

VI. Gospel Worship In Biblical Perspective

Worship God!

“That?”

Acts 17:16–34

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February 24, 2013 – Morning Sermon

Our study text in our series *Worship God* is found in Acts 17. The Apostle Paul is on his second missionary journey and he has arrived at Athens. Acts 17:16-22 says *[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 babblers 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.*

The grass withers, the flower fades, the Word of our God abides forever and by His grace and mercy may His Word be preached for you.

We will come back to this passage in Acts 17 in a few moments for some following verses. Before I do that I want to set this Lord’s Day in context in two ways. One is we continue our series for the theme of focus this year, *Worship God* and this Lord’s Day is designed to assist us as we move toward our Mission’s Conference next week in which our focus is *No Other Name, No Other Message*. For one week out of the year we focus on world evangelism and discipleship, world missions. We have a national mission’s conference as well but we’re focusing on world missions. Why do we do that one week out of the year? It’s not because it’s only one week out of the year at Briarwood but it’s 52 weeks out of the year for it is the heartbeat of this church. The reason we take that one week is so you can get acquainted with some of our missionaries, we have someone challenge us about missions and a sense about what the Lord is doing. We connect with what the Lord is doing. Our mission’s efforts to plant churches, Gospel discipleship and evangelism, church revitalization, Gospel deeds of love and mercy, Gospel leaders developed and deployed throughout all of the world is what we get caught up into all of this during our Global glimpses, our speaker, our meetings and worship services during our missions conference.

It is also designed to help us focus on how we can be engaged in missions. One is personally. How can we get involved personally? You’re a missionary. You’re a home missionary. We are bringing in some of our cross cultural missionaries that we send out cross culturally but every single one of us are missionaries. We are trying to fulfill our vision. We want to be a Christ centered, Gospel driven, Spirit filled church where every member is a missionary and every member is a minister. This will challenge me in my own mission field – my family, my neighborhood, my business, my school. How can I also be involved in world missions? Perhaps you and or your family can take a vacation

by going on a mission trip together. You will hear about all kinds of short term mission's trips we're doing this year or how you might be led of the Lord that He might be calling you to cross cultural missions. You might be led of the Lord to be on our Global Mission's team.

You may be led to focus in certain areas which would lead us to a second thing which is that we engage in intercessory prayer. We want to be personally engaged in world missions. We want to be committed to intercessory prayer. Certainly we pray in general. Every Lord's Day there is at least one flag up front that we want people to focus on in prayer. Because of our upcoming Mission's Conference we have all the flags up and people will be here representing those flags. So we want to engage in intercessory prayer but God may lay one particular person on your heart or one field of missions on your heart for intercessory prayer.

Thirdly, is our faith promise giving. We have our tithe and regular giving and then every year we ask (faith) the Lord (God) what we have been led to believe what God is going to give to us beyond our regular giving and we promise that what He gives to us will get through us and given to world missions. One hundred percent of that goes to world missions. At Briarwood we're committed to the fifty percent of everything (tithe) goes for the sake of the Kingdom but in the faith promise it's hundred percent that goes to the work of world evangelism. So we want you to pray about it and then we have the opportunity on the last Sunday of the mission's conference to make our personal, prayer commitment and our faith promise commitment that we are committed to doing that.

Why is missions so important to us 52 weeks out of the year and especially that one focused week? Obviously, Jesus told us to go and make disciples from all the nations but I'd like to go a step further and give you the ultimate reason why missions is crucial. It's not the only reason but the ultimate reason and how does that match up with our series on worship? Our focus this year is *Worship God*. How is the Triune God worshipped in a way that's acceptable? We have been on a Gospel journey of God glorifying, Christ centered, Bible shaped, Spirit empowered worship of the Triune God of glory. God teach us. We're on journey marker number six. The previous five are why we worship, who we worship, how we worship, what we worship and where do we worship, all answered from the Bible. Those are all available on our website.

This study is *Worship God; That*. So that. What is the ultimate objective in missions and how does that tie to the ultimate objective of our life? What is the end of man? It is that he would glorify God and enjoy Him forever. If you want to see what moves a missionary, let's go study a missionary. I thought, how about Paul? There's a missionary and let's take a look at a mission's moment, missionary event, and missionary trip so I thought of Paul the Missionary and his mission moment at a place called Athens. That's where I want to take us in this study. I want to walk through this text with you and look at four things.

The first thing is what is Paul's reaction when he gets to Athens? This is an interesting moment. He has arrived at Athens. Jerusalem has come to Athens. Moses, Elijah and David have arrived through Paul in the name of Christ to Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Theology revealed by God has arrived at the philosophy of man. Paul is the sent one who has arrived there. This is his second missionary journey. He has already done one. When he was in Asia Minor God called him to cross over into Europe, a Macedonian call. God blessed him at Nilopolis and Philippi. God blessed him at

Thessalonians but when God blessed him the evil empire would strike back and they tried to kill him in Thessalonians. Yet God delivered him. Then he went down Berea and the Thessalonians who tried to kill him came to Berea and tried to kill him. Then he left Berea and went on to Athens by the sea. There he arrived at the port of Athens. He disembarked and sent back for Timothy and Silas but in the meantime he decided to get out of the boat and go into Athens.

What did he see in Athens? I know he would have seen a lot of things. I've been there as a tourist. The first thing he would have seen is exactly what my eyes fell upon. He probably looked up and saw the Parthenon which was a dedicated temple to the goddess Athena, the goddess of wisdom. He would have looked off to the side and seen a place he would be taken to not long after that, a place called Areopagus, the hill of Ares or the hill of Mars. A place dedicated to the worship of Mars. He would have seen the temple of Nike (pronounced knee-kay) but who we know as Nike (the famous shoe maker). He would see the temple of Eros. He would see all of these temples and there is one road he would have walked. He would have even come across one that said "to the unknown god." They are just covering all their bases. So when Paul arrived at the astounding presence of pagan beauty, what did he see?

Paul had other eyes besides the eyes of a tourist. He had the eyes of God and saw a city, full of idols (Acts 17:16). What was Paul's reaction? It says he was provoked. We get the Greek word *Paroxuno* from it. It's when someone almost loses control in their life. He had this visceral reaction within him as he saw this city full of idols and full of *idolatria*, the worship of these idols. He saw people, who by faith, were living for these idols and where they were headed. So when he was provoked what did he do? He didn't go pitch a fit, he just started pitching the Gospel.

His action based upon his reaction of being provoked was to take the Gospel. Notice he went to two audiences. He went to the Jews and the God-fearers, the proselytes. Where would he find them? He would find them at the synagogue. I can just see him now flashing his credentials – rabbi, trained under Gamaliel, and given the privilege of the floor he would present to them Jesus and the resurrection which was his message. He also went to the Gentiles and he would find them at the marketplace, the mall. Side note – next week is our theme of No Other Name, No Other Message and we only have one Name to lift up and that's Jesus. We only have one message and that's the Gospel. It is absolutely unique. The audience does not determine the message. The audience determines where we go and how we get started but it doesn't determine the message. To reach the Jews I'll go to the synagogue. My starting point won't be creation because they already got that and it won't be the fall into sin, they got that. I'll start with Jesus, He's the Messiah. So he reasoned that He was the Messiah.

Then he would go to the marketplace and the two dominate philosophies that were at that time dominating Athens were the Epicureans and the Stoics. The Epicureans were the people whom Plato had influenced and believed that life in this flesh was pretty much meaningless so just gratify yourself. It's not be happy and feel good but it's feel good and hopefully you'll be happy. Whatever you do, just go feel good. The whole point of life is to feel good. Gratify your appetites – food, drink, sex, whatever it is, just gratify them because that's the whole point. Ecclesiastes has already told us about that – eat, drink and be happy for tomorrow we die (Ecclesiastes 8:15). That was the Epicureans philosophy. The Stoics believed that this life was terrible and you can never

be happy so just kind of grin and bear it. They are the ones who hit their hand with a hammer and says “Glad that’s over.” Then they’ll try to smile.

So both these groups are listening to Paul and they are saying to him “What you’re saying doesn’t match up to what we believe. It’s pretty unique. This is different. We’d like to have a talk with you.” Remember this. Always be sensitive to your audience but your audience does not dictate your message, only the starting point, because when he’d talk to them he would start with Creator, who made them. They were sinners under judgment and he’d say “Now I have Good News.” The Jews knew the bad news and Paul would say “I have the Good News.” What God promised is fulfilled in Jesus. To the Greeks he would give the bad news because they didn’t understand it, now here’s the Good News. So the audience will determine where you go to find them. It will determine where you get started in talking to them and it will determine the vocabulary that you use when you talk to them, but it doesn’t change the message. Notice there is one Message. It’s Jesus, risen and triumphant from the atoning death. That was Paul’s message.

What is their action? Their action is this doesn’t match. This is just another way to say that Christianity is absolutely unique. It doesn’t fit with the religions of the world. It doesn’t fit in a course called Comparative Religions because all the religions of the world tell you what you have to do or give to get to heaven. Christianity says that what you do and give is not the answer, it’s the problem, but we have Good News because there’s a God who gave and did to save you. It is not because you wanted it or loved it but He loved you and wanted you even though He didn’t need you. It is a glorious, unique message and they got that. This doesn’t fit in the Parthenon. This doesn’t fit at the Areopagus. This is a whole other message.

They said “Paul we have a place where you have to come to present your message to see if we’re going to let it be included in Athens.” So they invited the fox into the henhouse. Into the Areopagus Paul is ushered. So they react to his message and their action is to take him in to let him preach. Now, not just to the marketplace or synagogue but Paul was able to speak to the culture shapers of Athens, the people who determined the culture of Athens. So Paul went up to declare, defend and unleash the Gospel.

Now what did he do? Let’s see what he did in response to their reaction. Acts 17:22-28 says [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. [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, [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. [26] And he made from one man (Adam) every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, [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, (Then he quotes their own philosophers - Cleanthes and Ariettas) [28] 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.’*

Paul has these culture shapers, Gentiles, philosophers and Jerusalem has come to Athens, the Bible has come to philosophy and what does Paul do? The first thing he does

is number one God created you. You are not a cosmic accident. God created you. Number two He created you from one man from which everyone came from. There are not races but there is one race. It is the human race and it all comes from Adam. In Adam we sinned and fell into sin. The third thing is this God is sovereign. You're not where you are by accident. He appointed you and your habitation. Number four when He made you He made you to worship. That's why you're very religious and have objects of worship but you're not worshipping Him. You're worshipping false gods. This God who made you to worship Him is the same God who upholds every breath that you take. In Him you live, move and have your being (Acts 17:28).

Notice what he says about God. He is sovereign, almighty, omnipotent, Creator, the One who has upheld you in His kind gracious, providence toward you and the One who made you for His praise and glory. Now let's look at the next part of it. Acts 17:29-31 says [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.* (We don't serve God with our imagination. Paul just told them that God is Spirit and there is no place that can contain Him.) [30] *The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere 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;* (By Adam came death, by this Man comes salvation and this Savior is also the Judge and this God will judge through Jesus, His Son.) *and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."*

There wasn't anything more ridiculous that you could have said to someone under the influence of Plato. All those philosophies saw the flesh as evil. Why in the world would you ever want to raise it back up? The whole point was to get rid of it and that's why they burned the bodies when they died, with their funeral mechanisms. That's why they celebrate liberation from the body. What do you mean Jesus died on the cross and was resurrected? What will be their response to that? Let's look at the next part.

Acts 17:32-34 says [32] *Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, "We will hear you again about this."* (They were curious. God was moving them. The non seekers were becoming seekers.) [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.* That's always the way it is when you lift of the Name of Jesus and proclaim the message. Some it is death unto death. Some is life unto life. Some the Lord is starting the process and He's calling them.

As a Christian that text is telling you five things that you can know. When you leave here today you're going to meet people – Jew, Gentile, Asians, Caucasian, African Americans, rich, poor – all kinds of people from all kinds of social standing. So there are five things you can know about every person that you meet. Number one is they are believers. I didn't say they were saved but they are believers. That's why I never ask someone if they are a believer because I know that everybody I meet is a believer. The question isn't do they believe but the question is who and what. They are believers. Have they put their faith in stone and objects of worship? Prophets would say they would take a piece of wood and make an idol with one part and burn the other part to cook their food. What kind of god is that? I know everybody I meet has a faith commitment. The Bible even tells you that the devil believes.

An atheist believes. Before I was converted I was an immoral, ungodly person. I was atrocious apart from the Lord. In those days I didn't have enough faith to be an atheist. I did my best to try and deny the existence of God but I just didn't have enough faith. Atheism is a faith commitment to a leap in the dark. Christianity is a faith commitment that is walking in the light. You really have to work hard to believing that there is no God. You have to sophisticate yourself into absolute imbecility in the final analysis to be an atheist. I am glad to answer any of your questions but an atheist is a believer. Irreligion can be a religion.

That's number two. Everybody you meet is religious. Their life is reflecting what they believe. They have a religion. Whatever it is that they put their hope in for security, significance and salvation in life to make their life meaningful will show up in the way they live. It will show up in the checkbook, their calendar, their entertainment, how they spend their life. Their life will be the religious reflection. That's why Paul said "Men, all of you who are believers in this pagan deities, I see you are very religious in every way." In other words, they did life worship and gathered worship. Whatever you believe will not only affect your personal life but you'll get together with others where it has affected their lives and together you'll worship.

Worship is adoration and action. It's praise to God expressed. There is life worship in that whatsoever you eat or drink or whatsoever you do, do all to the glory of God (I Corinthians 10:31). Then there is gathered worship. The world has the same reflection. By faith, those who are apart from Christ, have what they believe in or who they believe in and it effects the actions of their life. So that they have life worship that directs their money, time or whatever their committed to which is paramount, preeminent. It also has gathered worship. There is some easy pickins' here, isn't there? I could go to sports idolatry. I meet people who don't tell me about the last verse but they can tell me who is getting drafted or got signed, but I don't hear anything about the Lord. They may tell me that it's too cold in that sanctuary but they'll gather for sports worship when it's ten below. It's absolutely amazing that what we believe will affect the way we live and that brings me to number three.

Number three is we're all worshippers. Here is what they believe. Here is your religion and in every way you're worshipping these gods. Go read Richard Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens. You are hearing evangelists of the religion of atheism. They propagate it, worship it, for everybody has a faith commitment. It affects the way they organize and live their life. That becomes a worship statement in life and they will find birds of a feather to flock together which is gathered worship. So they worshipped in every way and it was affecting their life.

Number four is, it's not working or in North Charlotte language, it ain't workin. Maybe it's sexual promiscuity or sexual anarchy or power or work, I don't know what it is that has been put as a substitute for the God who made them to worship Him, but whatever it is that they believe that's affecting their life, their religion and that they now worship, it may give them a momentary experience of exhilaration but it's empty. It ain't workin. In fact for these people in this text, it wasn't working so bad that they had to put up an "unknown god" to make all the other gods work. Paul said "The one you're worshipping in ignorance, this is the God of glory. Whom you are worshipping in ignorance I declare in truth. This God has loved you, given His Son to save you from your sin and He has proven that this salvation is true because He raised Him from the

dead, just like He'll raise you." It wasn't working so they had to go and build another one. They couldn't even name that one because the rest of them just didn't cover it.

I know some are reading this and are curious. You have come asking and seeking. There is a God who made you and gave you your breath right now. He designed you for His praise and as you sit and stand God is calling you to trust Him and His Son and love Him who first loved you. Don't do it because it works but do it because there is no other One who can save you and you want to know Him. This works. It works because you are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus. You are a trophy of His grace and then can pour forth His praise of the glory of His grace. There is nothing more glorious than to live life to His praise, enjoy Him and to grow in our ability to do that by His grace. Then to gather with His people who are on the same journey with us by His grace and encourage one another all the more and stimulate one another all the more as the Day of that Savior approaches which will consume those who don't know Him, but will gather up for eternal praise all of those who do know Him. That brings me to the fifth thing you know.

The fifth thing is that we have been entrusted with the only message that can set them free and the mission to take it to them. All of these people who are trapped in fictitious faith, religion and worship, the message to set them free and the mission to take it to them has been given to us. That is why we have a mission's conference. That's why we pray for the work of the Gospel. That's why we give sacrificially even beyond our tithe. That's why we consider if God is calling us there and we take the Gospel to our own mission field. We do all of that because God has given us that message and the mission to get it to those so that when we see a city full of idolatry and we are provoked we don't respond with anger to those who are trapped, but we respond with the message of saving grace in Christ to those who are trapped and we love them with the Gospel that they may know the love of Christ which will set them free. They go from fictitious worship to true worship, from idols to the One true and living God, from *idolatria* to the praise of the Triune God of glory, and from the despair of sin and its emptiness to life.

I hope you have read the book or seen the movie *The Chariots of Fire*. There are two people who are portrayed. There is Harold Abrahams, the great sprinter and Eric Liddell, a great sprinter and runner. They get to the Olympics and Eric Liddell says "I don't worship sports, fame or even my country. I worship the Lord and I will not break the Sabbath. I can't run on Sunday." So for the One in whom he believes, his life was arranged not around fictitious religion but true religion, not to get to heaven but because of the God who came from heaven to save him. The religion wasn't his way to heaven but it was the reflection of the One who came from heaven to save him. He said "The Lord's Day is worship." Everything and everyone who tried to convince him that it was all about him, he said 'no'. That day Abrahams won his one hundred yard dash that Olympics and here is what he said to his coach "When the gun sounds I have ten seconds to verify my existence. I've got to win." He did win and on the day he won he ended up in a drunken stupor underneath a bar in a pub saying "Is that all there is?"

It doesn't work. Immoral sex doesn't work. Sexual perversion doesn't work. Money and power don't work. The idols of this world all fall down and they break. Eric Liddell went on to be a missionary to China and we're still getting the fruit of his ministry but here was the key to Eric Liddell. He turned to his sister and said "Jenny, God has made me fast and when I run fast I feel His pleasure." It wasn't about him, it

was about giving pleasure and glory to God. That is a well that is everlastingly springing up in our life. There is only One Name and one message that can set people free from fictitious faith, fictitious idols, fictitious religion and fictitious worship. It is the One true and living God who will save them and put them on a journey of grace whereby they might know Him in all of His glory.

So here is our journey marker number six. The ultimate objective in Gospel mission is the same as the ultimate objective of the Gospel message – the praise and worship of the Triune God of glory. Why do we do missions? It is because we want the earth to be covered with the praise of God, even as the waters cover the sea. Now are there other motivations? Absolutely. I see people headed to a Christ-less eternity in a place called hell and I don't want them to go there. I see the emptiness apart from Christ and I don't want their life empty. I see the ruins of a life that doesn't know Christ and its despair. There are multiple valid motivations to go on the mission field. I'm sure Paul looked at the Athenians and wanted them to be saved and not go to hell. I'm sure he had all kinds of motivations but the ultimate motivation in missions is the same motivation of the Gospel and that's the praise of the glory of His grace, that the glory of the Lord would cover the earth as the waters cover the sea. Whether it's the book of Kings or Habakkuk or the Psalms, it runs throughout Scripture that the glory of the Lord shall cover the earth as the waters cover the sea.

That's our desire, but if that's not in our heart we'll go to Athens or Birmingham or San Francisco with the eyes of a tourist, but if that's in our heart we'll go with the eyes of Paul, but you can't have the eyes of Paul unless you have the heart of Paul. That is a heart that beats for the praise of the glory of His grace, from dead sinners, uprooted from a spiritual cemetery now to give praise, glory and honor to the Lord of glory who saves them from their sins. That's why we pray about what we're going to give. That's why we give our children to the Lord. Take them. That's why we pray how we can do here what we send out there. That's why we declare the glory of the Lord. We want to bring Calvary to the hill of Mars. We want to bring truth to the lie. We want to bring grace to those who are dying in their sins that they may have Christ and then the praise of God would cover the earth as the waters cover the sea.

I love that word picture. If you dive in an ocean you're going to get wet. Waters cover the sea. Here is why we do missions. One day no matter where you dive into the world you'll hear the praise of our God who has saved His people. Let all the earth hear His voice. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the time we could be together. Thank You for Him who is our Foundation, for Him whom we proclaim. Audiences change but we have no other Name, we have no other message, for we have no other desire but that men and women might be brought from death unto life, from fiction to truth, from sin to a glorious Savior for the praise of His glorious grace. Amen.