

The Holy God Who is Near
Acts 17:16-34

This morning we'll be in Acts 17, beginning with verse 16, which you can find on page 871 of the pew Bibles if you want to open there. We're going through the story of Acts, which, as Pastor Grant has faithfully reminded us, was written by Luke, and is really part two of the Gospel of Luke.

You can think of it as the Gospel of Luke is the account of Jesus' earthly ministry, and Acts is the account of Jesus' heavenly ministry, which He carries out through His people, the Church, by the indwelling of His empowering Holy Spirit. And we have seen God's people take the Gospel of salvation in Jesus to Jerusalem, Judea, and into the wider Mediterranean world. In the last few weeks, we've witnessed the birth of European Christianity, with Paul and Silas preaching the Gospel for the first time in Greece.

In our passage today, the Gospel reaches the religious, cultural, and intellectual center of the Roman world: the city of Athens. Of all the cities in Acts, there may be none that more closely resembles our culture than Athens. Democratic, inclusive, and progressive, Athens shared many of the values of the modern West. And, like the modern West, Athens was spiritually confused, blind, and dead. Yet, we will see that Paul was not without hope for that city. My prayer for us this morning is that, as we look at how Paul engages the Athenian people and culture with a compelling message of hope, we may be inspired to go to the people and culture around us with a similar hope and message.

So, let's pray to that end, and then look at the text together. Acts 17:16 reads "Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols." By way of reminder, Paul is in Athens after being spirited away from Berea due to a group of jealous Jews who had it out for him. So, he is in Athens, awaiting the arrival of his companions, Silas and Timothy.

As we will eventually find out in Acts, Paul is a Roman citizen, and so would have been very familiar with Athens' reputation as a cultural hub. He had apparently spent some of his time exploring the city, as he waited. And what he saw did not encourage him.

The city was "full of idols", the text says, which bothered Paul deeply. John Stott says the word translated "full of idols" is trying to convey the picture of the city being "smothered" or "swamped" with idols. There was even a saying then, that it was easier to find a god than a man in Athens. The tragic irony, and this is what provoked Paul, is that in a city that tried to worship every god, the one true God was unknown.

And this motivated Paul to try to remedy the situation, as we see in verses 17-21. "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. Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, 'What does this babbling wish to say?' Others said, 'He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities'—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 that you are presenting? For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.' Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new." Take note, Paul's distress motivates him to do something positive: preach the Gospel. He sees God is not being worshipped, so he goes about trying to make some worshippers. The scope of his evangelism is impressive, ranging from Jews to common people, to scholars.

First, as was his habit, Paul starts with the local Jewish synagogue, attempting to convince the Jews and God-fearing Gentiles there that Jesus is the Messiah promised in the Old Testament.

Next, he heads to the marketplace to talk to people there. This may seem strange to us, since Safeway isn't the first place most of us would think of to go evangelize, but in the first century the marketplace, or *agora*, was where people spent free time. Here Paul eventually gets into conversation with some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. The Epicureans

believed in the gods but believed that they were completely disinterested in and disengaged from the world and the lives of men.

And so, to the Epicureans, the goal of life was to maximize pleasure by minimizing pain, and the will of the disinterested, far-off gods was not a factor in that equation. This closely resembles what may be the most common belief system in the modern west: there may be a god or gods, but it doesn't really matter, just be a good person and live a good life. The Stoics, on the other hand, believed in a supreme god, and that God was reason, or the *logos*. The *logos* permeated and ordered all of the universe (it was close to what we think of as the laws of nature), and therefore, the universe could be understood thoroughly, and by understanding the universe mankind could live properly within it.

Ironically, this is not far from an atheistic outlook on the world today, which says there is no god, nor anything beyond the material world, and so our hope lies in understanding the material world so that we can manipulate it to our advantage. So, this is Paul's audience, and his conversations in the marketplace get mixed results, because he is telling them about a God who is not far away, nor impersonal, but came to earth as a man, and did not conform to the normal laws of nature, but reversed them and rose from the dead. Some thought he was talking nonsense, while others were curious. And so, they invited Paul to the Areopagus, which was a portion of the *agora* set apart for scholarly discussion and debate, so that he could give a formal presentation.

And then, Luke inserts a really telling comment about the residence of Athens. He says that they "[spent] their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new". One of the great challenges to the Gospel in cultures like that, as Paul will find, is that the Gospel gets lumped in with all the other views on God and life that are constantly being bandied about, and so becomes just one view among many. It's an incredibly difficult challenge to overcome, but in verses 22-23 Paul gives it a shot, and tries to distinguish Christianity.

"So, Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: 'Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. 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 begins by pointing out the obvious: Athens is full of religion. But he parlays that into the ironic problem: and yet, Athens does not know God. Remember Paul's audience, here is what the Athenians believe about God: He is distant, disinterested, impersonal, inconsequential, and/or unknown.

Now watch how that compares to the God Paul proclaims beginning in verse 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, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, 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, for "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we are indeed his offspring."

This is not a distant, disinterested, or impersonal God. This God made the world and is active in. And not for His own self-serving or needy reasons, but for the good of His creatures. This God is intimately involved with those creatures, even viewing them as His own offspring. This is a direct contrast to the predominate views about God in Paul's audience. The contrast deepens in verse 29 and following. "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. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 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."

And now, Paul shows this God is not inconsequential, and He has revealed Himself in history. While this God is patient, there will come a day when He judges the earth and everyone in it; so, He is not just one of the options at the religious buffet, He is the only one that matters. He will judge the world through a man whom He has chosen: Jesus, God in the flesh. And God showed that He chose Jesus for this purpose by raising Him from the dead. So, the God Paul proclaims is

near, involved, personal, knowable, and of ultimate consequence, and yet the response to his message is underwhelming, as we see in verses 32-34.

“Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, ‘We will hear you again about this.’ So Paul went out from 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.” Like I said, the Gospel faces a difficult challenge in cultures like Athens. Because in a culture that presents an intellectual and religious buffet, it is the individual’s preference that matters most, not what is actually true. Does something sound crazy to you? That’s ok, there’s lots of other options. Pick your favorite. In such contexts, the idea of objective truth that obligates us to live a certain way regardless of our preference is greatly weakened.

And an exclusive message like the Gospel is out of step, and easily ignored. Especially, when it includes fantastic claims that are hard to believe. And the ideas of God becoming a man and resurrecting from the grave would have certainly been hard to believe for the Athenians, even more so, perhaps, than they are now. Consider what we’ve already talked about concerning Athenian culture. With that in mind...

Could there be anything harder for an Epicurean to believe than that God was not in fact distant and removed from earth, but came to earth to live, suffer, and die for His creation? Could there be anything harder for a Stoic to believe than that the *Logos*, the very entity that ensures the unchanging natural order, reversed the laws of nature and rose from the dead? So, the underwhelming response that Paul got from his message is not surprising. It’s not surprising, though it’s certainly disappointing, and perhaps a bit discouraging when we consider that we live and minister in a culture that shares many similarities with Paul’s audience, as I’ve said. So, what does it look like to preach the Gospel effectively in such a culture? Well, I think there are some things we can learn from Paul’s experience in Athens. First, like Paul, I believe we need to know our audience.

The common beliefs about God in Athenian culture were that God was distant, impersonal, unknown, and/or inconsequential, as I’ve mentioned. And many in our context share those beliefs about God, which is important to understand, but it’s also important to understand that there’s a big motivation underlying those beliefs. You know what’s nice about believing in a distant, impersonal, unknown, and/or inconsequential God? Believing in a God like that allows you to live however you want. Take sin, for instance...

A distant God isn’t aware of your sin. An impersonal God doesn’t care about it. An unknown God has no grounds to condemn you for it. And an inconsequential God doesn’t have the power to hold you accountable for it. And so, one of the major obstacles to the Gospel for many is the fact that when you decide to follow Jesus, your life is no longer your own. Jesus said, only those willing to lose their lives for His sake, would find life. And only those willing to forsake all they have and are can be His disciples. That is the raw broccoli of the religious buffet. It’s really good for you, but it’s a hard sell when you put it next to cheesecake. So, how do we get people to eat the broccoli of self-denial? Answer: we do it by eating the broccoli ourselves.

Do you know what would happen if you took two people and had one of them eat only broccoli and one of them eat only cheesecake? Eventually, it would become clear that life and health is found in the broccoli, right? Eventually, the person eating cheesecake is going to have a heart attack. I know that’s an imperfect, silly analogy, but hopefully you see the point. In the long run what is true and good will always win out over what is false and bad. Living according to the Kingdom, living in submission to the King will lead to ever-increasing life, while living in rebellion against the King will inevitably lead to death.

Those two outcomes will eventually manifest themselves, which leads to our second lesson this morning. Living out the Gospel, living in submission to the King is always an essential component of evangelism, but it is especially necessary in a culture that assumes all paths are created equal. With that foundation of a life that reflects the life of the King, we can start to address the culture’s misrepresentations of God, just as Paul did, and by all means start with what they get right.

Similar to many in our context, the Epicureans were right to think God is far beyond us and made a logical assumption that such an exalted being would not be interested in us.

Paul himself refers to God in 1 Timothy 6:16 as the one who “dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see.” And the Bible is replete with references to God’s holiness and transcendence. Also, similar to some in our context, the Stoics were right to think that God is the creative, sustaining, organizing agent of the cosmos, and even right to tie that to the idea of reason. In fact, John’s reference to Jesus as “the Word”, the “*logos*” in his Gospel is likely a way of him contextualizing the Gospel for Stoics. Proverbs 3:19-20 speaks of God creating and governing the world by reason, saying, “The LORD by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding he established the heaven; by his knowledge the deeps broke open, and the clouds drop down the dew.”

Finally, and again like some in our context, whoever put up the altar to the unknown God was recognizing something true about God: He is ultimately unknowable, at least in an exhaustive sense. Jesus said, “...no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one know the Father except the Son...” Even God’s attributes are ultimately incomprehensible, as Ephesians 3:19 says the love of Christ surpasses knowledge, and Philippians 4:7 says the peace of God surpasses all understanding. Those cultural beliefs are right in certain points, but ultimately incomplete (as were some of the passages I quoted above, by the way), and so we must graciously fill in the gaps, and show the full picture of who God is, which ends up being far more stunning than the cultural beliefs about God.

So, yes, God is far above and beyond us, but He is also intimately near to us. As our passage says, “*In Him we live and move and have our being...*” One of my favorite verses that captures the seeming paradox of God’s farness and nearness is Isaiah 57:15, which reads, “For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: ‘I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite.’” This is the shocking reality of the God of the Bible: the God who is utterly beyond us is also intimately with those of a contrite and humble spirit.

Again, God is the creative, sustaining, organizing agent of the cosmos, but He is a person, not a force. John 1:14 says the *logos* “became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen *his* glory, glory as of the only *Son* from the *Father*, full of grace and truth.” 1 John 1:1-2, echoing the Gospel says, “That which was from the beginning, which we have *heard*, which we have *seen with our eyes*, which we have looked upon and have *touched with our hands*, concerning the *word* of life – the life was *made manifest*, and we have *seen* it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was *made manifest to us...*” The *Logos* is not an impersonal force, He is a person, who now has a name: Jesus, who can be heard and seen and touched and known. No, God can never be *fully* known, but He can be *truly* known, and that is what we actually long for.

Jesus did say in Matthew 11:27 that no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son, but that’s not the end of the sentence. In the full verse Jesus says, “All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son *and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.*” Gone are the days when the Father and Son could not be known, in fact, Jesus says to the Father in John 17:3, “And this is eternal life, that they *know* you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” You see, the glory of being able to truly but never fully know God is that this means we will be coming to know God more and more deeply for all of eternity.

And those of you who have walked with Jesus for a while know what I mean when I say relationship with Him is both satisfying and enticing at the same time, and both that satisfaction in and desire for Jesus grow the longer you know Him. And that experience will never end. That, I believe, is why Jesus says knowing Him and the Father is the essence of eternal life. The eternal life He’s talking about is not just existence that never ends, because that in itself could be a terrible curse, depending on the quality of existence; hell is unending too. So, the eternal life Jesus offers is life the never ends, *and* gets better all the time; in other words, the length and the quality of that life is eternal. That life is worth giving up this life to obtain, is it not?

11-19-23

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And so, brothers and sisters, to minister to a culture like ours we must be convinced of one very basic truth, and this is our main point, as I believe it was Paul's: the God of the Bible, Jesus, is infinitely better than the "gods" of our culture, and is the only God who truly satisfies our souls. We must believe that the way of Jesus is better than the way of the world. And to prove it, we must live out that belief. You want to take a stand for Jesus? Live like Jesus. You want to defend truth? Put it into practice. You want to win people to Christ? Show them that Christ has utterly won you. This was how the early Church eventually won over the Roman world, but it took nearly three centuries. In other words, as we think about reaching our context, it's going to take time. But the cure is to live in the way of the Kingdom, until it begins to show itself to our culture as the best way to live, in this life and in anticipation of the next.

With this in mind, and by way of application, let me remind us of the Kingdom way, as found in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount from Matthew 5-7. This is not an exhaustive accounting of the Kingdom way, but it is a good snapshot, particularly of those aspects of Kingdom living that run counter to our culture, even at times our church culture. From the Sermon on the Mount, Kingdom citizens...

Find blessing in poverty of spirit, mourning, meekness, desire for righteousness, mercy, purity of heart, peacemaking, and persecution on account of Christ (Matthew 5:2-11). Be salt and light, flavoring and preserving the world around them in a way that sheds light on the glory of the Father (Matthew 5:13-16). Have a higher standard of righteousness than even the Pharisees did, viewing anger to be as serious as murder, lust as serious as adultery, divorce (except on the grounds of unfaithfulness) as unacceptable, and our word as sacred (Matthew 5:17-37). Bear wrongdoing, bless when cursed, and give generously when asked (Matthew 5:38-42). Love their enemies and pray for their persecutors, in order to be like their heavenly Father (Matthew 5:43-48). Practice their religion, giving, praying, and fasting humbly (Matthew 6:1-19). Seek heavenly riches, are not anxious, are aware of their own sin and so are slow to judge others, trust the goodness of their heavenly Father, treat others as they want to be treated, walk the narrow way, bear good fruit, and (ending where we started) put Jesus' teaching into practice (Matthew 6:20-7:27). This is the way of the Kingdom; the Kingdom of Jesus, the God who is near, personal, and knowable. Let us walk in this way, and so show our culture that our God is infinitely better than any of the gods it has to offer. Let me pray for us to that end.

“The Holy God Who is Near”

Acts 17:16-34

Main Idea: The God of the Bible, Jesus, is infinitely better than the “gods” of our culture, and is the only God who truly satisfies our souls.

Introduction – Athens and the Modern West

Acts 17:16 – Paul in the City Swamped in Idols

Acts 17:17-21 – Paul’s Intellectual Audience

Acts 17:22-23 – The Obvious and the Ironic

Acts 17:24-28 – God: Up-Close and Personal

Acts 17:29-31 – God: The Judge Made Known

Acts 17:32-34 – The Underwhelming Response

Evangelism and the Religious Buffet: Lessons from Paul and His Athens Experience

- Know our audience
- Live out the Gospel
- Address misrepresentations of God

Application: The Way of the Kingdom of Jesus

“The Holy God Who is Near”

Acts 17:16-34

Main Idea: The God of the Bible, Jesus, is infinitely better than the “gods” of our culture, and is the only God who truly satisfies our souls.

- 1) What are some of the “gods” of our culture (i.e. false representations of God)?

- 2) What is true in those false representations? How are they incomplete representations of God? How does the Bible counter those false representations?

- 3) What are some Kingdom ways of living that our culture needs to see lived out?