



Acts 17:16-34
Jesus Among Other Gods

Summary: Paul enters a city full of ideas and tells them the God they haven't discovered yet is Creator, Judge, and Savior.

As we continue our study in the book of Acts we find the apostle Paul on his second missionary journey, stopping in different Greek cities to tell people the good news of who Jesus was, what He had done, and why that was important. This morning we find him in Athens, the center of Greek culture and thought.

As Paul walks through the famous ancient city, he would have seen temples for Nike, the Greek god of victory, Artemis, Athena, Poseidon and many more. In fact, there was even a statue of Athena arguing with Poseidon. And if you went up to the Acropolis and entered the famous Parthenon you would find yet another large statue of just Athena carved out of gold and ivory.

She was kind of a big deal in Athens, after all, the city was named for her, and that's actually what she and Poseidon were arguing about.

There was also a gold and ivory statue of Zeus, contained in a temple 90' tall with more than 100 Corinthian columns carved out of marble, each over 5 feet in diameter.

In other words, Athens was full of beautiful works of art and architecture and many of them were very spiritual in nature: statues, altars, and temples.

But Athens was also a prominent center of culture and ideas. For many years, Athens had been the home of philosophers like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, along with Epicurus the founder of the Epicureans, and Zeno, the founder of Stoicism.

At this point in history Rome was the center of military and political power and Corinth was the economic hub of the region, but young people from elite families still visited Athens to learn from its academics and orators.

And yet, the city had an unsettling effect on Paul who was in town waiting to meet up with friends. Read with me:

Acts 17:16 Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols. **17** Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the *Gentile* worshipers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there.

The city was troubling, distressing to Paul. Your Bible may say He was provoked or irritated, but it's in the sense of grief, not anger.

He's sad because a city with so much education, awareness, and enlightenment has missed something so important. You could see the evidence of time, talent, and resources spent in the pursuit of 'gods' and yet it was all missing the target – they did not know the one, true, living God who made the world and everything in it and sent His Son to save it.

Paul's emotional reaction to the city of Athens reminds us of Jesus who wept over Jerusalem, another city so caught up in its own ideas that it missed and rejected what God was doing. During one visit Jesus cried out publicly:

Luke 13:34 “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen *gathers* her [chicks] under *her* wings, but you were not willing!

Later, during His final visit to the city, we read that:

Luke 19:41 [...] as He drew near, He saw the city and wept over it, 42 saying, “If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things *that make* for your peace!

But they had not, and did not, recognize who He was or what was happening. They misunderstood and rejected the Kingdom of God that was offered to them in that moment and so, Jesus wept.

It makes me wonder: what does God think of our city?

And, it makes me ask: do I see it the same way He does?

When I look at our city, or any city for that matter, am I wowed by it, or worried for it?

It's not the way we usually think, but it's a helpful perspective and it makes us ask: am I being affected by this place or having an effect on it?

May God help us see the idols this city worships, even though it doesn't call them idols, even though it's not full of temples, may God help us see the things in this city that call us away from Him.

And may God give us His heart for this place and these people, may He help us see with His eyes and may He transform our hearts. May He use us, like He used Paul to be salt and light, to be ambassadors of an eternal kingdom, who will do this city good because we serve a good God, may we believe that we are people who have something to give to this city instead of people who need something from it.

This is what Paul was doing, and that got the attention of others.

18 Then certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him. And some said, "What does this babbling man want to say?"

Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods," because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection.

You may have heard of these two schools of philosophy but let me give you a little refresher, just in case.

The Epicureans believed the whole purpose of life was to maximize pleasure. As you might imagine, this view was more common among the upper classes – the kind of people who could afford to make choices based purely on pleasure and ease. The Epicureans thought the gods were distant and disinterested, off pursuing their own pleasure, and they did not believe in life after death. To an Epicurean, the only thing that exists is the material world, so enjoy this one life while you have it. You can still find people who hold this view today, even if they don't call themselves Epicureans.

Then you had the Stoics who taught that moral duty trumps everything else – you accept whatever life brings your way, whether good or bad, and you play your part well, regardless of how you feel - you do your duty.

The divine, they said, was everywhere and in all things and we are just a small individual part of that. When life is over our souls are eventually absorbed back into God.

I run into a surprising amount of Stoic philosophy today on podcasts and websites that are speaking to men, especially young entrepreneurial men. Joe Rogan, Tim Ferriss, Jordan Peterson, Brett McKay at the Art of Manliness, the Silicon Valley culture and the Navy SEALs are all caught up with Stoicism – reading Marcus Aurelius, Seneca and others and talking about the virtues of discipline and hard work.

It's not all bad, but it's still missing something and that is why Paul is trying to tell them about Jesus who, on the one hand, is the ultimate Stoic – He accepted and embraced suffering for the sake of His role and what it would accomplish. He did His duty. But He was also driven by love and a concern for others *and* He did it all because *He knew we couldn't*.

Stoics take pride in their ability to endure and accomplish. But what if you fail? Is there a way to get back up without shame? With Jesus, the answer is yes. Without Him it's a totally different experience.

So, Paul is presenting Jesus as the answer to both the Epicureans and Stoics,

19 And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus,

Now, the Areopagus was something like a Supreme Court of opinion where those of the highest status in the university community would sit and hear the most profound questions

of religion, philosophy, and ethics. So they invite Paul to speak to them, it's a guest lecture, not a trial:

19 (cont.) [they asked] "May we know what this new doctrine *is* of which you speak? 20 For you are bringing some strange things to our ears. Therefore we want to know what these things mean." 21 For all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing.

In America, Nashville is all about music. Las Vegas is about Gambling and entertainment. Hollywood is about movies. DC is about politics. Athens was all about ideas and intellectual entertainment, they always wanted to hear something new.

Friends, we have a lot to learn from Athens.

Information has become a form of entertainment for us, like it was for the Athenians – they, and we, feel like we must always hear something new. How many have checked your phone during worship this morning? How many of us pick it up at a stop light or while waiting in line? Why? Because there might be something interesting going on somewhere in the world and we don't want to miss out.

Friends, there is always going to be something new to see or hear. The question is: does it have it any real value? Does it really make a difference whether you read that article, watch that video or know that meme? Because, there's going to be something new after it too.

The best way to spend your life is focused on the essentials - love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. Can I do that?

And if not, why do I need to keep learning about more and more things that aren't going to have that great of an impact on my life? The answer is: because it's easy.

It's easy to hear new things, watch new things, see new things and just react. But it's hard to think, it's hard to love, it's hard to do life with people through thick and thin. So sometimes we just want to be distracted, show me something new.

Most of us could greatly benefit from turning off the TV or shutting down the computer, putting away your phone or device and just spending some time with the Lord or with our closest neighbors – our family and friends. Those are the things that really matter, and they are the ones which will have the greatest impact on our lives long-term.

Well, the one upside of their interest in all things new is that it gives Paul a chance to share his message, so he does.

Acts 17:22 Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; 23 for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription:

TO THE UNKNOWN GOD.

A little more history for you here - long before Paul showed up there had once been a plague in Athens – the people tried sacrificing in all the existing temples and altars but nothing stopped the disease, so they erected new monuments to an unknown god in an attempt to please him/her/it.

So picture this: in a city full of philosophy and knowledge, famous for it's teachers and temples, *no one knew what to do*. You tell me: how much have pandemics changed over the millenia?

But Paul capitalizes on their ignorance and says – you recognize that there's a God you haven't met, let me tell you about Him.

Acts 17:23 (cont) Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you: 24 God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. 25 Nor is He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things. 26 And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, 27 so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that 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 have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also His offspring.' 29 Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising. 30 Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, 31 because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead."

Now, that's a lot to process, I know. So let's break it down a little bit and highlight some of the things Paul says about God.

First, he introduces God as the Creator of the world and everything in it. In fact, that's the way the Bible begins:

Gen 1:1 In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

Of all the ways you might start off, of all the things you could say, God opens His message to us by saying, 'Everything you see? I made it.' If you wonder where you came from, where life came from, how did all of this happen? God says, 'I did it, and I did it on purpose.'

And when He did it, God made us **in His image**, Paul says **we are His offspring** which means something important about Him and something important about us.

Let's start with Him.

If God made the whole world, then He doesn't need us to bring Him stuff. He doesn't need anything from us. In fact, at times in Israel's history He told them – keep your stuff. Keep your sacrifices, they don't mean anything to Me, if I wanted stuff I could make it for myself – what I want is you, your heart, your interest, your affections.

Even today, when we give tithes and offerings, it's not because God needs money, it is, in part, a way of saying "God, you are more important to me than stuff. So I'll take some of the money that I have, money I could use to buy more stuff, and I'll give it to You as a demonstration of the fact that I value You more than anything else."

The other important thing about God as Creator is what it tells us about people. Notice in verse 26, this is very, very, important especially for our current moment in history: **He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth.**

Some translations say from **one man** – those are both ways of trying to help us understand the meaning in the original Greek which literally says, **God made us out of one.** It doesn't specify one man or one blood, in part, because it doesn't need to. It says what it needs to say: Asians, Southeast Asians, and Caucasians; Latinos and Philipinos; Panamanians and Persians; we're all *made from one*.

This is the message of God. And if we're all made from one, then *we're all equal*. We have the same value and worth.

And I hope you're listening right now, because what I'm about to say is massively important: if you lose sight of what Scripture says so clearly here – that out of one God created us all – things get ugly quickly. This is super, super, important stuff when you talk about which lives matter today.

Let's go back to Ancient Greece – did they believe all lives matter? No. They believed the Greeks were cultured and everyone else was a barbarian. Friends, this is literally why we have the word barbarian – it was a Greek word used to describe someone from outside Greek culture. Someone who was different and lesser.

What if we go back in American history? When the Founding Fathers sat down to write the Declaration of Independence they tapped into the Biblical idea of equality and used it as a weapon for their cause, they wrote:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

And that was good, that was true, they deserve an Amen and a Hallelujah! We believe that ALL men and women are created by the same God, out of one – they are created equal.

But then, we, as a nation, turned right around and said, well, maybe not all men – maybe African Americans are only worth 3/5ths of a white man when it comes time to counting the population and determining representation in Congress.

Now math is not my favorite subject, but tell me how to reckon these three things

- the Bible says God made *all* men out of one, made us equal,
- the Declaration of Independence agrees and says all men are created equal, by the Creator,
- but an African American only counts as 3/5ths of a person according to the Constitution for the sake of economic and political expediency.

My friends, especially my white brothers and sisters, do you see how this could be so confusing and hurtful to an African American? Do you see how hard it is for a Black brother or sister to look at the history of their ancestors in this country and then listen to white evangelicals say this is a Christian nation, founded on Christian principles, and make such a big deal about America's Godly heritage?

We used the right words, even the right ideas, sometimes they were straight out of Scripture: "all men are created equal ... endowed by their Creator." But then we failed to put it into practice when a plantation-based economy was on the line.

It's enough to make some people just toss out religion entirely.

But what happens if you do that? You lose the entire foundation for justice.

If there is no God, if we all just evolved, then equality is inherently impossible, because some people are going to be on the leading edge of evolution, making us better as a species and other people are going to be on the trailing edge – the kind of people that natural selection is removing from the gene pool.

So tell me this: if you hold to naturalistic evolution, where do you graph Asians on that spread? Where do you place Caucasians? Where are the Latinos and Africans? Who is ahead of whom when it comes to evolution of the species? Who is leading us forward and who is pulling us back? Show us the graph.

My friends, there is no moral foundation for equality with evolution, there are always winners and losers.

On the other hand, whether we're talking about gender, ethnicity, nationality, intellectual capacity, physical ability, age, or any of the other denominator, Scripture says, if you're human, you're equal, BECAUSE we were made that way by God – one God made us all **out of one**. The differences we have in culture and language were actually part of His plan and will persist forever, because in heaven we will see people from every tribe, language, and ethnicity gathered around His throne.

Speaking of God's plan, Paul tells the Athenians that God is behind the course of human history. He controls the destinies of nations and sets our boundaries.

And He does it all with a purpose – to provoke us to discover Him. God has designed the world in such a way that we have no excuse for not knowing Him - Creation and conscience both compel us – we have to actively resist God or explain Him away because it is natural for us to think of the supernatural.

Paul also tells them something we read throughout Scripture – that God is here with us, He is not remote and distant, He is not hard to find. He's not off on Mount Olympus having arguments with other gods. When Creation or conscience or a combination of both begins to get your attention, you can actually find the answers to your spiritual questions.

If you really want to know God – He is here, come to Him. Stop wandering away from Him and repent – that means turn around and head closer to God not farther away. This was the climax of Paul's message:

Acts 17:30 [God] ... commands all men everywhere to repent, 31 because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained.

This man, of course, is Jesus, the one Paul came to tell anyone who would listen about. The one who lived, died, was buried, and resurrected - though that last bit gave the academics in Athens some problems. Remember the Epicureans and Stoics didn't believe in a bodily resurrection. Your soul might live after death, but you wouldn't have a body. So,

Acts 17:32 And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, while others said, "We will hear you again on this matter." 33 So Paul departed from among them. 34 However, some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite [one of the Judges at the Aeropagus], a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

People responded to Paul's message the way they always do: some scoffed; some questioned; some accepted.

Even today we all fall into one of those three categories. You're either scoffing at all of this, accepting it, or you've got some questions – or maybe, you're accepting but you've still got questions – that's fine.

We should be asking questions. God made us to be curious about the world, to explore it and try to understand it. But one thing this passage helps us see is that we can draw some wrong conclusions if we try to figure it out on our own – Athens was a city full of ideas, and they were wrong.

Paul explained the truth to them and called them to repent. You might have some wrong ideas yourself. Ideas that seem beautiful, just like the temples in Athens, but they're still

wrong and God is offering you the truth even if you have to wrestle with it and question it. It's OK to have doubts, it's OK to be troubled about things and still trust God. You don't have to understand how it all works to believe that it does.

And let me speak for a minute to those who have built a little temple in your life to the unknown God – you're not sure who or what He is, you just know there is someone or something up there. Well, He's trying to speak to you today – trying to introduce Himself. Are you interested in coming closer, learning more, asking more questions?

He sent Paul to bring the message to Athens, and you're hearing it today. He wants to be found by you. He wants you to know Who He is and what He has done.

He wants all of us to know we have a purpose – you're intentional. You're not an accident, and you're not unseen, unnoticed, unloved or forgotten. He made you from the same stock as every other human being. It doesn't matter what you think about yourself. It doesn't matter what you think other people think about you, and it sure doesn't matter what they actually do think, or say. You are made in the image of God. He is not far from you. And yes, you have blown it in life, and so have I, He has appointed a day of judgment for that – but He has also made a way of escape for us through His Son Jesus Christ.

So let us call on His name today.

Let's pray.