



Acts: The Church Unleashed- Session 11

November 18, 2018

Reference: *The Gospel Project Winter 2017-2018*

If you were asked to give an example of things that you see broken in our world today, what would you say? What happens to your heart when you see the brokenness in our world? When you see the idolatry in our culture, how do you react? Do you have a posture of judgment? An attitude of indifference? A desire to run away? Or an urge to act and do something?

In church history, we read about people who believed that the world was so evil that they had to get away and separate themselves from it as much as possible. These kinds of people were often called “ascetics.” As a result, many lived in the desert and created monastic communities where they could guard and protect themselves from the idolatries in the culture. There were even some who believed that their bodies were such a source of temptation and evil that they would mortify their bodies.

According to Acts 17, however, we are not to separate ourselves from our culture but to distinguish ourselves from it with a biblical worldview that we maintain and the gospel message we proclaim. We are to be in the world but not of it (see John 17:14,16).

What will it look like for us today to live in the world but not be of it? How has it become harder to live for Jesus compared to the times 50 or 100 years ago?

What are things about our culture today that can be leveraged to share the gospel just as effectively as the time when Paul was in Athens?

Transition: We should pay careful attention to how Paul interacted with the men and women of Athens since this has many parallels for us today. Paul understood that the gospel must be presented in a way that is comprehensible to people in different cultures. As a result, when Paul reasoned with those in Athens, he found points of contact between the biblical view of the world and that of Greek culture. Then he proclaimed that all nations came from the first Adam and that the second Adam, Jesus Christ, will judge all nations. Paul’s message focused on the risen Jesus and included a fervent call to repentance. Like Paul, we need to allow ourselves to be provoked by the idolatry of our culture so that we can boldly and sensitively proclaim the gospel into it.

1. Know the Culture and Grieve Over Its Idolatry. Acts 17:16.

Have a volunteer to read Acts 17:16.

16 While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, his spirit was troubled within him when he saw that the city was full of idols.

What is the context of this passage?

In the preceding verses, Paul was preaching and proclaiming the gospel in a Jewish synagogue at Thessalonica. Some Jews were convinced, but it was the God-fearing Greeks and the leading women in the city that experienced much of the transformation (Acts 17:4). As a result, many Jews in the city “became jealous, and they brought together some wicked men from the marketplace, formed a mob, and started a riot in the city” (v. 5).

This led the disciples to send Paul and Silas off to Berea, where they were able to continue to share the gospel in the Jewish synagogue. In Berea, many more people heard and accepted the gospel, “including a number of the prominent Greek women as well as men” (v. 12). However, once the troublemaking Jews from Thessalonica heard that the gospel was being proclaimed in Berea, they also went there and stirred up the crowds. This is how Paul made it to Athens.

What were ways that you prepared for your job? What does that preparation look like (education, training, certifications)? Why does training and preparation for a job never really stop? How did Paul and Silas demonstrate and attitude of preparation? What does preparation in our lives look like to be on mission?

When has God used your past circumstances to prepare you for your next steps or to have a conversation with another person about the gospel? How did people respond to your past? How can our past be a tool for Christ?

When Paul arrived in Athens, Paul studied the city. He walked around and observed the culture. He became aware of his surroundings. Instead of running away, closing his eyes, or returning back to a “safer” city, he allowed himself to grieve over the idolatry in the city. He allowed the Holy Spirit to move his heart, which was the foundation and impetus for what he did next in the following verses.

What idols would you say are present in our area? How are these idols destructive to those enslaved by them? How can God use a group to do away with idols?

Transition: With his heart grieved and his eyes opened to the mass idolatry and lostness in the city, Paul could not take it anymore. So, he did what he knew to do—he went to both the synagogue and the marketplace to reason with the Jewish and Greek Athenians and to proclaim the gospel to them in hopes they would believe in the one true God.

2. Affirm the good, rebuke the bad, and proclaim the truth. Acts 17:17-31.

Have a volunteer to read Acts 17:17-31.

.17 So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with those who worshiped God, as well as in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. .18 Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also debated with him. Some said, “What is this ignorant show-off trying to say?”

Others replied, “He seems to be a preacher of foreign deities”—because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.

.19 They took him and brought him to the Areopagus, and said, “May we learn about this new teaching you are presenting? .20 Because what you say sounds

strange to us, and we want to know what these things mean.”²¹ Now all the Athenians and the foreigners residing there spent their time on nothing else but telling or hearing something new.

²² Paul stood in the middle of the Areopagus and said: “People of Athens! I see that you are extremely religious in every respect. ²³ For as I was passing through and observing the objects of your worship, I even found an altar on which was inscribed: ‘To an Unknown God.’ Therefore, what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it—he is Lord of heaven and earth—does not live in shrines made by hands. ²⁵ Neither is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives everyone life and breath and all things. ²⁶ From one man he has made every nationality to live over the whole earth and has determined their appointed times and the boundaries of where they live. ²⁷ He did this so that they might seek God, and perhaps they might reach out and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸ For in him we live and move and have our being, as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we are also his offspring.’ ²⁹ Since we are God’s offspring then, we shouldn’t think that the divine nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image fashioned by human art and imagination. ³⁰ “Therefore, having overlooked the times of ignorance, God now commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has set a day when he is going to judge the world in righteousness by the man he has appointed. He has provided proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.”

According to verse 22, what tone do you see Paul use in sharing the gospel to the Athenians?

When Paul reasoned with the Athenians, he did not expect them to come to faith the way he did—by first becoming a devout Jew and then a Christian. Instead, he started with their worldview and with what they knew. Then he laid a foundation for sharing the gospel with them.

After Paul was brought into the Areopagus to explain his message to them, he started his speech by affirming the good that he saw. He applauded the Athenians for wanting to explore and seek the truth since they gave him the opportunity to talk about the gospel to a large group of them. They even gave him center stage in their meeting hall to hear his teaching, which was very new to their ears. He commended them for being religious and for understanding that life was more than just the here and now.

At this point, Paul began to make the transition from their culture’s idea of the divine, which included multiple and various and probably contradictory deities, to the bedrock of biblical monotheism. Paul wanted to acknowledge that he understood where the Athenians were coming from before he shared the gospel with them. He wanted to explain that he was not ignorant about their ways before critiquing their beliefs.

Instead of introducing the one God that they had never heard about, he pointed out the fact that they already knew something was missing in their belief system.

In your experience, what are ways that you see people trying to make idols to reflect their own understanding of God? How can these contradict who God is? How can they be conversation starters to share the gospel?

As he continues, Paul builds further toward sharing the gospel with the Athenians. Notice the way that he does it. He starts by sharing how manmade idols are not necessary by how he rebukes their plethora of idols and their meaninglessness. After all, why would anyone want to worship a god that they could make? The true God, on the other hand, cannot be contained, nor does He need human beings to provide for Him. He is self-existent and independent of all of

creation, but all of creation, including human beings, is dependent upon Him. In other words, Paul proclaimed the existence and self-sufficiency of the God of Scripture.

As cliché as it might sound, there is a hole in each of our hearts that only God can satisfy and fill. The world tries to convince us that filling it with idols of our own making—such as sex, fame, money, possessions, drugs, and alcohol—will satisfy, but it never works. These are our modern-day shrines. The only thing that will truly satisfy is the true and living God who created and sustains the world, not the idols of the human imagination.

Notice how in verse 30 how there is the call for repentance and its immediacy. The resurrection of Jesus marks a new level of accountability that God extends to the nations as He sends missionaries like Paul to enjoin them to believe the gospel message. Just as Paul preached in the first century, so it is today—true satisfaction in God begins with repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, the One who will judge the world in righteousness.

What qualities do you see in children when they are repentant for a time of disobedience? How can these qualities translate to someone that is to repent and place their faith in Christ?

How does a repentant life display the work of the gospel to a lost world?

Transition: So far we have looked at Paul's motivation for reaching the Athenians as well as his message for them. Now we will consider the response of the Athenians to Paul's message. The important thing to note is the different types of responses that people gave to Paul's gospel proclamation.

3. Expect some to laugh, some to ask questions, and others to believe. Acts 17:32-34.

Have a volunteer to read Acts 17:32-34.

³² When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some began to ridicule him, but others said, "We'd like to hear from you again about this." ³³ So Paul left their presence. ³⁴ However, some people joined him and believed, including Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

When Paul affirmed the good in their culture, this opened the door for him to rebuke the bad and then ultimately proclaim the truth of the gospel to the Athenians. The Athenians' responses varied. Some ridiculed him because "resurrection" was such a far-flung concept to them in their culture. As one commentator put it: "The Athenians, to whom the idea of physical resurrection would have been repugnant, began to sneer, and the reported speech comes to an abrupt end."⁹

To those that reject, ridicule, or laugh, your best response to them is to end the conversation and begin interceding for them. Pray that God would soften their hearts to the truth of the gospel and that He would bring them to their knees circumstantially. Pray that He would open their hearts and change them. Pray also that He would bring other followers of Christ into their lives so that they can experience the love of Christ from many in the body of Christ. Your next response can be to try use apologetic arguments that help to clarify positions. Still, the text shows us how there are some that believe and some that do not. The amazing thing to consider is how God desires to use you to share his good news of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection!

In your personal experiences, what types of responses have you seen when sharing the gospel or seeking to have a gospel conversation? How have you

responded in those situations (frustration, argumentative, defensive)? What did you learn about how to have a more fruitful conversation with someone about Jesus?

Conclusion

Sadly, many Christians in our churches know what the gospel is but fail to share it with others. The gospel is not only for knowing but also for sharing. So pray for the lost in your neighborhood. Engage with them, develop friendships with them, and look for opportunities to share the gospel with them through both word and deed. Like Paul, meet non-Christians where they are, but don't leave them there. Present the gospel in a compelling manner so that some might believe.

Quotes/Commentaries

Acts 17:16

“Visitors to Athens today who view the masterpieces of the great architects and sculptors of the age of Pericles are free to admire them as works of art: to no one nowadays are they anything more. But in the first Christian century they were not only admired as works of art: they were temples and images of pagan divinities. Temples and images of pagan divinities were no new thing to a native of Tarsus, but this native of Tarsus had been brought up in the spirit of the first and second commandments of the decalogue. Whatever Paul may have felt in the way of artistic appreciation—and his education had not fostered any capacity for this—the feeling that was uppermost in his mind as he walked here and there through the violet-crowned city was one of indignation: the city was full of idols, dedicated to the worship of gods that were no gods—for ‘what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God’ (1 Cor. 10:20).”⁴
—F. F. Bruce

Acts 17:13-31

It is the duty and privilege of every Christian and of every church of the Lord Jesus Christ to make disciples of all nations. The new birth of man's spirit by God's Holy Spirit means the birth of love for others. Missionary effort on the part of all thus rests upon a spiritual necessity of the regenerate life and is expressly and repeatedly commanded in the teachings of Christ. The Lord Jesus Christ has commanded the preaching of the gospel to all nations. It is the duty of every child of God to seek constantly to win the lost to Christ by verbal witness undergirded by a Christian lifestyle.

“In Paul's day, Greece was no longer a political and military power...[but] remained a crossroads between the eastern and western sections of the Empire...Athens gained new notoriety as a university city. Plato's Academy still flourished and young men, especially from Rome, came to acquire some knowledge of philosophy and rhetoric...The Athens that Paul saw was still a bustling city. Athenians lived in the open and daily gathered in the agora to conduct business or exchange the latest gossip. The agora was also the place where many philosophers congregated. Stoics, Cynics, and Epicureans regularly gathered in the agora and espoused their different philosophies. Cynics questioned whether knowledge was attainable. Epicureans wished to attain a state of detachment: a life free of pain and stress, whereas Stoics believed all living things possessed the divine principle of life (the *logos*). ‘They saw this spark of divinity as the cohesive rational principle that binds the entire universe together.’ People gathered around the speakers seeking either to be enlightened or entertained.”⁸

–Gary M. Poulton, *Biblical Illustrator*

Acts 17:32-34

“Paul’s return to his starting-point provoked the scorn of some of his hearers. Although Greeks believed in the immortality of the soul, the idea of a bodily *resurrection* was alien to their thinking, since the body was increasingly regarded as earthly and evil in comparison with the soul which was the seat of the divine in man. Not only was the cross ‘folly to Gentiles,’ but so also was the resurrection. Others of Paul’s hearers said that they would *hear* him on another occasion; this is often interpreted as simply a more polite form of dismissal, but the contrast expressed with the first group may suggest that this was a more positive reaction, and that these people longed that what Paul said was true. This verdict is confirmed by the fact that after Paul had left the gathering he did gain some converts. One in particular was a member of the Areopagus called *Dionysius*. This indicates that Paul’s audience certainly contained members of the court of the Areopagus, whether or not we identify the occasion as a meeting of the court.”¹⁰
–I. Howard Marshall

“God uses everyday people like you and me to make His children into mature, world-affecting disciples. This statement is nearly unfathomable. That the God of the universe concluded that we would be the primary earthly tool through which someone begins to look more and more like Him is a mystery beyond comprehension. Yet that’s exactly what He chooses to do.”¹¹
–Philip Nation and Rick Howerton