

If Paul Came to the Bay: Learning to Reach Our City Like Paul Reached Athens (Part 1)

Introduction

The Text

- A. Remember, earlier in this chapter, Paul was run out of Thessalonica by the Jews. Then they followed him to Berea, and he was run out of there as well. So they sent him off alone this time to Athens. And he sends word back “for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible” (v. 15). And then we pick it up in v. 16 . . .

¹⁶ 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. 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. 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.

²² So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. 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. [His discourse continues, but we’ll stop here for the sake of time.] (Acts 17:16-23)

The Bay Area and the Ancient City of Athens

- A. As you likely know, the Bay Area is often referred to as one of the most unchurched places in the country.
1. In fact, recent statistics from the Barna Group put us at the top of the list, with some 60% of our population falling into their “**unchurched**” category—meaning: they haven’t attended a church service in at least six months, except for maybe a special event like a wedding or funeral.
- B. At the same time, the Bay Area is also one of the most influential cultural hubs, not just in the country now, but in the world.
1. Some of the brightest minds gather here in Silicon Valley to work on some of the most significant and ground-breaking projects.
 2. The things that are developed here, especially with technological innovation and all this, it goes everywhere.

- C. In many ways, then, there is striking overlap between where we are here in the Bay Area and where Paul is now in [Acts 17](#)—in Athens.
1. Similar to our area, though there was a little pocket of Jews and God-fearing Gentiles there in a synagogue in Athens, the city would have been largely “[unchurched](#)” you could say—largely unaware of and illiterate in the things of the Bible.
 2. And Athens, as likely you know, for quite some time would have been regarded as one of the most prominent cities in the world—a cultural capital of sorts.
 - a. Athens was known and admired for its contributions in art, architecture, mathematics, medicine, literature, religion, politics, and, of course, philosophy—with guys like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle all having spent their days in and around the city.
 - b. This is one of the reasons why people still go there today. It’s a magnificent place.
- D. And I suppose I bring up these parallels between the Bay Area and Athens here at the start because I think, in light of this, we’re going to learn a lot from Paul here about how we might go about reaching those in our own city.
1. In other words: this isn’t just an interesting story, it’s an instructional one.
 2. Especially when we keep reading on to the end of the chapter ([v. 34](#)), as we will next time, we’ll come to see:
 - a. How does he bring the gospel to people with little background knowledge of the Bible? They don’t even have categories for it.
 - b. How does he bring the gospel to members of the intelligentsia, to the upper crust, the social elites, the movers and shakers of the culture around? What’s his approach?
- E. So there is a lot we can learn from him here. Taking in the full story, I see at least five things we need to do if we want to be effective missionaries like Paul in our city, if we want to be followers of Jesus helping others become followers of Jesus in the Bay Area.
1. We need to: (1) Open Our Schedules; (2) Open Our Eyes; (3) Open Our Hearts; (4) Open Our Mouths; and (5) Open Our Hands.
 - a. This morning, we’ll only really get through the first three.
 - b. Next time, when we really dive into Paul’s message there, we’ll deal with the fourth and the fifth.

(1) Open Our Schedules

Unnecessary . . . but Necessary

- A. With this, I'm simply thinking of the fact that, if we're going to have any impact on the people in this city around us at all, we've got to be with them—we've got to make time for them; we've got to be present in some way; we've got to open our schedules.
 - 1. You can't effectively open your eyes or your heart or your mouth to people if you're not first with them.
- B. This may sound a bit intuitive and unnecessary. But I do think it's worth accenting because of how hard this does seem to be, especially for people in the Bay Area—people like us, people like me.
 - 1. We're always rushing off to the next thing—for our work, for our play, for our kids, or whatever.
 - 2. And as a result, we don't really engage the city, we use it, we move through it.
- C. And so it starts here with opening our schedules—making sure we're truly present in this place that God has put us with the people who are around us.

Intentionality + Flexibility

- A. And, learning from Paul's example in our text, I think we see that this involves at least two things: (1) Intentionality, on the one hand; but (2) Flexibility, on the other.

(1) Intentionality

- A. For Paul, we see this especially in what he says to the Athenians down in [v. 23](#). He tells us what he's been doing in the city, for what seems to have been quite some time: "[I passed along](#)," he says.
 - 1. To be clear, this doesn't mean he's walking quickly through. Nor does it mean he's merely passing along to see the sights—of which, in Athens, there were many.
 - 2. As will soon become clear, it means he's intentionally walking along the city streets, taking things in, learning about the people he's hoping to reach. He knows effective evangelism starts with just being there.
 - a. So he wasn't passing along the city like a traveler or a tourist.
 - b. He was passing along like an evangelist, like a missionary, like a Christian.
- B. That's what intentionality looked like for Paul in Athens, but what about for us in the Bay Area?
 - 1. Well, certainly, this may mean we have to re-prioritize a bit. We have to make time to be with people we otherwise might not.
 - a. So you might, kind of like Paul, start taking evening walks around your neighborhood after dinner with your family or whatever, and see who "bump" into. Be present in the neighborhood.
 - b. Or you might schedule a regular pickleball match or hike or something with that coworker or lady from the gym.

- c. It might even mean you sign up to help with kids ministry, and you really pour yourself into it. This is not just glorified babysitting. With these kids, the mission field comes to us. They're just learning about the things of Jesus and you get a chance to help them along.
- 2. But, whatever it is, you've got to be intentional. You've got to be there. You've got to open your schedule . . . or it can't even start.

(2) Flexibility

- A. But, set alongside intentionality, this idea of opening our schedules also involves flexibility.
 - 1. We can't be so rigid with our agenda and plans.
 - 2. We have to be open to interruption and things.
- B. For Paul, we see this when we come to realize just how this whole evangelistic adventure in Athens began in the first place.
 - 1. It was actually a "happy accident" you could say. Or, perhaps better, a "divine interruption."
 - a. Remember, it wasn't in his plan to come to Athens, so far as we can tell. He came to Athens because he had been run out of Berea. Technically he had something else on the schedule. And he wanted to get back with his boys. That's why he sends back word for Silas and Timothy to reconvene with him.
 - b. But, in [v. 16](#), we're told that this whole amazing story unfolds in the city there: "[while Paul was waiting for them at Athens . . .](#)"
 - i. Don't you see? If he wasn't flexible, if he wasn't willing to open his schedule because a new and unforeseen opportunity had arisen, he would have missed it.
 - ii. But he didn't miss it, because he was open, he was flexible.
- C. For us, this may mean, of course, that at times we become more "inefficient" from our point of view.
 - 1. I don't know about you but I'm the kind of person that always has a plan. I wake up and one of the first things I do is write out some sort of schedule for my day. Here's what I'm going to do from nine to noon. Here's what I'm going to do at 1 and at 2 and at 3. And on it goes.
 - 2. I'm aiming for efficiency. And that's good and bad.
 - a. It's good because I have some direction and I get things done.
 - b. But it's bad because I'm not always available to others or to interruption or changes in my plan. My schedule isn't open. I don't have time for them.
- D. It's interesting (I wonder if you've noticed), seen from one angle, Jesus' ministry looks haphazard and terribly inefficient. He just kind of pinballs around from place to place.

One particularly notable example of this is found in [Mark 5](#).

1. First, he tells his disciples he wants to cross the sea so they go on to the other side. And when they get there, they are immediately met by a guy possessed by demons. So he casts the demons out of him and sends them into some pigs instead that go running off the cliff's edge. And the people see this and they're freaked out by his power and a little upset that their livestock and source of income had been adversely affected, so they kick him out.
 2. So Jesus and his disciples get back on the boat and return to the other side once more. There they are met immediately now by another guy whose daughter is sick and dying. And he wants Jesus to come and lay his hands on her. So he starts to go that way.
 3. But while he's doing that another person, a woman who had been dealing with something for many years, lays hold of him, and she's healed. And so Jesus stops and talks with her.
 4. But as he's talking with her, the other guy's daughter dies. So he figures okay well I'll go ahead and raise her from the dead, and the people are overwhelmed by all this.
 - a. But, don't you see, from one angle, it looks like he's just bouncing all over the place, with no real agenda or plan.
 - b. But that's not it. The point is: his schedule is open. He's not just intentional, he's also flexible.
 - i. He's ready to be with people. He's ready to make time for people. He does that for each one of us. That's the kind of Savior he is. He's "[Immanuel . . . God with us](#)" ([Matt. 1:23](#)). Always available.
 - ii. Because he knows that's where ministry starts . . . by opening your schedule for others.
- E. So I wonder, are you flexible, willing to open your schedule to be present with the people around you, even when you hadn't planned on it?
1. When you're about to head out to the car, but you see your neighbor's outside and will likely want to talk—do you wait until he goes in before you go out; or do you flex a bit, go out and see how God leads?
 2. When your coworkers are going to lunch and ask if you want to come—do you stay back to try to get a little more work done in the peace and quiet; or do you flex a bit and make time for them and see what happens?
- F. I'll tell you, I don't often do this very well, but I got a little taste of it just this past week.
1. Our dishwasher died and so I found a decent one on Facebook Marketplace to go grab.
 2. And I guess the guy discovered I was a pastor by looking at my profile and he had all sorts of questions.
 3. He seemed like a believer to me, so it wasn't necessarily an "evangelistic encounter," but it was still a "divine interruption" nevertheless.
 4. We ended up talking for almost an hour. He's been going through it and wanted help and counsel from the Scriptures and we were able to pray together and all this.
 5. It was amazing. But here's the thing: it wasn't on my calendar. It "set me back" a bit. But it's worth it to open your schedule and see what God might do.

(2) Open Our Eyes

“I Passed Along and Observed . . .”

- A. Opening our schedules, as I’ve said, is just the start of things. There’s more to this.
- a. We open our schedules, but then we’ve got to open our eyes.
 - b. We’ve got to actually see and observe and learn about the people we’re with and trying to reach.
- B. We see this with Paul when we keep reading in those same two verses I just referenced under the first point:
1. So, first, [v. 16](#), read in full now: “[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.](#)”
 - a. What was he doing while he was waiting in the city there?
 - i. Well, I’ll tell you what he wasn’t doing. He wasn’t doing what you and I often do when we’re forced to wait somewhere. What are we doing? We’re looking at our phones. Give me something to pass the time, to entertain me, and all this. So we scroll and we scroll. We can be physically present with people and yet not even really be with them, right? We’re off somewhere in a digital black hole, as it were.
 - ii. But he wasn’t looking at his phone. He was looking at the city and the people and learning about them. “[\[W\]hile Paul was waiting for them at Athens, . . . he saw that the city was full of idols.](#)” He had open eyes.
 2. That’s why, then, down in [v. 23](#), again, when we read a little further on into what he says, what was he doing when he “[passed along](#)” the city and people there in Athens? He was “[\[observing\] the objects of \[their\] worship . . .](#)” He was looking closely at things. Again, he had open eyes.
 - a. The Greek word translated “[observed](#)” here, [anatheōreō](#) . . .
 - i. It doesn’t mean to merely look or see, but to behold and perceive.
 - ii. It means to “[look at again and again](#)”; to “[examine, observe carefully](#)”; “[to give careful thought to, consider](#)” (BDAG).
 - (1) So, in other words, you’re not just seeing it. You’re seeing through it, seeing into the meaning of it.
 - (2) It’s the difference between mere sight and in-sight.

“ . . . the Objects of Your Worship”

- A. And what exactly is it that Paul is observing or seeing into here?

1. As he's opened his schedule and given himself to walking through the city, taking it in, he is growing more aware of what they worship and why.
 2. He sees, in other words, their idols.
- B. This certainly was something that would have been in your face in a place like Athens. There were temples and shrines and statues and altars and things like this everywhere.
1. That's why one commentator would write: "[T]here were more gods in Athens than in all the rest of the country, and . . . [some have said] it was easier to find a god there than a man" (BST).
 - a. As you passed along the city streets, you would see images of (to give you the original Greek names): Zeus, and Apollo, and Aphrodite, and Hermes, and Poseidon, and Artemis, and countless others.
 - b. And these images were made not only of stone, but of gold and silver and brass and ivory and marble.
 - i. It would have been quite a sight. It still is in many ways, even today.
 - ii. No doubt, if you and I were there, we would have been struck by the beauty of it all.
- C. But, here's what we must catch: Paul didn't just see the beauty, he saw through it to the idolatry.
1. He could see the bigger story that was playing out in the culture.
 2. He was starting to see what made them tick—what they wanted, what they were afraid of, what they were looking for, how they were looking to get it, what they had their hope set on, what they were trusting in for rescue and salvation and meaning, and so forth.
 - a. He was learning about the people he was trying to reach.
- D. And, because of this, when it finally came time to open his mouth, he would have something meaningful, something relevant to say. They would feel heard, understood by him, because he'd already been observing them—because he opened his eyes before he ever opened his mouth.
1. That's why he begins his speech there in v. 22: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious."
 - a. "I perceive something about you. I get it. And I want to speak into that. I want to show you how the gospel will light that up, how Jesus can give you what your idols never could."
- E. I thought of Jesus' little exchange with Nathanael in John's Gospel.
1. You remember, Nathanael is coming towards him and Jesus says something to him that makes Nathanael respond: "How do you know me?" (John 1:48). Because I guess, technically, they'd never met.
 2. But then Jesus answered him: "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you" (v. 48).

3. So Nathanael says: “[Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!](#)” (v. 49).

a. When people feel seen and known by Jesus, they come to see and know him.

F. Now, I’m not saying we can “see” people like Jesus sees people, or even necessarily like the Apostle Paul sees people.

1. But we can try.

2. And if we want to reach people for Jesus, we must try.

Be on the Lookout

A. So one of the things we learn from this, then, is that if we want to reach people in our city, we don’t just need to see the city around us in general, we need to be on the lookout for the idols people have here.

1. Idolatry might not be as blatant now as it was in the ancient world, but it’s no less rampant.

B. I can tell you how I look for it . . .

1. We all have desires that only God can ultimately fulfill for us in Jesus. Desires for security, comfort, peace, pleasure, joy, satisfaction, fullness of life, identity, justification, salvation, rescue, and so forth. The desires in themselves are not wrong.

2. Things go wrong when we go to other places with those desires, thinking they can do it for us instead of, in place of, God. We set up counterfeit gods in that sense, idols.

a. It could be a person, a job, technology, money, a resume, success as a parent, finding a spouse, physical beauty, etc.

b. “If I could just get _____, I’d be good, I’d be happy, I’d have peace, I’d be saved from whatever trouble I’m in.” It’s a false god with a false gospel.

3. And when our hearts have set upon some idol as if it can deliver us, interestingly enough, we really do end up sacrificing things in our lives to it.

a. We’re not going into a temple and putting some animal or whatever down on the altar.

b. But we are sacrificing other things and even people sometimes to get it.

C. But here’s what we know: even if you get that “god” on your side, as it were . . . it won’t be enough.

1. This is what God’s talking about in [Isa 46:1-4](#). Speaking about the false gods of Babylon, he begins: “¹ [Bel bows down; Nebo stoops; their idols are on beasts and livestock; these things you carry are borne as burdens on weary beasts.](#) ² [They stoop; they bow down together; they cannot save the burden, but themselves go into captivity.](#)” And then he shifts to talk about himself as the true God, the true Savior: “³ [Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel, who have been borne by me from before your birth, carried](#)

from the womb;⁴ even to your old age I am he, and to gray hairs I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save.” Do you hear what he’s saying?

- a. These idols you turn to thinking they will uphold you, you end up having to uphold them. And you end up buckling under the burden.
- b. But God—he’s made you, he carries you, he can save you.

D. Think about it. Isn’t it true?

- 1. If you’re hoping that success or achievement in the workplace will make you happy, fill you up, justify your existence, give you ultimate security and stability and satisfaction—that’s the idol.
- 2. So you sacrifice all your time and relationships with family and all this to get it.
- 3. And you do it because you think this god will carry you. But in reality, in the end, you always end up having to carry it.
 - a. So even if you momentarily get some success at work, you did well on that last project, the boss took notice and gave you a shoutout at the last meeting, it feels good for a moment, and then, just as quickly as it comes, it turns, doesn’t it?
 - b. From joy to anxiety, because maybe you get the weekend off to rest in your triumph a bit, but then on Monday there’s another project put on your desk, another deadline, another mountain to climb . . . and what if you don’t do as well this time? It’s exhausting.
 - c. Your idol doesn’t carry you, it crushes you.
- 4. Meanwhile, God is inviting you in Jesus to stop all that and let him carry you for a change.
 - a. He was crushed for you on that cross, so he could carry you from this day forth and forevermore: “[E]ven to your old age I am he, and to gray hairs I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save” (v. 4).
 - b. Your work will go up and down. His work on your behalf it’s done, it’s complete, it’s “finished,” and it’s good.

E. That’s just one example. But we’ve got to open our eyes so we can see this happening in the culture and in our friends. So we can help make meaningful connections for them to Jesus, the only one who can truly save.

F. I would sum it up like this: “If we desire to speak compellingly to the unbelievers in our spheres of influence we must first pass along and observe the objects of their worship. We must get to know them as people—their cravings, their fears, their philosophies, their religion, their god(s). Without this time spent observing, we will rarely be granted access inside their hearts. For we will come instead with only a pre-packaged presentation of Christ that will not speak to the particulars of their own worldviews and personalities. It is this time spent by Paul that allows him to so skillfully and winsomely deconstruct the philosophies of this people, causing them to ‘despair of their basic principle’ (as Francis Schaffer would say) that they might be reconstructed and lifted up in the hope of the gospel!”

(3) Open Our Hearts

Paul's Paroxysm

- A. But, even still, before Paul opens his mouth to speak, there's yet one more opening we see him make.
1. He opens his schedule; he opens his eyes; and, next . . . he opens his heart.
- B. Look back at v. 16: "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."
1. To be clear, we're not talking about the Holy Spirit here.
 2. We're talking about his spirit, his soul—his "heart," if you will.
 - a. As he saw the idols, the false worship, the sheer lostness of this place, he was feeling something in the very depths of his being.
- C. The Greek word translated "provoked" here is *paroxunō*—it's where we get our English word *paroxysm* from.
1. Do you know what a paroxysm is? It's "a sudden attack or violent expression of a particular emotion or activity." That gives you a good sense of what's happening here, doesn't it?
- D. The long and short of it is this . . .
1. Paul didn't just see the city and the culture, the idols and the people.
 2. He felt something about it all. In his guts. He feels it. In his bones. He feels it. In his heart. He feels it. Likely a mix of indignation and compassion.
 - a. Indignation because the glory of the one true God was being diced up and attached to lesser things which are no gods.
 - b. Compassion, because those things which are no gods cannot, therefore, truly save. And the people in this city are in a perilous situation, and they don't even know it.
 - i. "We're Athenians. We're wise, we're able, we're the cream of the culture."
 - ii. But they're woefully deceived and they're headed for hell. Paul would say elsewhere: "[W]hat pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God" (1 Cor. 10:20).
 3. So this is a problem, a massive problem. And he feels it. It shakes him down to the soul.
- E. It's the same thing with Jesus, if you remember, when he's approaching Jerusalem in the final week of his life: " ⁴¹And when he drew near and saw the city, he wept [i.e. 'wailed'] over it, ⁴²saying, 'Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are

hidden from your eyes. . . .⁴⁴ [Y]ou did not know the time of your visitation” (Luke 19:41-44). “Your Messiah has arrived, I’m right here in front of you, and you don’t get it!”

1. He’s moved, he’s “provoked.”
2. He feels the weight of their sin and the terrible state that they’re in.

Moody’s Window

- A. When’s the last time you felt something like this for the unbelievers in your life—stirred up to the core, with emotion for them?
- B. Emotion, in many ways, is the currency of the heart. If you want to know what you value, look at what you feel.
 1. What gets you worked up with excitement or overwhelmed with anxiety?
 2. What lifts you with joy or drags you down into depression?
 3. What do you laugh about? What do you cry about?
 4. What do you stay up at night worrying about?
 - a. You won’t be moved much by something for which you care little.
- C. This is the whole issue God takes up with Jonah. He felt deeply, as we all do, but not for the right things.
 1. He could get all emotional and grieve over his dying plant.
 2. But he couldn’t care less about the countless Ninevites dying in their sin apart from God.
- D. I fear some of us, myself included, can be like that.
 1. We get more worked up over the orange juice our kid just spilled on the couch than we do over the fact that the whole neighborhood around our house has stiff-armed Jesus and the people are attaching their hope to counterfeit gods, idols which cannot save.
- E. I remember the story that’s told of the great evangelist D.L. Moody: “When Dwight L. Moody was in London during one of his famous evangelistic tours, several British clergymen visited him. They wanted to know how and why this poorly educated American was so effective in winning throngs of people to Christ. Moody took the three men to the window of his hotel room and asked each in turn what he saw. One by one, the men described the people in the park below. Then Moody looked out the window with tears rolling down his cheeks. ‘What do you see, Mr. Moody?’ asked one of the men. ‘I see countless thousands of souls that will one day spend eternity in hell if they do not find the Savior’” (Today in the Word, Feb 1, 1997, 6.).
 1. Is that the window you’re looking through? Is that the window I’m looking through?
- F. Certainly that’s the window Paul is looking through.
 1. He doesn’t just open his schedule, he opens his eyes.
 2. But he doesn’t just open his eyes, he opens his heart.

3. And that's why, even though he knows he's putting his reputation and even his life on the line for this, he feels compelled to open his mouth . . .

Conclusion

- A. I'm going to spend nearly all of next time on that. What does he say? How does he say it? And what can learn from it all?
- B. But, for now, I think I'd like to end by just reminding us of something . . .
 1. Yes, we see Paul doing all these things in our text here;
 2. Yes, every Christian in this room is called in some way to lean in and start doing some of this ourselves as we try to reach others in our lives;
 3. But, may we never forget, the reason we're called to do this for others is because Jesus has already done it for us!
 - a. He opens his schedule and makes time for us, leaving the glory he had with his Father, coming down to dwell among men.
 - b. He opens his eyes and truly sees and knows us—to the core. He gets what's going on in our hearts—what we crave, what we fear, what we long for, what we dread. He knows how our affection and our devotion and our worship so often goes awry—we give it to lesser things.
 - c. And his heart is open to us. He feels for us, both indignation at the idolatry, the belittling of God's name, but also compassion.
 - d. And so he comes and he speaks.
 - i. But he does more than speak to us, right?
 - ii. He dies. He isn't just mocked in his effort to reach us (as Paul is in our text here), he's crucified . . . for me, for you.
- C. So, before you do anything else, let him reach you this morning right where you're at, right now. Because only then will you be ready to go—in him, with him—and reach others!