



I OFFERED THEM CHRIST
Acts 17:16-34

Today we come to one of the most important missionary stops in the life of the Apostle Paul. How Paul comes to minister here is something that is locked away in the mysteries and purposes of God. It truly is a testimony to the truth of **Romans 8:28** of how God works everything to the good for those who believe – who are called according to his purposes.

In **Acts 17:11-15** – we see that Paul and a few residents of Berea had just escaped death from an angry mob that had come down from Thessalonica to stir up trouble. As Eugene Peterson shares in **THE MESSAGE BIBLE**: “Paul gave them the slip – caught a boat and put out to sea.”¹

His boat ride brings him to the historic seaport and town of Athens. There he would wait for Timothy and Silas to join him to continue on their missionary journey to Corinth. Once again the Holy Spirit uses the persecution of the town fathers to drive Paul to Athens for missional purposes. Here we see that man attempts to rule, but God in his providence overrules.

As we learn from **verse 16**, Paul stayed longer in Athens than he thought – so he assumed the role of a tourist – and began to sightsee all the historic places of this once grand city of the world. It was during the fifth century B. C. that Athens reached the zenith of its glory and fame. Paul was now walking on the soil of the great philosophers such as Socrates – Plato – Aristotle. Scholars came from around the world to sit and learn at the feet of these giants of the academic world. The academic pursuits of literature – science – the arts – rhetoric – and philosophy flourished during this time.

When Paul arrived in 51 A.D. Athens was now in the “late afternoon of her glory.”² Her glory days were gone – and she was a mere shell of that era.

The great power, population, and influence were now in her rival city of Corinth – which also hosted their own version of the Olympic Games. While Athens was greatly reduced in its importance – it was still considered an intellectual center similar to Princeton – Stanford – or MIT.

As Paul walked around the city and observed the most pagan and idol-saturated soil of the earth – he must have scratched his bald head and wondered ‘What in the

world am I doing here?’ Was there ever a more less-receptive audience anywhere in the world for Paul?

However, God knew that Paul was the right man for the assignment. Remember, Paul had been trained in the university town of Tarsus – and had studied under one of the great religious scholars of his time. He had been trained in the law – and knew perhaps as many as 7 different languages. He had been exposed to the writings and thoughts of some of the great poets and writers of the era.

The summary of Paul’s sermon – shared by Dr. Luke and found in our lesson today – is considered a masterpiece of biblical apologetics. We learned in seminary that it is a classical example of explaining and sharing the Christian faith to a pagan culture. Paul meets them where they are – he supports his argument with examples taken from their own culture. If you want to share your faith in Christ with a non-Christian – you can learn a lot from Paul’s methodology in this sermon. We know how St. Thomas Aquinas used the logic of Aristotle in his proofs for the existence of God.

Our lesson today came alive for Mary and me when – in November, 2001 – we stood at Mars Hill (also known as the Rocky Hill) and read the lesson out loud and offered a 5 minute devotional to our traveling group (picture). Mars Hill is the traditional meeting place of the Council of the Areopagus.

Here lively debates and religious and philosophic discussions took place. We stood at the presumed altar erected to the ‘Unknown God.’

As it shares in the latter part of **verse 16** in our lesson – everywhere Paul looked and traveled he saw idols. As Dr. William Barclay writes, “She was a city of many gods (perhaps up to 30,000). It was said that it was easier to meet a god in Athens than a human being.”³ Eugene Peterson writes, “The city was a junkyard of idols.”⁴

As Paul traveled to every nook and cranny of the city he observed the temples to Zeus – Diana – Apollo – Poseidon – and of course Athena – the great goddess who was housed in the Parthenon and for whom the city was named.

First he went to his fellow Jews at the synagogue – and other God-fearers in the city. Then he went street preaching and anywhere he could gather a crowd and give a witness. Mary and I traveled to the marketplace – the Agora (the Mall of America of that time) – where he encountered the two dominant philosophical schools of thought of that time. Paul was trained and gifted to preach in both of these arenas.

We know from **verse 16**, the more he observed – the angrier and more provoked he got. Paul knew from his training in the law and as a Pharisee that idolatry was an assault upon the glory and greatness of God. The making of idols and the worshiping of idols – were serious violations of the first and second commandments. They still are.

John Calvin once shared that “the human mind is a factory of idols.” The Athenians were idolaters as most people are today. The human race has always

murmured “What is this about serving God? I thought the gods were there to serve us.” As my mentor Eugene Peterson reminds us, “If we have a choice – which we do – of dealing with God or an image of God – we much prefer the image.

An image of God is God customized to our requirements. We not only have the pleasure of making the image – but also of controlling it. The image is a god with all the God taken out of it – so that we can continue to be our own gods. It is no wonder that in Athens – as it is now – idol-making and idol-worshiping continues to be the most popular religious game in town.”⁵ Remember Satan’s words and promise to Eve in **Genesis 3:5** “You will be like God.” Remember in the Genesis account that humanity was made in the image of God. We try to reverse it and make God in our image.

Gratefully, Paul was able to see through their religious devotion to idols – to see the deep hunger and thirst they had for the living God. As he saw their 30,000 human-made idols – he knew there were longings and appetites of the human soul and spirit that these gods could not meet – despite their beauty and outward appearance.

Many years ago, a tribe of people in Australia were discovered who were nutritionally starving to death. The rescue workers were further amazed because the land was filled with a certain kind of fruit. The fruit was tasty and nice in appearance – but of absolutely no nutritional value. That is what happens when we worship idols. They are not able to satisfy the deepest longings of our soul and spirit. St. Augustine wrote “Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee.” There is this God-shaped place in our lives that only can be filled by God. C. S. Lewis discovered through his journey from atheism to Christianity – that God cannot give us a happiness apart from himself because it is not there. There is no such thing.”⁶

He further discovered “If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy – the most probable explanation is that I was made for another.”⁷ This longing and appetite and unsatisfied desire led him to God – for the human spirit cannot rest in things beneath itself. This is why each week in worship – you and I must bring the “gods we have created before the God who has created us. It will be the greatest exchange you’ll ever make.

The great buzz word of the 21st Century is spirituality. Despite the enormous efforts of secular humanism to rid the world of God – the need for God can never be erased. As I shared with you two weeks ago – there is great spiritual hunger in America and in the world. Paul saw this need and – directed by the Holy Spirit – responded in a remarkable way and manner.

Notice in **verse 22**, he begins his sermon by honoring and respecting the thirst for God that he discovered. He listened to their voices – read their books – saw their needs – and sought common ground to invite them to know the Living God. This is missionary preaching at its best. The tone and substance are different here than Paul would use in a synagogue setting.⁸ Karl Barth encourages us pastors to have a Bible in

one hand – and a newspaper in the other. Paul saw these folks as earnest seekers of God – and responded in an appropriate way to that setting.⁹

So, Paul accepts the invitation to preach before this learned council of 30 men at Mars Hill. You will notice that Paul never quotes the Bible directly in his sermon – because this crowd did not know the Bible. He quotes two of their well-known Greek poets. He uses their language and literature to say what they need to hear. Paul’s sermon exposed the religious needs of the Athenians. That wasn’t hard to do with altars and idols all over the place. Paul merely stated what was obvious, but overlooked. People are empty without God – and they try to eliminate that emptiness with philosophy and religion.¹⁰ Now you understand why this sermon is as up-to-date as our Sunday Morning newspaper.

Notice how Paul shares in **verse 23** that their search for the ‘Unknown God’ was over. Paul now with sensitivity shares: “God is the Creator of all things.”

As our opening hymn declared, “Sing praise to God who reigns above – the God of all creation” – or as we sang on Reformation Sunday with the Brass Group, “All creatures of our God and King – lift up your voice and with us sing.” We know God through his glorious witness. As Dr. Warren Wiersbe reminds us, “Creation was God’s first missionary.” As the Psalmist declares “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof.” You have no excuse - this God has made himself known for all to see.

Paul then reminds them and us in **verse 25** that “God is the sustainer of his creation.” It is not that we provide for him – God provides for us. This is taking place even now. As Paul would share later in **Colossians 1:17**, “In Him (Christ) all things hold together.” If God is not in control even now – we would have destroyed his creation a long time ago. Here Paul makes the distinction between the Creator and his creation.

Next, Paul goes on to testify that it is “in God that we live and move and have our being.” One of their Greek poets had drawn this conclusion. It was standard stoic thought to declare that “God lives in us.” Paul reverses this thinking and declares that we live in God.¹¹ Paul’s greatest discovery in his own life was that God lived in him. The life of the God-head isn’t something far off in heaven – it’s active now in one’s life. Paul’s favorite expression was “Christ in me.”¹²

Yes, the reason the worship of idols never satisfies our deepest longings and desires is that it neither reveals to us who God is – nor does it reveal to God who we are.¹³ This is why it is crucial week after week that we bring the gods we and our world have created before the God who has created us. God has placed eternity in our hearts.¹⁴ As Rick Warren shares “Nothing matters more than knowing God’s purpose for your life – and nothing can compensate for not knowing it.”¹⁵ That is why the ‘gods’ we create take on the worst of human thought and behavior rather than elevating us to the position that God created us to be on.

Now, Paul moves from this common ground of creation to the issue he calls repentance. He moves his audience to think about the future and their relationship to this unknown God now known to them. He shares that God the Creator and Sustainer will become the Judge. We like idols because idols don't call us to repentance.

Paul then opens the doors to the kingdom by telling them about the resurrection of Christ. Now, remember we only have this summary of Paul's sermon. Some Bible teachers fault Paul for not talking about the cross – and the death and burial of Christ. Paul would not have shared the good news of the resurrection without the death of Christ. There would have been no resurrection if Christ had not died on the cross for our sins. Paul opens the door of Christ. As John Wesley shared when asked about the success of his revival in England: "I offered them Christ."

Our Creator God offers us the opportunity to be a new creation in Christ today. Would you this day give and surrender your life to him?

While converts were small in number that day – the seed was planted and a glorious harvest would come. Today, Greece is a Christian nation – and the head of the Greek Orthodox Church has his office and seat in that great city.

Yes, while Paul was angry at the idolatry he encountered in the great city – he had a heart and passion for those who were victims of idolatry – and shared with them how they could be victors in Christ Jesus.

May God give us grace and courage to do the same and offer our world Christ as well.

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz
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ENDNOTES

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, **THE MESSAGE**, Acts 17:14.

² James M. Boice, **ACTS, An Expository Commentary**, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, third printing, March, 2001, page 293.

³ William Barclay, **THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES, The Daily Study Bible series**, revised edition, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, PA, 1976.

⁴ Peterson, **THE MESSAGE, Acts 17:16**.

⁵ Eugene H. Peterson, **THE JESUS WAY**, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, pages 116-117.

⁶ C. S. Lewis, **MERE CHRISTIANITY**, Macmillan Publishing Co, New York, NY, first paperback edition, page 54.

⁷ Ibid, Lewis, page 120.

⁸ Fred B. Craddock, **Preaching Through the Christian Year, YEAR A**, Trinity Press International, Harrisburg, PA, 1992, first edition, page 276.

⁹ Ibid, page 276.

¹⁰ Eugene H. Peterson, **CONVERSATIONS: The Message Bible with its Translator**, NavPress Publishing Group, Colorado Springs, CO, 2007, page 1715.

¹¹ Craddock, op.cit., page 277.

¹² Ibid, Peterson, page 1834.

¹³ Ibid, Craddock, page 277.

¹⁴ Ecclesiastes 3:11b.

¹⁵ Rick Warren, **THE PURPOSE-DRIVEN LIFE**, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002, page 29,