

## ***All People Everywhere***

*Acts 17:16-34*

In your opinion, who is the person you know who is most unlikely to become a genuine disciple of Jesus? In other words, this is the person about whom you would say, “Of all the people I know, this is the one who has insurmountable barriers to turning from their sins, believing in Jesus, confessing him as their Lord, and following him no matter what.” Those barriers might be intellectual or moral or emotional or something else. The person you’re thinking about may be a family member, a friend, or a coworker. Or that person may just be you, yourself.

Whatever the case, today’s passage argues that ***The good news about “Jesus and the resurrection” is for all people everywhere.*** This means that the gospel is for the people that you and I think are the most unlikely people to become disciples. This reality should both challenge us to have greater faith and give us the courage to not lose heart and give up on people spiritually.

A few words about the context of today’s passage. Last week we saw that after Paul’s life was threatened in Thessalonica he was taken to Berea. After his life was threatened in Berea he was put on a ship and taken to the Greek city of Athens. And so Athens wasn’t a scheduled, planned stop on Paul’s missionary tour. But finding himself there in Athens provided him the opportunity to talk about Jesus and his resurrection with all sorts of people, including high-powered philosophers. They were surely among the least likely of people to become disciples of Jesus. But Paul spoke the gospel to them because - as he will tell them - that this message about Jesus is for all people everywhere. And some of them came to Christ.

Paul’s experience shows us three things in relation to sharing Christ with the unlikely in our lives.

### ***Our motivation is the glory of God. (Acts 17:16-21)***

The glory of God was Paul’s motivation for sharing Christ in Athens.

16 Now while Paul was waiting for them [Silas and Timothy] at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.

One Roman satirist said that it was easier to find a god in Athens than a man. One person estimated that there were 10,000 people in Athens and 30,000 idols in Athens. Paul had a visceral reaction when he saw that the city was smothered (one translation of “full of”) in idols; his spirit was provoked within him.

Paul’s reaction mirrored God’s reaction to idolatry in ancient Israel. The same word used to describe how Paul was “provoked” is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament to describe how the Lord was “provoked . . . to wrath” when the children of Israel worshiped the golden calf in the wilderness (Deut. 9:8). Idols weren’t merely statues or works of art; they were rival gods. Because God was zealous for his own

glory (Exodus 20:4-5), Paul was also. He was provoked in spirit when he saw God being robbed of the glory by the rampant idolatry. Of course he wanted people to escape God's judgment and experience eternal life; but perhaps more than that he wanted God to receive the worship that he alone is due. That's what motivated him to preach Christ in Athens.

We may not see idols on every corner here in our town. But idolatry is no less rampant in our day. Anything that people (us included) substitute for God is an idol. It's been said that the human heart is an idol factory. Whereas we were created to love God wholeheartedly, we often and easily love God halfheartedly and set our deepest affection on other things (which aren't necessarily wrong or bad in and of themselves): money, sex, power, reputation, family, our intellect, our bodies, etc.

The first issue in our lives flagged by this passage is whether or not we will be captivated by the glory of God and therefore give him the worship he deserves. The second issue is whether or not we will be motivated to share the message about Jesus so that others might give God the glory he deserves.

That's what motivated Paul in Athens. Look at verse 17ff:

17 So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. 18 Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, "What does this babbler wish to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities"—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.

It's really hard to summarize what the Epicureans and the Stoics believed. But basically the Epicureans were akin to deists who believed that the gods were remote and uninvolved in human life. They didn't believe that humans survived death, and therefore there was no judgment day. The Stoics were pantheists who believed that the world was ruled by fate. Therefore you simply try to live a good life and endure whatever pain comes your way. The Stoics might have believed in the "immortality of the soul" (a different concept than Paul taught in 1 Cor. 15), but they certainly didn't believe that anyone would live eternally with a material body.

When they heard Paul preaching about Jesus and the resurrection, they called him a "babbler" - literally a "seed picker." They likened Paul to a bird that goes around picking up random seeds of thought here and there. They didn't think he had anything substantive or coherent to say. But even though they were dismissive of Paul, they wanted to give him a hearing because he seemed to be preaching "foreign divinities" - because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection." It may be that they thought that "Jesus" and "the resurrection" (*Anastasia*) were two foreign gods that might be added to their pantheon.

19 And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? 20 For you bring some strange things to our ears. **We wish to know** therefore what these things mean." 21 Now all

the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.

The Areopagus was basically a council (much like a city council) that had a tremendous amount of power and influence in Athens. Paul had been invited (or perhaps forced) to speak to the Areopagus because some of its members wanted to hear more about “Jesus and the resurrection.”

Paul’s sermon the the Areopagus shows that:

***Our message is that the one true living God can be known. (Acts 17:22-31)***

Motivated by the glory of God, Paul told the Areopagus that the one true living God can actually be known. Beginning in verse 22 we have a summary of Paul’s speech.

22 So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious.

The word “religious” was somewhat ambiguous. It could have a positive connotation of devout; or it could have a negative connotation of superstitious. As we’ll see Paul may have chosen the word because in one sense they were devout (as evidenced by the thousands of idols), but they were also superstitious (as evidenced by the thousands of idols). He explains:

23 For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.

Paul mentions that came across an altar with an inscription which read, “To the unknown god.” The term translated “unknown” is used only here in the New Testament. It’s the word ἄγνωστος, *agnostos*, from which we get the word “agnostic.” Today when people call themselves agnostic, they might mean different things: either “***I don’t know*** whether nor not God exists” or “***I don’t think it’s possible to know*** whether or not God exists.”

The Athenians who made an altar “to the unknown god” were agnostic in a different sense. There were many different gods that they ***did*** know (Zeus, Poseidon, Hermes, Ares, Athena, etc.); they made idols of these gods whom they worshiped and brought sacrifices. But they assumed that there were other gods that ***didn’t*** know. They were agnostic in the sense that ***they didn’t have knowledge about them***; they believed they existed, but they were ignorant about them. Just in case they had offended these unknown gods they also made altars to them and brought them sacrifices.

In a very bold move, Paul tells them, “What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.” He’s not implying that they had been worshiping the God is Israel all along. Rather, he’s simply picking up on the fact that they had acknowledged that there was a god they didn’t know. He is going to tell them about the God they need to know: the God of Israel as revealed in the Scriptures and through the resurrection of Jesus.

What Paul next says about the God of the Bible can be summarized in a number of different ways. This morning I am using John Stott's outline found in his commentary on the book of Acts (*The Message of Acts, to the ends of the earth*, IVP). Stott's outline summarizes five things that Paul says about God in contrast with the gods/idols of Athens. I hope you find this as helpful as I do.

First. . .

*God is the Creator of the universe. (v. 24)*

24 The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man,

From Genesis to Revelation, the Scriptures stress that the one true living God made the world and everything in it, including humanity. One implication is that he is therefore "Lord of heaven and earth." As the Creator and Ruler and Owner of everyone and everything, it's absurd to think that he lives "in temples made by man (lit. "In handmade temples"). God cannot be contained in a building. Ancient Israel often needed to be reminded of this.

Second. . .

*God is the Sustainer of life. (v. 25a)*

25 nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.

The point here is that God doesn't need us to do anything for him; he is not dependent on us. Rather, we are absolutely dependent upon him! Specifically, Paul says that "he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything." As opposed to being remote and uninvolved in everyday life, God is the Sustainer of life. [By the way, this is a perspective that can radically change the way we live our lives. People who truly believing that God supplies them with everything are joyful, grateful, generous people.]

Third. . .

*God is the Ruler of all the nations. (Vv. 26-28a)*

In these verse Paul establishes God's sovereignty over all of human history. He began with one man and is moving all of history to its appointed end.

26 And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods [lit. "times"] and the boundaries of their dwelling place,

Some commentators understand Paul to be talking about God establishing the seasons and establishing the boundaries between land and sea. But it seems best to understand him as talking about God being sovereign over the history and the geographical boundaries of each nation (so Stott, Boch, Peterson, etc.). We see this in the Old

Testament when God accomplishes his purposes through nations/kingdoms such as Assyria, Babylon, and Persia.

Look at the reason God rules and sustains the nations in verse 27:

27 that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, 28 for “ ‘In him we live and move and have our being’ . . .

Paul likens the peoples of the earth seeking God much the way a blindfolded person might feel their way along the walls and furniture to get somewhere. Because all humanity is created in the image of God, we have the basic longing to find the One who created and sustains and rules over us.

As a matter of fact, Paul tells them, God is not remote and uninterested in their lives; “. . . he is actually not far from each one of us.” In verse 28 he quotes one of their own poets (Epimenides) who lived in the 6th century bc who had this same sense when he wrote, “In him we live and move and have our being.”

Fourth, moreover. . .  
*God is the Father of human beings. (Vv. 28b-29)*

Here he quotes another Greek poet (Aratus):

28. . .as even some of your own poets have said, “ ‘For we are indeed his offspring.’  
29 Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.

Of course Paul wasn’t saying that their poet got it right when he said that they were the offspring of Zeus. But his impulse to see a divine being as their father was spot on. When it comes to salvation, we become God’s children through faith in Christ (John 1:12). But there’s also a sense in which all human beings are God’s children because we are all created in his image and sustained by his grace.

In verse 29, Paul tells them that the fact that we are his offspring makes idolatry illogical and absurd. We should never employ art and imagination to create a god(s) out of gold or silver or stone.

This leads to Paul’s fifth and final statement about God:  
*God is the Judge of the world. (vv. 30-31)*

In verse 30 Paul describes the centuries and millennia before the death and resurrection of Jesus as “the times of ignorance” (or the times of agnosticism) - the times when the nations lacked knowledge about who God really is and what he demands.

30 The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent,

In the past God overlooked in the sense of being patient and not bringing all of human history to a close prematurely. But “now he commands all people everywhere to repent” - to turn from their idolatry and turn back to God in faith. Notice **why** Paul said that now is the time 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.”

Paul says three things about this judgment:

- \* The day of judgment is fixed. (It will happen and nothing can speed or delay that day.)
- \* God will judge the world in righteousness/fairness. [God is fair and just in all of his judgements. If you read the book of Revelation, you will see the refrain, “[God’s] judgments are true and just” (see 15:3, 16:7, 19:2).]
- \* God will judge the world through a man he has appointed. And, by the way, Paul says, we can be sure who this man is because he’s the one God raised from the dead. Paul returns to the very thing that got their attention in the first place, “Jesus and the resurrection.” When God raised Jesus from the dead, he declared that he is “the man.”

The God that Paul described was lightyears away from the gods that they worshiped in Athens. Nevertheless he declared that “now [God] commands all people everywhere to repent. God commands people in every culture and on every continent to turn from the gods they’ve been worshiping and turn to him, the one true living God.

This leads to the third thing we learn about sharing Christ with the unlikely in our lives: ***Our hope is that some will respond in faith and become disciples.*** (Acts 17:32-34)

Last week we saw in Thessalonica and Berea that people respond to the gospel in radically different ways. But our confident expectation (i.e., our hope) is that some will respond in faith and become disciples of Jesus. Notice the response in Athens.

32 Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, “We will hear you again about this.”

Have you ever been mocked or laughed at when you’ve talked about Jesus being raised bodily from the dead? That was the reaction of many to Paul. But others were open to what Paul had said and wanted to hear more.

33 So Paul went out from 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.

Luke tells us that a man named Dionysius - who was a member of the Areopagus - joined Paul and believed. Even though the vast majority of his colleagues and friends

scoffed, the seed of the gospel was planted in the good soil of his heart, springing up to eternal life.

The same thing was true of a woman named Damaris; by virtue of the fact that she was present, she may have also been a member of the Areopagus or something like a visiting scholar. Luke tells us that others also joined Paul and believed. This spiritual fruit in Athens confirms that ***The news about Jesus and the resurrection is for all people everywhere***. The gospel bears fruit in the most unlikely of places among the most unlikely of people.

There are people in my life - family members and friends - whom I love and whom I want to experience salvation through Jesus. But when I think in purely human terms, I really don't think that will happen. And when I try to figure out ***how*** they will come to Christ, I despair because that's way beyond my wisdom (and responsibility).

But when I see Paul's zeal for the glory of God. . . and when I listen to Paul talk about God as the Creator and Sustainer of everyone and everything, the Ruler of the nations, the Father of all humanity, and the Judge of the world. . . and when I think about people like Dionysius and Damaris and others in Athens believing and becoming disciples. . . it makes my faith in God grows stronger, and it prompts me to pray and trust God for their salvation, and it gives me the desire to speak freely about Jesus with family and friends.

I trust that this passage has the same effect in your life. And if you yourself are the most unlikely person you know, I trust this this passage reassures you that the message about Jesus and the resurrection is for you.