

“Athens and Evangelism”

Acts 17:16-23

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Introduction:

This morning, I would invite you to turn with me to the book of Acts—Acts 17—as we begin a series of three lessons that are based on a visit that was made by the apostle Paul to the city of Athens. Most of us have probably studied Athens in school, and so we know that Athens was the center of knowledge and learning in the ancient world. Athens was the home of great philosophers like Aristotle, and Plato, and Socrates; the home of great poets and playwrights—men like Sophocles and Euripides. At one time, Athens had been the capital of the Grecian Empire. We remember all of the conquests that were made under the rule of Alexander the Great, and yet we also know that by the First Century, Athens' power had faded. The Golden Age of Greece had come to an end, and the city of Athens was actually captured by the Romans in 86 BC. Athens, then, had seen better days, and yet most of us probably also remember that Athens remained at the center of Greek mythology. In fact, even the word Athens reminds us that the city was named after the goddess Athena—the goddess of wisdom and war. Of course, the most famous monument to Athena in the ancient world was the Parthenon—**»PPT»**. The temple was completed in 432 BC and much of it is still standing today. As most of you already know **»PPT»**, the Parthenon is located on one of the major hills in the city of Athens (the Acropolis), and it is visible from many miles around.

Of course, not all of us are able to take a trip to Athens. Thankfully, though, there is a full-size exact replica of the Parthenon in Nashville, Tennessee—completed in its present state and opened to the public in 1931. **»PPT»** And if you look very carefully at the base of the Parthenon in Nashville, you can see two people you know—Silas and Bryor are standing there at the base of the Parthenon. We stopped by on our way to the Freed-Hardeman University Bible Lectures almost exactly two years ago (February 2008). **»PPT»** We were also able to look around on the inside. Based on drawings, and paintings, and coins from the ancient world, archaeologists were able to reconstruct the statue of Athena on the inside of the Parthenon. I hope you can get some perspective here, because you will notice that those in the background are standing at the base of the statue, and the average person only comes up to Athena's toes. The statue is more than 42 feet tall and is covered in 8 pounds of very thinly pounded gold leaf. **»PPT»** In Athena's right hand is a statue of Nike, the goddess of victory, and again, to give you a bit of perspective, the statue of Nike is 6' 4" tall, almost three inches taller than I am. So, the statue of Athena is rather large. And I show you these pictures simply to reinforce the fact that the worship of idols in ancient Athens was rather serious business.

Now, if we were to go outside the Parthenon in Athens and look down from the big hill, the Acropolis, we would be able to look down on a smaller hill known as the Areopagus. »PPT» And this is the hill where the apostle Paul delivered his sermon in **Acts 17**. Literally, the word Areopagus refers to the “**rock of Ares**.” Ares, of course, was the god of slaughter—sometimes referred to as the god of war. When the Romans came through, they referred to this as Mars Hill—Mars, of course, being the Roman god of war. Some translations, therefore, refer to the location of Paul’s sermon as being either Mars Hill or the Areopagus—they both refer to the same place—known to the Romans as Mars Hill and to the Greeks as the Areopagus. »PPT» More down on the same level, we get a better view of the Areopagus—it was a bare rocky hill, and in the ancient world it was a gathering place and really more of a courtroom—a place where the elite would come together to argue and discuss the latest news. This is where Oprah would have hung out. Rush Limbaugh would have loved this place. People came here to discuss the latest politics, and this is the actual place that is referred to in our text for this morning’s lesson. In fact, in the lower right hand corner, you might notice a bronze plaque. »PPT» That plaque contains (in Greek) the words of Paul’s sermon from **Acts 17**. In our pew Bibles, the scripture is found on **page 1734**. For the rest of the lesson, in light of what Paul has to say, I would like for us to consider the view—if you could imagine standing on the Areopagus »PPT» and looking back over your shoulder—the view of the Parthenon and the other temples on the Acropolis. This is what people would have seen in the background as they listened to Paul’s sermon. With this in mind, please look with me at **Acts 17**. Paul is on his Second Missionary Journey. He is simply passing through. He is dropped off in Athens and is waiting for Silas and Timothy to come join him for the next leg of the journey down to Corinth. Today, we might refer to this as a “**layover**.” This is what happens as he waits. **Acts 17:16-34**...

¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is which you are proclaiming? ²⁰ "For you are bringing some strange things to our ears; so we want to know what these things mean." ²¹ (Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new.)

²² So Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects. 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.' Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I

proclaim to you. ²⁴ "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; ²⁵ 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; ²⁶ 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, ²⁷ 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; ²⁸ for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His children.' ²⁹ "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. ³⁰ "Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, ³¹ 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.

³² Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some began to sneer, but others said, "We shall hear you again concerning this." ³³ So Paul went out of their midst. ³⁴ But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

As we think about this passage today and over the next two Sundays, I would like for us to focus this morning on **verses 16-23** **»PPT»** and how Paul serves as an amazing example of how to reach out with the gospel. I would like for us to focus next week very specifically on what Paul has to say about the one true God. And then in two weeks I would like for us to conclude by looking at what Paul actually tells these people to do. But for this morning, let us please consider Paul as an example of sharing the gospel.

I. And one of the first things we notice is that PAUL GOT ANGRY AND GOT MOTIVATED TO DO SOMETHING WHEN HE SAW THE GREAT NEED.
»PPT»

In **verse 16**, the Bible says that, *"...while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him as he was observing the city full of idols."* The word *"provoked"* refers to being *"sharpened,"* and it refers to getting upset, to getting mad about something. One translation says that Paul was *"irritated"* at the sight of so many idols. And so as Paul was waiting for Silas and Timothy, he got out and he started looking around. But as he started exploring the city of Athens, he discovered that the city was full of idols, and so his spirit was *"provoked"* as he saw the great need for sharing the good news. Paul, coming from

his very strict Jewish background, would have been especially upset at this. Remember, the first two of the Ten Commandments were very plain on this issue—no other gods but God, and no idols. In those opening verses of the Ten Commandments, God even explained that He was a ***“jealous God” (Exodus 20:5)***. In other words, ***“I am a God who gets angry at this kind of thing.”*** Paul, then, would have also been very, very upset.

Historians tell us that there were more than 30,000 idols in the city of Athens at the time Paul was there. In fact, one Greek author has said that in the city of Athens, it was easier to find a god than a man! Another ancient author said that the city was, ***“one great altar, one great offering to the gods.”*** From history, we know that about 600 years before this, a terrible plague had struck Athens, and Epimenides, the poet, had what people thought was a brilliant suggestion to stop the plague. He suggested that a flock of sheep be released at this very spot, on the Areopagus, and that each time a sheep lay down in front of an idol, that it be sacrificed to that god. Not only that, but if a sheep were to lay down where there was not an idol, that an idol would be built to an ***“Unknown God,”*** and the sheep would be sacrificed right there on the spot. As I was preparing this morning’s lesson, I started thinking about this from the sheep’s point of view. Here we are in a giant flock on the top of this little hill, and then suddenly, ***“Freedom!”*** We all wander off in different directions, and then we notice one of our fellow sheep takes a break and lays down—whack! Killed right there on the spot! We wander around, and it happens again. Someone lies down, and then—whack! Sacrificed to a god. After a while, ***“Whatever you do, don’t lay down!”*** But eventually every sheep was sacrificed.

Even in ruins today, as we have already seen, some of those temples are still considered some of the great wonders of the ancient world. And yet we find here that Paul was not impressed with the silver, and gold, and great architecture, or the size and beauty of those 30,000 idols and their temples, but it all made him angry. He was ***“provoked.”*** We remember what Paul wrote from the nearby city of Corinth just a few years later. Right down the road from Athens, Paul wrote to the church in Rome and said, ***“For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures” (Romans 1:21-23)***. Paul, then, looked out over the city of Athens, and he was not impressed. In fact, he was angry. His spirit was ***“provoked.”***

Each idol represented the fact that the men and women of Athens had a great capacity for God. They knew that there was something out there—there was something beyond themselves—they were seeking for it. And yet each idol represented a twisting of that capacity. Right there in the center of the academic universe, in Athens, Greece, there was the most foolish thing we could possibly imagine—wise and otherwise intelligent people building idols out of wood, and stone, and gold, and then bowing down and worshiping those idols. And so when Paul saw that the one true God was not being honored, he was motivated to do something about it.

Here we are in Madison, nearly 2,000 years later. When we look around us, what do we see? When we walk through our neighborhoods in the evening, when we drop our kids off at school in the morning, when we walk into work, when we drive around this city, what do we see? Like Paul, are we upset that our friends and neighbors are not honoring God as they should? Not that we are mad at them, but are we upset that they are missing something? Were we upset this week to learn that Madison is now ranked as the **"5th Gayest City"** in the United States? And again, when we get angry, it is not a position of arrogance on our part, but it is a position of concern, of being motivated and provoked by the great need. Do we get upset when people talk about all of the different religions as if it matters no more than the style of clothing we choose to wear—that you can be a Hindu, or a Buddhist, or a Catholic, or a Lutheran, that it doesn't matter, that it is all just a matter of personal opinion? I would suggest that these things need to make us angry—not a mean kind of anger, but the kind of concern that motivates us to do something about it. In fact, several chapters later, Paul will go on to say that his mission in life was, ***"...to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins..."*** (Acts 26:18). Paul, therefore, opened his eyes during this layover in Athens, and his great concern was a motivation.

II. As we look back at our text for this morning, we find not only that Paul was motivated, but we also find that HE HAD THE COURAGE TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF AN AMAZING OPPORTUNITY. »PPT»

In other words, not only was he upset by the situation, but he did something about it. And unlike some people with religious differences, he did not strap on a vest and blow himself up in a crowd, but the Bible says that he reasoned with them from the Scriptures. He could have left town. He could have ignored the situation. He could have admired all of the religious diversity. And yet we see here in Acts 17 a great example of how to handle a city that is lost in sin—get upset, and then do something.

In verse 17, we find that 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."*** In other words, he started with those who already believed in God—the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles. But even beyond this, he continued on to the marketplaces, and as it says in verse 17, he talked with anyone who happened to be present. He did this ***"every day."*** He did not wait for the perfect opportunity, but he stepped out and said something. In verse 18, we find that he was conversing with some of the, ***"Epicurean and [the] Stoic philosophers."*** These were two very different philosophies, two very different groups of people. And as they talked, these people described Paul as an ***"idle babbler."*** Literally, the phrase refers to a ***"seed picker,"*** to a bird that hops around picking up stuff here and there. They were accusing Paul, then, of picking up ideas from various religions and kind of mashing them all together with no real understanding of his own—basically accusing him of plagiarism—they looked down on Paul as if he knew nothing. And yet as a result of their conversations, and in spite of their criticism, the situation progressed and Paul was eventually invited to speak—

they wanted to hear something new. But the point here is that Paul saw the need and then he spoke up. He crossed racial and social boundaries, he put himself out there, and he took advantage of an amazing opportunity.

We think of what brother Michael read for us in the Scripture reading this morning, where Peter told those in the early church not to be afraid, but to, ***“...sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you...”*** (1 Peter 3:15). Paul, then, took advantage of the opportunity. He did not abuse the privilege, but he spoke of Jesus, the people wanted to know more, and so he spoke up. What an amazing example! In the same way, we also need to look for opportunities, and then we need to have the courage to speak up at the appropriate time.

III. As we go back to Acts 17, there is another lesson we can learn on how to share the word of God with people, and that is THE APOSTLE PAUL APPROACHED THESE PEOPLE WITH KINDNESS AND WITH THE UTMOST OF RESPECT. »PPT»

In spite of his anger at seeing all of the idols, in spite of being provoked, the first thing we notice about Paul’s actual sermon is that he does not overreact. He does not become angry and condescending. He did not look down his nose at these people, but he approached them in a kind and yet courageous way. Again, as Peter said in this morning’s Scripture reading, we are to make a defense, ***“with gentleness and reverence.”*** Paul, then, spoke in a very civilized way. In verse 17, he ***“reasoned”*** with them—he respected them as human beings with brains of their own. He did not rant and rave and scream and shout, and yet on the other hand, he did not leave them wondering where he stood. He was straightforward and clear. As we have on our stationery and on our brochures here at this congregation, a quote from Ephesians 4:15, we want to be people who are known for ***“speaking the truth in love.”*** That is exactly what Paul was doing.

And this morning, we focus on the opening line in verses 22-23, ***“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.”*** That opening line is a masterpiece—an amazing example of how to be kind yet firm. Please notice what he did. He was talking to people who did not believe in either God or the Bible, so he did not start by quoting Scripture. These people did not care about the Scriptures! And so he will go on to quote one of their own poets; he quotes an inscription on one of their statues, but not a single Scripture. Instead, he starts with a compliment, ***“Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects.”***

I know we haven’t looked at the whole sermon yet (we will get into it in much greater detail over the next two weeks), but have you noticed how simple it is? How the entire sermon fit onto that little bronze plaque? That it would take maybe 30 seconds to read the entire sermon word for word? Paul was preaching to some of the most

highly educated and smartest people in the world here in Athens—these people were world leaders, and philosophers, and university professors, but Paul preaches a rather brief lesson that most 3rd graders could understand—there is a God, this is who He is, and this is what we need to do about it—very simple! He took the time to pay attention to who these people were, he understood where they were coming from, and then he uses their own words to tell them exactly what they need to hear!

He latches on to this statue that had been dedicated, ***“To An Unknown God.”*** And from a legal point of view, he avoids the accusation that he was preaching a new god, but he is telling them about a God they already worship—a God they worship in ignorance—not a slam, but an opportunity to fill them in, to enlighten them concerning a God they already know deep down inside. He could have started out by very accurately saying, ***“You guys need to tear down these stupid idols. How can people as smart as you be so ignorant as to worship all of these chunks of stone and wood covered in gold? You are a bunch of dirty, low-down, good-for-nothing, ignoramuses.”*** He could have said that, and he would have been accurate. But instead, he was respectful, he praised something positive that they were doing (that they were very religious), and then he told them the truth about the one true and living God.

As we apply what Paul did here to our own lives today, doesn't it seem that we need to be aware of things that are important to people—the things they live for, the things they talk about—and then find a way to kindly introduce the Lord into those conversations? Let us find out what their problems are, let us take an interest, let us pay attention, and then let us get to know the people that God has put in our lives. Above all, let us teach about God not only accurately, but also with kindness and respect, as Paul did.

Conclusion:

As we close this morning's lesson, I would point out that like Paul, we also live in a society that continues to worship an ***“Unknown God.”*** A lot of the people we know here in Madison are also highly educated (as were the men and women of Athens). A lot of people around us think that how we approach God does not really matter—that we are all honoring some kind of God, just in different ways, that we are simply taking different paths to the same destination. As we go back into the community this week, I hope we can think about how Paul handled a very similar situation. He saw the need. He took advantage of the opportunity. And he approached his audience with the utmost of respect.

Lord willing, we can continue our study of this passage next Sunday morning by looking at what Paul actually said about God. And then in two weeks we will hopefully be able to consider the conclusion of Paul's presentation, and what he told the people they actually needed to do.

This morning, we need to know that God has made Himself available—He has offered His only Son as a sacrifice for our sins, and we are to respond to that offer with loving

obedience. We must turn away from sin, and then we must allow ourselves to be briefly buried in water for the forgiveness of our past sins. At that point, our sins are washed away, and we are born into God's family. If you are already a Christian but have turned away, or if you are facing some special struggle in your life right now, we hope you will write it down and bring your request to the front in just a moment so that we can pray about it as a congregation. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's all stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: church@fourlakescoc.org