

Confronting Cultural Idols Pt. 3

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 25 October 2020

Preacher: Rev. Thomas Hinson

[0 : 00] Right now, our society is in desperate need of hope. And so we've been looking these past few weeks at how to bring the hope of the Christian gospel to bear in our culture and our society.

So today we're going to be looking at the Apostle Paul in Acts chapter 17 and how he brings the hope of the gospel to the culture in Athens. This week we're going to focus on the ministry of Paul. And next week we're going to focus on the message of Paul, the content of what he had to say. But Athens is really relevant for us. Athens is a lot like Washington, D.C. for those of us who live in the DMV area.

It's a very intellectual place. It's a highly pluralistic place. And it's a center of cultural influence in the Roman Empire. Because of that, Paul's approach to ministry in Athens is particularly relevant for those of us who are part of Church of the Advent as we think about our ministry in Washington, D.C. And to be totally honest, this particular passage, Acts 17, what we're going to be looking at this morning, has been very formative for our church. It's been very formative for me and how we have gone about ministry over the last decade or more.

[1 : 14] So we're going to be looking together at Acts 17, verses 16 through 21. And we're going to focus on three aspects of Paul's ministry that form and shape how we think about ministry as Christians in D.C.

So we're going to look at Paul's motivation, Paul's approach, and Paul's foundation. Let's pray, and then we'll open God's word together. Lord, we thank you for your word, and we thank you that your Holy Spirit has the power to illuminate your word.

And so we pray that you would do that. We pray that we know that there are things that we need to hear from you, even if we don't know it. And I pray that you would speak to each of us in just the way we need to hear from you this morning, that we might become more like you, fall more in love with you, and bring more glory to your name.

In your Son's name, amen. So first of all, let's look at Paul's motivation together. It says in verse 16, Now while Paul was waiting for them, meaning his friends at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.

And that word that we translate, his spirit was provoked within him, is the word *paroxuno*, from which we get the word *paroxysm*. And the best translation of this word would be the idea of righteous or jealous anger.

[2 : 33] This is a, he's deeply upset. He's angry. He's deeply moved. So imagine that your lover or your spouse leaves you to go be with someone else, and you see them with that other person.

Or imagine your child leaves you to go live with another family, and says they would prefer this other mom or dad, and you see them together. Imagine how that would make you feel.

You would feel excruciating pain. You would feel righteous anger. You would feel jealousy for that person. And the reason that you would feel all of these things is because of your love.

It's because this is a person that you love, a person whom you love, who has spurned your love to go be with someone else. And so we need to understand what's happening in Paul here.

Paul loves God. He's given his entire life to God. And Paul loves these people that God has called him to minister to. And so Paul is jealous on God's behalf.

[3 : 35] That's really how we need to understand this word. He's jealous on behalf of God. He knows that God made each one of these people. He knows that God loves each one of these people beyond measure.

Each man, woman, and child in Athens, God created in his image and loves beyond measure. And yet these people have given their hearts and given their allegiance to things that are made out of wood or metal or stone.

And so Paul's reaction is one of righteous anger, which is actually motivated by love. Love for God and love for these people. So this is the first principle that we draw out of this passage, that all true ministry in God's name is motivated by love.

All true ministry done in God's name is motivated by love. Love for God and love for the people whom God has made. And so the opposite is also true.

Any ministry that is not born out of love does not reflect the heart of God. So love has to be the starting place. And some of you may hear this and think, well, I really struggle to love.

[4 : 50] I really struggle to love anyone. I struggle to love myself. I struggle to love my own family. I struggle even to love my friends. And the idea of loving my neighbors or loving a city just seems way beyond what I'm capable of.

And I would say if you do struggle to love, which all of us do, if that's a struggle for you, even if there's somebody in your life that you really dislike, that you have a lot of antipathy for, you really struggle to love that person.

If you really struggle to even care about the people who live around you, you don't want to have to talk to them. You don't want to have to get to know them. You don't want to have to interact with them. But if these are the things that you struggle with, you're not alone.

And here's what I would say, and this is just born out of personal experience. Pray for them. Pray for them. Pray for the person in your life that you struggle to love.

Pray for your neighbors. If you don't know their names, make it a point to learn their names. Write them down if you have to. And then pray for them by name. Pray for the city.

[5 : 54] In my experience, it is almost impossible to consistently pray for someone without your heart softening and warming toward that individual.

And I think that often God uses prayer more than anything else to kindle love in our hearts for the people he calls us to love.

So pray for them. All true ministry is born out of love. Now I want to look at Paul's approach. That's Paul's motivation. Paul's approach is going to be longer because we're going to look at two aspects of Paul's approach that we see in this passage.

Let me read verses 17 and 18. So he, being Paul, reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews. He's motivated by love. He's motivated by this deep, he's deeply disturbed. And so he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons and in the marketplace every day with those who happen to be there.

And then verse 18, some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. So I want to look at two things about Paul's approach here. Number one, Paul uses discourse as well as proclamation, which is very, very, very important.

[7 : 05] Paul is not just standing on a street corner shouting the gospel woodenly to anybody who happens to walk by. The words reason and converse both imply a back and forth dialogue between Paul and his hearers.

Now, this wouldn't have been pure dialogue as we might think of it today in our society, but it would have been a kind of format where Paul would speak or preach or teach. And then there would have been opportunity for his hearers to push back or offer objections or ask clarifying questions.

And Paul is most likely doing the same thing in Athens that he did in many places, like Thessalonica, which we read about at the beginning of Acts chapter 17 in verses 2 to 4. We see this picture. If we translate the words there, what we realize is that Paul is probably presenting the gospel and then allowing people to ask questions.

He's teaching in a way that one of the words means to open. He's opening these concepts up to his hearers, which means he's explaining things in a way that takes into account the view of his listener.

He's teaching things in a way that doesn't assume they have a Jewish or religious background that would be relevant to the things that he's saying. And then as we see in verse 28, he's not only quoting scripture, but he's also quoting the pagan or the secular sources when they reflect biblical truth.

[8 : 28] So he's doing everything he possibly can to engage his listeners in a back and forth dialogue with them and with their culture and with their authoritative sources, even outside of scripture.

So this tells us a lot about Paul's approach, and we're going to look at this a little more next week. But I want to draw something out here for us, and that is this. Here's the first principle from this section here.

We need to realize that learning how to listen and seeking to understand the views of the people with whom we disagree is every bit as important as anything that we might have to say. Learning how to listen, learning how to hear, and then understanding the perspective of the people with whom we disagree is every bit as important as anything that we might have to say. And in fact, it will radically shape how we say what we say. You know, I've been in a lot of highly contentious conversations lately for one reason or another, and I've been reminded again and again and again that there's a vast difference between true communication and people simply hurling words at each other.

[9 : 40] Between talking with someone and just talking at them. I've been reminded again and again and again there's a big difference between those two things. And this is not just true in debates, but it's also true in our relationships.

It's true in friendships. It's true with the people that we're dating. It's true with the people that we're married to. It's true with our kids. We tend to focus. I know I do this.

I tend to focus on what I'm going to say next. When somebody's talking to me, I tend to want to think about the thing that I'm going to say as soon as they're done talking. Right? And we tend to assume that we already know what the person is going to say.

That we already know what they're going to say in response to us. And so we don't really listen to what they say because we already think we know what they think. Right?

And this actually happens in verse 18. People say this about Paul. They say that he seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities. And then it says they think that because he's preaching Jesus and the resurrection.

[10 : 40] And what's easy to miss, but what commentators point out, is that people are misunderstanding Paul. When Paul talks about Jesus and the resurrection, some of the people listening think that he's talking about two different gods.

There's a god named Jesus and there's another god or goddess named resurrection. So people are misunderstanding him. And this is a really important point for us. When we talk about concepts like Jesus or resurrection or grace or justice or mercy, how can we be sure that we're on the same page?

Very often people use the same words but in greatly differing ways. And so the only way we can know that we're on the same page is through discourse. Through the give and take.

Through listening and understanding the perspective of our hearers. And what you realize is that a great deal of unnecessary conflict in our society right now comes from the fact that people are simply talking past each other.

There are ships passing in the night. Nobody's really listening to one another. And so nobody really understands the other. Now I want to be clear on something before we move on. I'm not saying that dialogue should replace proclamation.

[11 : 54] There is a time and a place where Christians must declare what God has revealed. We're called to do that. But I find, and I think Paul knew, that we are much more effective in proclamation of the truth when we can accurately understand the perspective of our hearers.

And I think ideally, ideally, if you're engaged in debate with someone, you should be able to understand their views so well that you would be able to articulate it with such accuracy that they would actually agree with your summation.

I think that should always be our goal when we're conversing with people with whom we disagree. And so, you know, these days, as I think about and kind of look at the books next to my bed or the books that I keep in my car or the books that are in my office, the books that I'm reading, most of these books express ideas that I completely disagree with.

And I realize that most of what I read these days is stuff that I more or less disagree with. But I'm doing it for this reason, because I'm seeking to try to understand the perspective of the people with whom I disagree.

And I would love to be able to articulate their views in ways that they would actually agree with. So this is the first thing. Paul recognizes the value of discourse, and he engages in discourse as well as proclamation.

[13 : 18] The second point I want to make is equally important. Paul is actually challenging the philosophical assumptions of the day. He's challenging the philosophical worldview that shapes how his hearers think.

It says here that Paul is conversing with the Epicureans and the Stoics, and they actually then invite him into the Areopagus to discuss his ideas more fully with the philosophers who were there.

When it talks about Epicureanism and Stoicism, these were the prevailing philosophies of the day. They shaped how people saw the world. They shaped the assumptions that people made about life's biggest questions.

And again, we're going to talk about this more next week when we talk about Paul's message. But I just want to make a point about this now. Paul knew that if he wanted to bring the gospel into the culture, if he wanted to bring the gospel to bear in the culture of Athens, he had to contend with the philosophies that shaped that culture.

He had to engage at a philosophical level. And the point that we need to realize is this. This is not just true for Athens. It's not just because Athens particularly cared about philosophy and said this was a part of what Paul had to do.

[14 : 33] Every single one of us, whether consciously or unconsciously, every single one of us is a follower of some influential philosopher or philosophy throughout history.

We are all either consciously or unconsciously followers of some great philosophical thinker found in history. So you probably never consciously decided to adopt many of the views that you have. I'm talking about the assumptions that we make in a kind of unexamined level. Our background assumptions, the things that we think that we just assume everybody thinks, or anybody with common sense would think.

These assumptions actually come from somewhere. And if you really pay attention, you realize that we absorb these ideas through various places, through the university that we attend, or the social media that we consume, or TV, or music, or movies, or books, or articles, or podcasts, or blogs, or any of the things that we expose ourselves to embedded within that media, there are certain philosophical views.

And so certain philosophies become popular. Certain philosophies become mainstream. They get embedded in popular culture. And they become our unexamined assumptions that really shape how we think and live.

[15 : 54] And so the truth is, we are all disciples of someone. We are all disciples of someone. And so the way that you answer life's biggest questions, right? What does it mean to be a human being?

How should society work? What's wrong with the world? How should we go about fixing the biggest problems in our society? All of our answers to those questions come from somewhere.

It could be Plato, or Aristotle, or Kant, or Hume, or Descartes, or Nietzsche, or Marx, or Foucault, or the list goes on and on and on.

But these ideas come from somewhere. They come from someone or a group of people. Now, I realize when I say this that there are probably people who are going to object. And they'll say, how dare you say that about me?

How dare you suggest that I would be so easily influenced by other people? I'm not influenced by anyone. My thoughts are my own. And I'm actually on a journey to discover my own personal truth.

[16 : 54] And my intention is to do that completely free of any outside influence, whether it be an individual or an institution. I need to figure out for myself by looking within what is true for me.

In fact, I just recently heard somebody express that. It's a very popular way of thinking. Now, that desire to discover our own truth free from influence, that is itself a way of thinking.

That is itself a product of the influence of certain thinkers on the way we think. Right? This is what the philosopher Charles Taylor calls the culture of authenticity.

This desire to discover what I believe, what is true for me, apart from any outside influence, that is an aspect of the culture of authenticity. It's a particular way of thinking that's less than 100 years old.

All right? And you're only really going to find it in Western affluent societies. And if you understand the way most people have thought throughout history and from one society to another, most people throughout history, if you were to tell them that, they would laugh in your face.

[18 : 02] Because it would be utterly ridiculous to their ears. It's a very new and very niche way of thinking. And so the point put another way would be this. Even the desire for authenticity is itself

inherently inauthentic because it's coming from somewhere.

It's coming from someone. So the point that we need to see here is this. Philosophy, for those of us who are followers of Jesus, philosophy strongly influences the way we think about faith.

It actually also strongly influences people who reject faith. And it influences us whether we know it or not. This is a way of thinking. This, for instance, to give one more example before we move on, this explains why there are a lot of people who grow up as fundamentalist Christians who then later in life leave that tradition and they become progressive Christians later in life.

I see very few people converting from atheism to progressive Christianity. I see a lot of people who grew up fundamentalist Christians becoming progressive Christians later in life.

So let's think about why that would happen. Right? So say you grew up in a fundamentalist Christian community. And by that I mean you grew up in a community where you weren't ever allowed to ask questions. You weren't ever allowed to express doubt.

[19 : 21] That was forbidden. Say you grew up in a community where people were very anti-science. They didn't trust science. They rejected all science. Say you grew up in a community where you were given a very wooden, very literal interpretation of Scripture.

And say that was your kind of background. But see then later in life you go to university or sort of in your late teens, early 20s, you discover, you pick up a book by Rob Bell or you pick up a book by Rachel Held Evans and you read it and then you find it exhilarating.

Right? Because it's a way of talking about Christianity that feels right in a way that nothing that you grew up with felt right. This connects with you on some deep level.

And so you start listening to podcasts. You start listening to the liturgists or the deconstructionists.

And you learn to question everything that you were taught. You're encouraged to deconstruct your faith and to then maybe reconstruct a faith that is more true for you.

And all of this feels right. And you feel light bulbs going off and things are coming alive in you. And it feels like a kind of new conversion experience. Right? Now the point that I'm trying to make is not to bash anyone in particular.

[20 : 29] In fact, a lot of these people say some really good things and ask some really good questions that we should be asking as Christians. The point is this. We need to ask, why does that feel right to me?

Why would that feel right in a way that something else may not feel right? And the answer is this.

Christian fundamentalism was shaped by philosophical movements that were happening 250 years ago during the Enlightenment.

And so Christian fundamentalism is in many ways a reaction against the Enlightenment. And there are a lot of problems that come along with that. Right? But you live in the 21st century.

Right? You're not shaped by what was happening 250 years ago as much as you are shaped by a very different philosophical tradition, the ideas that hold sway in our culture today, which we can loosely summarize as postmodernism.

Right? You didn't know that you were being formed by this, but all of your life you've been formed by this way of thinking because it's simply been embedded in the culture around you. So the desire to reject tradition.

[21 : 36] Right? Mistrust toward any form of authority. Skepticism that we can really ever know anything objectively. Assuming that almost everything is socially constructed.

The desire to poke holes or to deconstruct everything we can. Seeing all of society through the lens of power and oppression. These ideas were not mainstream 250 years ago.

They have become mainstream. This all came from the postmodernists. And so what you see in progressive Christianity is you see people who have simply reworked the entire Christian faith to fit these postmodern ideals.

They have taken Christianity and laid it like a blanket or a cloth over postmodernism. Right? And so that's why when you discover something like this, it feels like you're coming home.

It's because this is the kettle that you've been steeped in all of your life. It fits your sensibilities about how the world is. It fits those unexamined assumptions that govern the way you think.

[22 : 49] And so the problem is, though you may think of yourself as a disciple of Jesus, you've actually become a disciple of Foucault. Or Derda.

Or Jean-Francois Lyotard. Even if you've never heard these names before today, in some ways, you have been discipled by these thinkers. And so coming back to Paul, Paul understood the

importance of philosophy in shaping how people think.

He knew that if the gospel was actually going to penetrate hearts and minds, he had to challenge the philosophical assumptions that people walk around with. He had to get to that level of their thinking.

And this is actually what we see in verses 22 to 31, which we'll look at next week. We see that Paul presents the gospel in ways that specifically challenge Epicurean and Stoic thought.

The way he presents the gospel shows that he has a deep, working understanding of these philosophies and how much they influence the people he's speaking to. Right?

[23 : 54] So just in terms of our own practice at Church of the Advent, this is why we do the things that we do at Advent. Again, as I said at the beginning, this has deeply influenced how I think about ministry and pastoral care and preaching and teaching in our church.

This is why in classes like Foundations or Sex and the Gospel, we talk just as much about philosophy as we do Scripture. It's not because philosophy is more important than Scripture. Of course that's not true. Scripture is our only true final source of authority. But philosophy is important because we need to understand our bias. We need to understand why we think the way that we do.

We need to understand why we want certain things to be true over other things. We need to understand that we tend to be very biased when we read Scripture.

We either want to ignore things that are there, or we want to read things into Scripture that aren't there, or we want to read Scripture through a 21st century lens rather than a 1st century lens.

[25 : 00] We need to understand that we're not coming from a place of neutrality, that we've been profoundly influenced by people whose names we may have never even heard before.

So the point is not that everyone needs to go out and get a PhD in philosophy or learn all the names or learn all the isms, but you do need to know why you think the way you do. You do need to understand that no one's neutral.

You do need to understand what your influences are. And most importantly, we need to make sure that we are actually following the person that we think we're following, who is ultimately and finally, for those of us who are Christians, Jesus Christ.

Right? So this is what we see in Paul's approach. He makes just as much use of discourse as he does proclamation. He really wants a back and forth. He wants to hear and understand his hearers. And he engages the philosophical assumptions that shape the culture.

Now, finally, I just want to say a word about Paul's foundation. Everything that we just said about philosophy has to be balanced against this final point. Paul's preaching is summarized in verse 18 as he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.

[26 : 13] Even though Paul could contend with the philosophers of his day, he also knew the limits of philosophy. We see in 1 Corinthians 1, verse 20, where Paul says, Where is the one who is wise?

Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom. In the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom.

It pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. In other words, no one can be argued into the kingdom with philosophy. There is a spiritual power that comes when we proclaim the gospel.

You know, you can hear the gospel a thousand times, and all of a sudden, one day, you hear it, and it becomes real. You see the emptiness of your life. You see the truth about yourself.

You realize that Jesus died not just in general, but for you personally. And everything hits home. The penny drops. You know, this was my experience.

[27 : 14] And that kind of thing can't be achieved through human means. It can't be achieved through philosophical debate or discourse. Ultimately, people's response depends on the work of the Holy Spirit in their heart.

The good news of this is that it reminds us that all of this doesn't ultimately depend on us getting everything right or making the best arguments.

Our calling is simply to be faithful in the things that God has entrusted to us and to trust Him with the outcome. So we'll pick this up again next week.

But just to summarize so far, these are some of the principles that guide us in our approach as a church. We are motivated by love. We are committed to discourse. We do everything we can to engage the philosophies that shape the way people think in our culture. But finally, we are centered on Jesus Christ. That's our final source of hope and power.

[28 : 18] Lord, we thank you for these truths. And we pray that you would illuminate for us the ways that we need to be shaped in what we love and how we think by you, by your son, Jesus Christ, and by his word.

We pray that we would be able to love the people in this city around us, the people who live in the homes around us with your love, Lord.

That all of this would be motivated by your love and a desire to see your name glorified. And it's in the name of your son, Jesus, that we pray. Amen.