and Silas to arrive. The city wasn't on his agenda for this trip, and apparently he wasn't planning to stay long. While waiting he did a little sightseeing. As he wandered among the buildings and statues and altars he appreciated the beauty of the city. Paul was a cultured man. Athens was a very beautiful place. It was the site of the Acropolis and the Parthenon, one of the architectural wonders of the world. Our word theatre comes from the word "observing" (verse 16). Paul looked long and hard at what he saw: a "city full of idols."

Athens was crammed with altars, images and statues dedicated to the gods. Some historians said it was easier to find a god than a man in Athens. Statistically, that might have been

true. The population of the city at the time was about 10,000, but some scholars estimate that there might have been as many as 30,000 statues of gods erected there.

Observing this, Luke described how the apostle felt: "his spirit was being provoked," or as the NIV puts it, "he was greatly distressed." Paul was upset and angry—not at the people or even at the idolatry per se. It was what idolatry does to people that troubled him. He saw the emptiness in the lives of those who believed those lies. He saw all the beauty of the city, the culture and the art. On the surface, everything looked good. But he saw more than that. He knew that underneath things were not good at all.

Luke says the apostle felt compelled to discuss the matter, and he began to dialogue with anyone who would engage him. He went first, as he always did, to the Jews and the God-fearers in the synagogue. But there doesn't seem to have been much response, so he took his message out into the streets. In the marketplace he began to talk to people. The Agora, just a couple of blocks northwest of the Acropolis, was the center of social, commercial and intellectual life. It had a marketplace with stalls for fruits and vegetables, interspersed with altars, images and statues of various types, including temples, some of which have been reconstructed and are still standing today.

Around the outside of the marketplace stood a series of covered porches or porticoes, called stoas, where the philosophers taught. This was a circus-like atmosphere, with people milling about buying and selling and philosophers debating with one another. Evidently Paul got on his soapbox and began to preach. He may have engaged one of the philosophers in a debate. It didn't take long before there was a response.

And also some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him. Some were saying, "What would this idle babbler wish to say?" Others, "He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities," because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is which you are proclaiming? For you are bringing some strange things to our ears; so we want to know what these things mean." (Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new.) (17:18-21)

Soon Paul was confronting the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, two groups who represented the competing philoso-

phies of the day. The Epicureans based their philosophy on the teachings of Epicurus, who lived about 300 years earlier. Today, we think of an epicurean as a connoisseur of gourmet food, but in that day their philosophy was a little more complex. The Epicureans were agnostic. They didn't know whether the gods existed or not. If they did, they lived very far off and had absolutely nothing to do with the world. The Epicureans thought that everything happened by chance, that the gods were not in control of anything; and that the end of life was simply death, extinction with no afterlife. Their philosophy was, "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow, we die." Or, as we hear today, go for the gusto, because you only go around once.

The Stoics were so named because their teacher, Zeno, taught in the stoas, or porches. Unlike the Epicureans, they believed that the gods controlled everything. Everything was fated and fixed. Life was bleak and harsh, because the gods were cruel and hardhearted. You had to grin and bear it. Life was lived with detachment. Our word stoic means just that. These then were the competing and conflicting philosophies that Paul encountered.

If you don't have God in your life, those are the two major options. You decide either to make pleasure your ultimate good and go for all the gusto, or that life is tough and you just have to be tougher. Both of these philosophies engender pride. Epicureans take pride in pleasure, bragging about how much alcohol they can hold or how many sexual conquests they have made. Stoics take pride in their character, in how tough and resilient they are. These were bright, intelligent people, and hearing Paul preach about Jesus and the resurrection, they responded with clever, ironic sarcasm.

"What is this seed-picker trying to say?" they sneered. That is exactly what that word translated "idle babblers" means. Seed-pickers were little sparrows that hopped about the market place, picking up scraps of seeds and grain. This is what the philosophers thought of Paul. He didn't seem polished; his message wasn't well thought through. It sounded like he was sharing an eclectic hodge-podge of information. They made fun of him and wrote him off.

They brought him to the Areopagus, a very prestigious body of men. Although they had lost much of their legal punch, they still retained authority in matters of religion and morals in the city. These were the scholars and aristocrats. They got their name because they met on a little hill, "the hill of Ares," or Mars Hill, an outcropping of rock northwest of the Parthenon.

These intellectuals asked Paul, "May we know what this new teaching is which you are proclaiming? For you are bringing some strange things to our ears; so we want to know what these things mean." Luke adds the footnote, "Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new." These men had heard it all. Athens was the city of Socrates,

Plato, Aristotle and Zeno. They were given to novelty. They wanted to hear something new. With all their wisdom, they hadn't found what they were searching for.

As Paul stood up to speak, his adrenaline must have been flowing.

So Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects. For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, 'TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.' Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you." (17:22-23)

In Acts, Luke records three samples of Paul's teaching: his preaching to the Jews in a synagogue (chapter 13); his preaching to believers in the church at Ephesus (chapter 20); and here in Acts 17, his preaching to non-Christians. Certainly what we have here is a summary. The apostle must have said much more, but this is a shorthand account.

His point of contact is their idolatry: "Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects." You are given to spiritual things, he says. The city was crammed with altars and images and statues to other gods. He doesn't start by attacking their idolatry, but by admiring their search.

When you forego the God of the universe it takes an infinite number of gods to fill his place. They had looked everywhere for some god to satisfy them, but still they were empty. Notice how Paul argues. The evidence of their hunger for spiritual things was not the fact that they had many gods, but that they had one particular altar to an unknown god.

Notice the conjunction "for" at the beginning of verse 23: "For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, 'TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.'" For Paul, the existence of this one altar indicated the depth of their search. Having tried to find God everywhere, they finally gave up and made an altar to an unknown god. They thought that if the gods were not properly venerated they could strike the city. So, lest they offend a god in their ignorance of him, they built numerous altars to unknown gods.

Paul says, "What is unknown to you I am going to declare." So he introduces his God to the Athenians.

"The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things." (17:24-25)

Paul begins with the fundamental truth that God is the creator of the universe. How very different this is from the Epicurean idea of some chance combination of atoms, or the pantheism of the Stoics. Paul denies the premise of both groups. God is the personal creator of everything and the personal Lord of everything that he has made.

Secondly, God not only created everything, he is the sustainer of all life. With these words Paul speaks to the very heart of pagan worship: God is not “served by human hands.” This endless routine of propitiating gods by offering up bloody sacrifice is fruitless. God is not impressed by efforts to propitiate him. He doesn’t need to be satisfied. He is already satisfied. That is the apostle’s point. He cares about you. Most pagan religions are designed to get God to care about people. Paul says you don’t have to do that. God already cares about you. You don’t have to give anything. He is the giver of every good and perfect gift. As John Stott writes: “It is absurd, therefore, to suppose that he who sustains life should himself need to be sustained; that he who supplies our need should himself need our supply.”¹

Many who have grown up in severely dysfunctional homes have a distorted view of God that keeps them from truly knowing him. They think of him as harsh, cruel and demanding. But we need to understand, as these Athenians did, that God loves them.

Next, Paul says that God is the ruler of every nation.

“and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us.” (17:26-27)

These verses give us great insight into what shapes history. History is not random; nor is it driven by economics or war. Paul declares that God is sovereign. He is shaping history for his own redemptive purposes. As someone has said, history is “His story.” He decides how long a nation rules and the extent of its dominion and power. His sovereignty even includes the evil regimes of history, like Nazi Germany and Iraq. He doesn’t accept responsibility for their evil, but he permits their existence for a purpose.

God has a greater purpose than freedom and liberty, and that greater purpose is redemption. Paul says that God “determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation so that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him.” The limitations that are placed on us are there so that we might seek God; that they might drive us to the end of ourselves that we might, as Paul says, “grope” for God. That word denotes the groping and fumbling of a blind man. God wants us to seek him. That is why he allows catastrophes to occur, why wars break out, why violence is so prevalent. God allows the evil in men’s hearts to break out in these terrible catastrophes, to show men that they are not independent, that it is a self-delusion to think they can live without God.

I am sure there are people here this morning who could testify that they lived for years in the grip of this idolatrous delusion that they were sufficient in themselves. Then something occurred that put you flat on your back or broke your heart

and made you realize for the first time that you could not live without God.

“for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we also are His children.’ Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man. Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.” (17:28-31)

Paul could have quoted Scripture to support this thought of the nearness of God, but he doesn’t. Instead, he quotes two Greek poets. The first part of the verse, “for in Him we live and move and exist,” is from the work of Epimenides. The final line in verse 28, “For we also are His children,” comes from the writings of the poet Aratus: “All ways are full of Zeus and all meeting places of men; the sea and the harbors are full of him. In every direction we all have to do with Zeus; for we are also his children.” In the Greek pantheon of gods, Zeus was the high god. Paul says Zeus is very near. By your own writings, he says, you understand that God is near. Paul was very well read. He had studied what people in secular society were writing, and he was able to argue Biblical truth from their literature.

Here the apostle is talking about the character and nature of man. Man is created in the image of God. Man moves and lives and exists, therefore God moves and lives and exists. If that is so, how absurd it is to try to represent God through pieces of wood or stone. It is ridiculous. Idolatry not only degrades God, it degrades man. Idolatry says that we can be satisfied by things that are much less than who we are. But that is a lie.

Therefore, Paul says, we are to repent of our idolatry, because there is coming an inescapable day. God has fixed a day when he will judge the world. Judgment is coming. That sense inside us that there is a comeuppance is true. Most people have a nagging feeling that someday they are going to have to stand before God. Paul says that this judgment is not going to come from some remote god on Mt. Olympus, but from a Man who was raised from the dead.

It is possible that at this point Paul wanted to go on and preach about Jesus, his life, death, burial and resurrection, but when he mentioned the resurrection, he lost control of the meeting.

Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some began to sneer, but others said, “We shall hear you again concerning this.” So Paul went out of their midst. But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them. (17:32-34)

Paul’s sermon had three responses: mockery, delay, and belief. Some scoffed. He’s just a seed-picker, they sneered. What

a waste of time. Some were polite, but indecisive. We'd like to hear you again, they said. They delayed making a decision, as many people do. But a few believed. One of the scholars, Dionysius the Areopagite, believed. So did a woman named Damaris, and a few others. So Paul left a very small group of believers, about whom we know nothing (he never wrote a letter to this church).

As we reflect on this passage let me make a few observations.

First, we need to ask God to help us see others the way he sees them. Learn to see past the behavior to the needs which that behavior reveals. We often respond incorrectly because we aren't seeing clearly. Despite what people are inclined to reveal up front, down deep inside they are often looking for something. They might not even realize that it is a spiritual quest. They just know that there must be something more to life. They have an itch that they can't scratch. The writer of Ecclesiastes reminds us that God has placed eternity in the hearts of men. There is a hunger inside us that no start-up company can satisfy, no man or woman, no child can satisfy. Nothing in this life, no material thing, will satisfy that inward yearning.

We live in a culture of beautiful people. They dress in beautiful clothes, drive beautiful cars, live in beautiful homes, and vacation in beautiful places. Observing their lives, we often want what they have. But what we don't see is that down below the surface there is often an emptiness and a quest for something more. That is what Paul saw in Athens.

Secondly, we need to be in the world and know the world. Jesus was a friend of sinners. We need to be acquainted with secular society. We need to be where people are, in the marketplace, to build relationships and make proclamation there. We need to understand how people think. It appears that Paul read the Greek classics. He was a student of secular society. He wasn't afraid of secular facts. He recognized truth wherever he found it and he was very bold in his proclamation of it.

Finally, regardless of the reaction we get from non-Christians, we need to be gracious, loving and courteous. We need to treat people with dignity and respect. I am impressed by Paul's kindness and courtesy to the philosophers, in spite of their scoffing and criticism. He could have lashed out at them, called them idol worshippers and told them they had better repent or they were going to hell, but he didn't. Like God, he overlooked their ignorance. He was patient and took care to build a rapport with them.

May we ask God to give us fresh eyes to see others as he does. And may he give us sensitive hearts and grace-filled tongues, always ready to be used by him to impart love and truth.

1. John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990), 285.

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