

# Subversive Fulfillment

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Preacher: Rev. Thomas Hinson

[ 0 : 00 ] We'll be reading in chapter 17. We're only going to be reading a couple of verses this morning, verses 22 and 23. So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said, Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious.

For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, To the unknown God. What therefore you worship is unknown.

This I proclaim to you. The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Well, this is a big week coming up with the election, and the passage that we're going to be looking at this morning may not seem very relevant to that at first, but I hope and trust that by the end you will see how important this passage is and how it offers incredibly helpful guidance for those of us who are Christians as we navigate the coming weeks, which will surely be eventful.

The passage we're looking at is Acts chapter 17, verses 22 and 23, and this is the place where we really see Paul's approach to evangelism. We get to see his strategy, if you will, for evangelism in the city of Athens, which is highly intellectual, highly pluralistic, and it's a cultural center of influence. And I think this is an extremely important passage because as I look at our culture today, I believe that this pattern, the pattern that we're going to see this morning, I think this is the pattern that should inform the church as a whole as we seek to evangelize the culture in a post-Christian society.

[ 1 : 44 ] Now, I know when I say the word evangelism, some of you may balk. You may sort of react negatively to that or turn your nose up or say, I can't believe that we're still talking about this in 2020.

Haven't we all learned that people should simply hold their beliefs to themselves and that no one should impose their beliefs on other people? What I would say to that is that that statement is in itself a contradiction.

You've just done the very thing that you have told others not to do. By saying that, you're actually imposing your beliefs on other people. And another way of saying this would be to say that it's really impossible to live our lives in society and have relationships with one another and not have our beliefs bump into one another from time to time.

So what we're going to do this morning is simply assume that we all have beliefs and that we will inevitably share those beliefs, either directly or indirectly, with one another.

And so we're going to talk about how Christians should be going about this in a pluralistic society like the one that we live in. And we're going to follow Paul's example. So let's pray and then we'll open God's word together.

[ 3 : 02 ] Lord, we thank you for your word and we thank you that you are able to open it and illuminate it with your spirit. We know that we come here with our own expectations and hopes and even agendas, but that, Lord, you have something that you desire to speak to us.

And it's your voice that we long to hear, not the voice of human beings. And so we pray that we would hear yours and yours alone and that you would do in us your work, Lord, for our good, but ultimately for your glory through our lives.

And we pray this in your son's name. Amen. Amen. So the first thing that we see Paul do as he has spent some time in Athens and as he's beginning to learn the culture, he identifies the religious longings of the culture.

He identifies the religious longings of the culture. It says in verse 22, so Paul standing in the midst of the Areopagus, he's been invited to speak to the philosophers at the Areopagus.

And Paul says, men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. Now, I want to make it very clear here. Paul has already been mocked.

[ 4 : 09 ] He's already been talked down to. It's clear that many of these people don't respect Paul. He could have very conceivably started in a critical way. And yet he chooses to start this way.

He starts by going to the one place where you're always going to find common ground with people. Even if you disagree politically, even if you disagree about every other kind of thing, you will always find common ground, no matter who you're talking to, if you focus on religious longings.

And this is where Paul goes. See, there are different kinds of longings in life. There are what you might consider basic longings, things like hunger or thirst.

These are desires that can be satisfied here and now. If you're hungry, eat. If you're thirsty, drink. These are basic desires. But then there are deeper longings. There are, you might say, more existential longings.

And these are things that can't be fully satisfied here and now, no matter how hard we try. And these are what we would call religious longings. So Bertrand Russell, the well-known agnostic, wrote about two kinds of loneliness that he struggled with in his life.

[ 5 : 20 ] First, he talks about physical loneliness, which he says can be relieved simply by being with people. He says being with almost anyone relieves that kind of loneliness.

And he muses about how getting married and having kids might be able to permanently solve that kind of loneliness. But then he goes on to talk about a very different kind of loneliness.

He describes it as a, quote, very internal and terrible spiritual loneliness. And he says, you know, even getting married and having kids wouldn't come close to fulfilling that kind of loneliness.

And he even reflects on if he ever were to find some kind of companion who could meet that need, that it might actually transform him, that he would be a very different kind of person.

And right here in Russell's writing, we see the difference between a kind of basic longing of loneliness and loneliness as a spiritual longing, as a religious longing, the kind of longing that can't be satisfied simply by being around people.

[ 6 : 24 ] And the thing that we need to be clear on is this. Religious longings are good and godly desires. They actually teach us something about what it means to be a human being. They tell us what kind of world God made us to live in.

They tell us about the God who made all of this. So to take loneliness as one example, loneliness is a good and godly desire in that it teaches us that we were made for relationship with one another and with God.

And so every individual, every society has religious longings of one kind or another. But they do tend to differ from one individual or society to the next.

So if Paul were speaking at Harvard or Oxford instead of the Areopagus, and if Paul were speaking in 2020 instead of in the first century, what might Paul say?

Perhaps he would say, people of Harvard, people of Oxford, I perceive that in every way you care a lot about meaning. You want to know what all of this means.

[ 7 : 31 ] Is there any purpose to it all? Maybe he would say, I perceive that you care a lot about freedom. You care a lot about making sure that people are free. In this society, people of Harvard, people of Oxford, I perceive that you care a lot about satisfaction.

You want to live your life and experience pleasure. You do not want to deal with things like anxiety or depression or fear or grief. I perceive that you care a lot about identity.

You really want to know who you truly are and to make sure that that's an authentic identity that has not been unduly influenced by outside pressures. You care a lot about justice, people of Harvard, people of Oxford.

You want to make sure that we live in a just society, an equal society for all. And see, all of these are good and godly desires.

And I believe that if Paul were here today, he would affirm these desires in the same way that he affirms the religious longings in Athens. So the first point is this. When it comes to evangelism, we have to start by meeting people where they are.

[ 8 : 37 ] In all my years as a pastor, I have yet to have the experience of anyone coming to me and saying, Pastor, I really want to talk to you.

I've just been deeply burdened and crushed by the weight of my own sin. And I've been thinking day and night, is there someone out there who could deal with my sin and then could become my Lord and Savior and teach me how to live in the world?

Can you help me out? I've never had that experience. And that would be amazing if somebody comes and asks that. I am ready. Right? I've been ready. But I have yet to have that conversation with a single person.

The kinds of questions that people ask are questions like this. Am I really going to live the rest of my life alone? Why am I so afraid all the time, even when I know I shouldn't be?

Why do I have such a hard time trusting people? How can I keep doing my job when I hate it?

[ 9 : 43 ] When I hate my boss? When I hate the person I work with? These questions. The kind of questions that keep you up at night.

The kind of questions that you think about at three o'clock in the morning when you're tossing and turning. These are the questions that connect to our religious longings. And every human being is haunted by questions like this.

And so this is where it has to start. Right? So another way of saying it is this. Don't waste your time or somebody else's time offering the gospel as an answer to questions that people are not asking.

We have to figure out how to connect the hope of the gospel with the questions that people are actually asking. The ones that connect to their religious longings. That's where it has to start.

Right? So that's the first thing. Paul identifies the religious longings of this culture. But then he goes on. Once he's identified those longings, he then goes on to expose the false promises of fulfillment that are embedded in this culture.

[ 10 : 50 ] In verse 23, Paul says he observed the objects of their worship. And, of course, Paul's referring to idols. Over the last several weeks, we've talked extensively about idols.

And so the connection I want to make, though, this morning is this. As we've said, an idol is a false god. It's anything that has taken the place of God in our lives.

But the question that we want to ask is, why do people worship idols? And why do they choose to worship certain idols over other idols? And the answer is that idols, by definition, promise to fulfill our religious longings.

That's what an idol does. And the problem with idols is that these are empty promises. Idols never deliver on their promises.

They'll take everything from you. And yet they never give you what they promise. So let's take an example from earlier. We said that Paul might observe that in our culture, people care a lot about satisfaction.

[ 11 : 49 ] And I would say that this is a good and godly longing. People long to be satisfied and content and free from fear or pain.

And that's a good, legitimate thing to desire because it tells us that we weren't made to live in a broken world. There's something in us that instinctively knows that suffering was not a part of the original plan.

But this longing for satisfaction leads many people to worship the idol of comfort. And the promise that this idol gives us is this.

The idol says, if you devote yourself to me, if you devote yourself to comfort and rituals of comfort, if you devote yourself to maximizing your pleasure and minimizing or avoiding discomfort at all costs, then you will be satisfied and content in your life.

So that's the bargain that we make with this idol. So maybe you relax by scrolling through Instagram or TikTok. Maybe you deal with your negative feelings by eating a gallon of ice cream.

[ 12 : 56 ] Maybe it's cocktails that happen seven nights a week where the first cocktail is mixed at 4.55 p.m. Maybe it's binge watching Netflix every night.

Maybe it's shopping. Maybe it's fantasizing about houses on Zillow. Maybe it's planning your next vacation. Now, most of these things are not bad in moderation, but the problem with the idol of comfort is this.

It never gives the lasting satisfaction that it promises. It's like a bucket with a hole in it. You pour into it and pour into it and pour into it, but it never fills up.

So you get that dopamine hit from Instagram, but then it fades. The ice cream carton is empty, and then all of those negative feelings come back, plus the guilt of having eaten an entire gallon of ice cream.

The drinks make you numb for a while, but then that numbness wears off, and maybe you even feel worse than you did before. The novelty of the new purchase wears off, and then you're more aware of all of the things out there that you don't yet own, that you could buy.

[ 14 : 13 ] And then this leads to other problems, right? You start seeing everything through the lens of your own comfort, including your friends, or if you're a Christian, your church.

You see your church primarily in terms of how it meets or doesn't meet your particular needs. You neglect the real needs around you because you don't want the inconvenience.

That would threaten your comfort. You miss out on the fact that sometimes, like it or not, suffering is the thing that produces the most growth in us, the most maturity in us.

And the worst part is you're still perpetually unsatisfied. None of this actually deals with the source of your dissatisfaction. It's all temporary.

It's temporary fixes. And you will find that the same is true any time we look to idols to fulfill our religious longings. We long for identity, and so we go to the idol of expressive individualism, and that idol tells us that we have to find ourselves by looking within and trusting our feelings.

[ 15 : 22 ] But then all of our feelings are constantly changing, and so our identity constantly eludes us, and so we continually redefine ourselves, but never feel that we have arrived.

We long for justice, and so we go to the idol of power. That tells us that justice means taking power away from people who have it and giving it to people who don't.

But all that does is turn today's victims into tomorrow's oppressors. All it does is reinforce the idol of power rather than tearing it down.

We long for self-worth, and so we go to the idol of performance, and that idol tells us that our worth is measured by our accomplishments. But no matter how much we accomplish, there's always someone out there who is better than we are.

And so we always feel like we're falling short. See, I could go on and on and on, but the point is the same in every case. Idols make empty promises. They will take everything from you, but they'll never give you what they promised.

[ 16 : 32 ] And I can tell you this. I can describe it. I can give illustrations and examples. I can tell you stories about other people. But chances are, unless you have experienced this personally, you're probably not going to believe me.

Only when someone has become aware of their religious longings, and they have realized that their idols will inevitably fail them, only then might they possibly become open to the gospel as an alternative source of hope.

It's only when our idols fail us that we become truly open to the possibility that the gospel has something better to offer. And that's why only after Paul has observed the idols of worship, only after he's observed the rampant idolatry, and only when he realizes that some of his people might actually be open to what he's about to say, does he then do the third thing, which is to proclaim the gospel as the true fulfillment of our longings.

He says in verse 23, I found also an altar with this inscription to the unknown God. What therefore you worship is unknown. This I proclaim to you. See, the Athenians wanted to cover all of their religious bases, and so they built an altar devoted basically to anyone out there they may have overlooked.

And Paul sees this, and he takes it as a sign of their open-mindedness. And then what Paul goes on to say is extremely important. He says, And so what he's doing is he's actually connecting their desire to worship the right God with the truth about God found in Jesus Christ.

[ 18 : 15 ] And as we're going to see next week, this is not just an example of syncretism. This is not just Paul saying, Well, you have your road to God, and I have my road, and isn't that great? It all works swimmingly.

What he actually does is he affirms their longings. He affirms their desire to know God. But then he confronts and challenges the idols and the false promises in their culture.

And then at the very end, as we'll see next week, he calls them to turn and worship the true God who made them. Paul's not coercing these people.

What he's doing is simply offering a clear alternative. A clear alternative. And he's making this offer to people who are already looking for one. There's already an openness.

They have an altar to an unknown God. They are willing to consider the possibility that they may have gotten it wrong. So if you're not a Christian, here are some questions that you might want to consider.

[ 19 : 15 ] First of all, let me ask you this. What idol, or I'm sorry, what altars have you built in your life? What altars, if Paul were to sort of look at the various altars in your life, what would he see?

What are you religiously devoted to? What can you not imagine your life without? Maybe there's an altar that you've built to your career. Maybe there's an altar that you've built to being liked by everyone who knows you.

Maybe there's an altar that you've built to comfort, as we talked about earlier. Maybe there's an altar that you've built to your family. Maybe there's an altar that you've built to security and safety.

So that's the first question. What are the altars in your life? The second question is every bit as important. Is there an altar to the unknown God in your life? In other words, are you absolutely certain that this is all there is?

That there's nothing beyond what you have already perceived? Are you absolutely certain that what you believe is the only thing that there is to believe? Or are you open to the possibility that there may be a God out there you have not yet encountered?

[ 20 : 26 ] Are you open to the possibility that there is a God out there who made you and that he's the one you've been seeking after your entire life? The times when people are most open to this possibility are the times right after their idols have let them down.

Right? Right? So you gave everything up for your career and you still lost your job. Right? You sacrificed your integrity in order to be liked and you still got rejected.

You put everything, invested everything into your family and your marriage still fell apart. Then there's an opening in your heart.

Then there's a possibility. Right? That's when the gospel starts to make sense. That's when the gospel begins to be the answer to the deepest questions that you're asking.

Right? When you begin to realize that there is a God who made you. That there's a God who loves you. When you begin to realize that even though you turned your back on that God, that God has enacted a plan to restore you to himself.

[ 21 : 39 ] That he did the unimaginable and sent his son to die in order to bring you back into the fold of his family. That even when you fled from God, God pursued you because he loves you.

That is the first sign of you turning to come back to him. Like the father in the parable of the prodigal son, he runs down the street to embrace you. When you realize that God is not only saving you, but his plan is to put the whole world right again.

The beauty and the grandeur of that story starts to outshine everything else. The gospel confirms the deepest longings of every human heart regardless of their culture.

To paraphrase the theologian Daniel Strange, the gospel offers what all human hearts rightly need. It offers meaning, but a kind of meaning that suffering can't take away.

It offers satisfaction, but a kind of satisfaction that doesn't depend on our circumstances. It offers freedom, but a kind of freedom that doesn't break down the bonds of community.

[ 22 : 52 ] It offers identity, but a kind of identity that doesn't elude you or crush you or lead you to exclude others. A basis for justice, but one that doesn't turn you into the new oppressor.

Relief from shame and guilt, but a kind of relief that doesn't resort to relativism. Hope, but a kind of hope that can enable you to face anything with poise, even death.

So this is Paul's approach to evangelism in a highly intellectual and pluralistic culture. And I believe, as I said at the beginning, this should be our approach in the post-Christian West.

Identify the religious longings of the culture. Expose the false promises of fulfillment in the culture. And then proclaim the gospel as the true fulfillment of those religious longings.

And actually, we have an opportunity this week to put all of this into practice. I told you at the beginning that this would be relevant to the election, and here we are at the end. Listen, no matter how this election pans out, there's going to be widespread disillusionment and unrest throughout our nation.

[ 24 : 09 ] There's going to be widespread disillusionment and unrest. And listen, this is a fantastic opportunity for the gospel. Right? This is a fantastic opportunity for the gospel to be proclaimed because idols are going to come crashing down.

The idol of politics is going to fall. And for a little while, people are going to be crushed, but they're going to be open.

Maybe in a way that they haven't been in a long time. And it is often in the ashes of disillusionment and despair that the fires of faith can be kindled.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word. We thank you for your gospel. And we thank you that this doesn't depend on us. I pray that in the power of your Holy Spirit, we who are Christians would

have our hearts reignited with excitement and passion for the truth of your gospel. That it is the greatest story and the truest story in the world. And we pray for all those in our lives, all those we know, and especially those who might be listening right now.

[ 25 : 19 ] That, Lord, they would have the clear-eyed ability to see the idols in their lives for what they are. To see the empty promises. And that they would be willing to consider and embrace the alternative hope that can only be found in the gospel, Lord.

And I pray for all of us that should draw us closer to you and tie us to your purposes in the world, Lord. Those purposes for which we were made. We pray this that you would be glorified in all ways in us.

We pray this in your Son's holy name. Amen.