

Responses to the Gospel

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[0 : 0 0] This week we will be reading again in Acts chapter 17. We'll be reading at the very end of this chapter. We've spent the last few weeks looking in detail at Paul's ministry in Athens, and here we see the conclusion of this account before Paul goes on to Corinth.

We'll be reading starting in verse 29, and we'll read through verse 34. 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.

The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now He commands all people everywhere to repent, because He's fixed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom He has appointed, and of this He has given assurance to all by raising Him from the dead.

Now, when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, but others said, we will hear you again about this. So Paul went out from their midst, but some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. So this week we come to the end of a series that we started back in September looking at the gospel and culture, how the gospel brings the hope of renewal, not just to individuals, but to the culture as a whole, to all cultures around the world.

[1 : 3 4] We've been focusing for the last several weeks as a part of this series on Paul's ministry in Athens. And as we've said already, Athens is a place that's a lot like Washington, D.C.

It's a highly pluralistic place. It's a highly intellectual place. It's a sort of center of learning where all of the latest, greatest, most brilliant ideas are discussed.

And Paul is invited to speak in the Areopagus, which is the very center of philosophical and religious discourse in Athens. And he's invited to make the case for Christ.

All right, so you can imagine for Paul, this is his big chance. He has spent time in Athens. He has expertly diagnosed and exegeted the culture.

He has a deep understanding of the prevailing philosophies of the day, Epicureanism and Stoicism. He is ready to go. This is the moment he was made for.

[2 : 3 2] From the time that Jesus first encountered him on the road, Paul has been gunning for a moment like this. So how do people respond? That's going to be our focus this morning.

And what we're going to see is three general categories of response that we see not only in Athens, but there are essentially three categories of response that we can expect to see anytime and anywhere the gospel is proclaimed.

And as we look at these responses together, I invite you, those of you here and those of you at home, to reflect on your own heart and the way you respond to the news about Jesus.

Some of you may be Christians. Maybe you've grown up in the church. Others may be very skeptical. Maybe you've stumbled on this by accident on the internet. Whatever the case may be, I invite you to take a moment and just to reflect on your own response to the gospel and why you think that is.

So let's pray and then we'll get started. Lord, we thank you for your word. And as we pray every week, we thank you that it doesn't depend on us only to open and extrapolate what we can from these pages.

[3 : 37] That, Lord, your spirit means that this is a living word and you are able to do your work through your word in ways that we can only begin to understand. And that's actually what we need this morning, Lord.

We need you to do your work in us through your word. And so we pray that we would have open, receptive hearts to hear what you have for us. And we pray this in your son's holy name. Amen.

So the first thing that we see in terms of people's response to the gospel is contempt. Verse 32. Now, when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked.

And I just want to point out right away, here we have probably, arguably, the greatest church planner who ever lived. He has seen Jesus face to face on the road.

He is theologically brilliant. He's one of the most well-trained theologians of his time. He is absolutely filled with the Holy Spirit. And we learn in other places in Scripture that he has spiritual gifts that other people might envy.

[4 : 39] And yet he gets laughed out of the room. He can't even finish his sermon. Right now, if you're a Christian and you're hearing this, that's really worth thinking about a whole lot more.

And there are a couple of reasons why people respond this way. Specifically in Athens, this was not just a matter of people hearing Paul and thinking, well, this guy's weird or his ideas are weird.

The idea of resurrection actually ran directly against the founding charter of the Areopagus itself. Tradition held that the god Apollo actually inaugurated the court of the Areopagus.

And according to that story, when Apollo did this, one of the declarations he made was this. Apollo reportedly said, when a man dies and his blood is spilled on the ground, there is no resurrection.

Right? So if you knew that story, if you knew that history, you would recognize that Paul is directly challenging one of the founding principles of the Areopagus. Right? There is no such thing as resurrection.

[5 : 43] Paul says, I beg to differ. But even if this hadn't been the case, Scripture is absolutely clear that the default response of the world toward Jesus and thus His followers is going to be contempt.

Jesus Himself says to His disciples in Matthew 10, 22, you will be hated. You will be hated by everyone because of me.

He doesn't say, you're going to rub some people the wrong way. He doesn't say, you know, time and here and there, people might, you know, be rude to you. He says, you will be hated by everyone because of me.

And, you know, it's interesting because I think people often assume, in our day, people often assume that the people who lived a long time ago in previous ages and eras were much more likely to believe in silly things like resurrection because they were much more gullible or much less sophisticated.

Right? This is what C.S. Lewis referred to as chronological snobbery. But the truth of the matter is that from the very beginning, from the first moment that the resurrection of Jesus was announced to the world, people responded by mocking it.

[6 : 56] Right? People mocked Jesus. People mocked His followers. People ridiculed the Christian faith. People mocked it when it was a tiny sect within the Roman Empire, .00-something percent of the population, and they kept right on mocking it up until it became the dominant religion of the Roman Empire.

And they've continued mocking it ever since. Right? So just, we want to look at this for a second, this response of contempt, and draw out a couple of implications before we move on.

These would be implications primarily aimed at Christians. I think there are two ways that Christians go wrong when we recognize that that contempt is going to come our way.

The first way we go wrong is simply trying to escape it. Right? Trying to negotiate our way out of having to be hated. Out of having to face the contempt and scorn of people who respond this way.

What we need to recognize is that the gospel is inherently offensive. It's inherently offensive. I mean, it's a message that says, at your core, your core problem is that you worship false gods instead of the God who made you.

[8 : 06] And then it goes on to say, and the problem with that is that those gods are walking all over you. They're taking advantage of you. They're crushing you. They're making promise after promise after promise.

And all they do is rob you of the most precious things. Right? So if you worship intelligence, you always end up feeling stupid. Right? If you worship beauty, you always end up feeling like the ugly one in the room.

Right? If you worship ideals like tolerance and inclusion, that actually makes you more intolerant and more exclusive. Right? If you worship and idealize your family, you'll end up crushing the people that you love under the weight of your expectations.

Right? So the gospel says these false gods will rob you and rob you and rob you and leave you empty and broken on the side of the road. And then the gospel says everything about you, therefore, needs to change.

Everything. Right? And then it says, it has the audacity to say, that being the case, you can't do it on your own. Right? So this is just one hammer blow after another on our egos.

[9 : 12] Right? And then the gospel says your only hope is to repent. Right? Which means to abandon your entire life project apart from God. Abandon all of your attempts to be good.

Abandon all of your attempts to fix yourself. Abandon all of that. Turn away from all of that, all of the false gods, and give yourself entirely to Jesus. Jesus. He's the only one who can save you because He's the only God out there who is willing to give Himself for you.

This is the gospel. And what you, I hope you hear in this, is that gospel, by design, directly challenges the core idols in our lives. And guess what happens when you challenge somebody's idols?

They respond with severe anger and hatred and contempt. In fact, this is how you can tell what your idols are. When somebody challenges your idols and they're really your core idols, you respond with disproportionate anger.

And you ask, why am I getting so upset about this? It may be because one of your core idols is being threatened. We don't like that. Right? So, any preaching of the gospel that doesn't directly challenge idols is incomplete.

[10 : 26] It's an incomplete gospel. And over the centuries, there has always been the temptation felt by individuals, churches, and entire denominations to domesticate the gospel, to remove anything that might be offensive, which often means removing anything that might challenge the prevailing idols of the culture.

And what that basically means is that there's this temptation to put out a version of Christianity or the Christian gospel that simply allows us to continue worshiping our idols.

Right? Which, if you understand Christianity, is ridiculous. That's like a version of veganism that says you can keep eating at McDonald's every day. But you can call yourself a vegan. Right?

Now, this is the first way we go wrong. We say, maybe there's some way I can escape this. Maybe there's some way I can negotiate my way into being liked and approved of, but also preaching the gospel.

The other way we go wrong is basically to respond with our own contempt. And this is the other point that we need to make. Just because the gospel is inherently offensive doesn't give Christians the right to be inherently offensive.

[11 : 37] And I would go so far as to say, and anybody who knows me knows I'm a fan of nuance, but it's kind of nice when we don't have to be nuanced. Here's a very un-nuanced phrase.

Christians should never, ever, under any circumstances, ever treat others with contempt. There's no exception to that. Christians should never, under any circumstances, treat others with contempt.

We should never treat other Christians with contempt. We should never treat other Christian denominations with contempt. We should never treat people who we perceive to be off the rails in their doctrine with contempt.

We should never treat the enemies of the church, people who mock and hate and heap contempt on Christians, we should never treat them with contempt. We should never, under any circumstances, respond with contempt.

1 Peter 2, verses 21 to 23, says this, What's that example you say?

[12 : 46] Verse 23, when he was reviled, he did not revile in return. When he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.

When we're treated with contempt, when we're mocked for our faith, when we're mocked for what we say, we entrust ourselves to the one who judges justly, and we go right on loving.

And we go right on preaching. Right? So this is the first response for us to reflect on. Contempt is inevitable. This is the default response of the world toward the Christian faith, and it's because of their hatred of Jesus.

Right? If that wasn't the case, the cross wouldn't have been necessary. Right? So that's the first thing. There's a second group of people, and the way they respond is slightly different.

Others said, it says, we will hear you again about this. They want to hear more. They want to talk more with Paul. They want time to consider the things that he said. And certainly, I want to make it clear, there are legitimate reasons why people may want to discuss this more and investigate the claims of Christianity and ask a lot more questions as they're deciding whether or not they want to believe the gospel.

[13 : 59] And I just want to be clear, I think that we should always ask lots of questions. You know, Christianity does not ask people to make a blind leap of faith. It's a faith that's actually based on evidence.

It's based on eyewitness testimony. There's an enormous amount of credibility to the claims behind the Christian faith. And it's had a rich intellectual history spanning the last 2,000 years.

And some of history's greatest thinkers have been Christians, people who never stopped asking questions. And so we need to make that clear. So it may be the case that some of these people genuinely want to know more.

They genuinely want to understand. They genuinely want to ask questions, right? But many commentators look at this, and because of the way it's structured, the way it's written, many commentators read this as a kind of form of procrastination.

In other words, these are people who are sort of giving the polite no. Right? They're putting off ever really deciding what they think about Paul's message.

[15 : 00] Well, let's keep talking, Paul. Interesting idea. I'll go home and think about it, right? But it's a form of procrastination. And we need to recognize this because there are a lot of reasons why it's really tempting to put off ever deciding what we believe about the gospel.

I mean, the first reason is a cultural reason. It's the fact that we live in a culture that idolizes open-mindedness. We live in a culture that says if you're sophisticated, if you're smart, you're going to always be open-minded, as though this is the only way to ever have any intellectual integrity, just remain perpetually open-minded about everything.

As long as you're asking questions, you're sophisticated. But if you land on any convictions, you're naive. And we need to remember the words of G.K. Chesterton, who said, an open mind is a lot like an open mouth.

It's meant to be shut again on something solid. And if you live your life and you're never prepared to ever close your mouth on anything solid, guess what's going to happen? You're going to starve to death.

And the same is true spiritually. The same is true with your mind. If you're always asking questions, but you're never prepared to receive an answer, to grab onto and hold onto a conviction, spiritually you're going to starve to death.

[16 : 18] But we live in a culture that very much says as long as you're open-minded, as long as nothing is settled for you, no settled convictions, you're more sophisticated. Also, there's a sort of a personal reason why people procrastinate.

I think a lot of us believe that as long as we don't have solid convictions, we can't be held accountable to those convictions. So over the years, just in our community, I've seen people who were steadfast in their faith.

I've seen people who were rock solid, who were leading in the church. They were deeply involved. All of a sudden, fade away. And they start saying, you know, well, I have tons of doubts.

I'm just not really sure what I believe anymore. And, you know, sometimes that's a genuine faith crisis. But more often, I've seen that this happens right around the time that they decided to move in with somebody.

Right? They don't want to leave the faith entirely, but they can't reconcile the faith with their lifestyle. And so the answer is to embrace a posture of sort of perpetual uncertainty.

[17 : 22] You know, so there's a number of incentives that we would have to procrastinate. Now, I'm not really sure what I believe about that doctrine. I'm not really sure what I think the Bible actually says about that.

And if that's accompanied with a genuine desire to explore that, then it might very well be honest doubt. And there's definitely a place for that. But more often than not, it's a perpetual uncertainty.

It's a perpetual agnosticism. Right? So what we need to understand is if we respond this way to the gospel, that we're actually misunderstanding the very nature of Paul's message.

Right? So, I mean, if you're at a wine tasting, and somebody says, you know, I really think that the Pinot is better than the Cab, you would say, okay, I'll take that into consideration. I'll think about that.

I'll see for myself. And let's talk more about that. Right? But if the bank calls and the bank says, you know, you're late on your mortgage payment, you're not going to say, well, thanks for the input. I'll take that into consideration.

[18 : 21] Let's talk more about that. Right? When it comes to the gospel, you need to be able to recognize that the essence of the message demands a decision. It demands a response.

Right? It's the kind of thing, you know, if somebody comes and says, there's a wildfire and it's headed for your house, you don't say, well, let's just keep talking. You know, you have to figure, you run out of your house and you look, and if you see the smoke and you see the fire and you see the helicopters in the sky, then you pack your stuff and you get out.

Or you decide that none of it's true and you do nothing. But the one thing you don't do with a situation like that is to just procrastinate about it. Right? And so we need to understand that procrastination is not the proper response to the kind of message that we're hearing from Paul.

Right now, God has fixed a day where He's going to judge the world and He's calling everyone to repent. This is your moment. This is the time. What's your decision? Right?

So we have contempt. Some people just respond with mockery. Some people respond with procrastination. And then we have this third response, the response of faith. It says in verse 34, but some men joined Him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite, and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

[19 : 36] And so some hear Paul's words, some hear Paul's message of the gospel, and they believe. The Greek word is pistouo, which can also be translated faith.

So this is the response of faith. And we're told of two converts by name. We hear about Dionysius the Areopagite, and being a member of the Areopagus was a very high honor.

You had to be invited to be a member of the Areopagus. You had to be really smart, really well respected. And so this is sort of like someone who's on the faculty of Harvard or Oxford. And then we hear about Damaris.

And what we know of the culture, she must have been a woman of relatively high standing to be allowed in the Areopagus. If she even was in the Areopagus, it could be that she heard Paul on an earlier day preaching in the marketplace at Athens.

But we have a sense that she's probably a woman of very high standing. And they're mentioned by name, which suggests that they're not only people of high standing in Athenian society, but they're probably people who were very highly regarded in the early church.

[20 : 39] The way this is written suggests that the original audience of Acts, they would have known exactly who these people were. Oh, that's where Damaris came to faith. Oh, that's where Dionysius came to faith. So they're mentioned by name.

And so then we have to ask, well, what does it mean to respond in faith? Christians often talk about faith, but what exactly does that mean? Modernism in the last century was highly rationalistic.

It very, very, very highly prized reason and rationality. And so definitions of faith that come out of modernism often sound like little more than intellectual agreement with a set of premises.

And that carried all the way into the 20th century. Somebody might make a decision for Christ as a child. But then that never really gets translated into their lives at all. You ask somebody, well, what makes you a Christian?

Well, I made a decision when I was 12. And that's the essence of my Christianity. It was an intellectual decision that I made. And then postmodernism comes along, and the pendulum sort of swings really far in the other direction.

[21 : 41] And so now the emphasis has moved away from rationalism, and it's moved entirely into the realm of the emotions, and the realm of feelings. So it depends on what feels right in a given moment.

So people say, well, I'm feeling my Christianity right now, but it could change tomorrow. It's just what feels right for me in the moment. And there are really deficiencies with both, right?

If your faith is purely intellectual, then it's going to remain cold and lifeless. It's never going to touch your heart. It's never going to change you. But if your faith is purely emotional, it's going to come and go with every change of mood.

It'll depend on your circumstances. It'll depend on how well you slept the night before. It'll depend on whether or not you had breakfast. Right? As C.S. Lewis says at one point, our moods will rebel against our true self.

He says, if you're a Christian for any length of time, you recognize that you have these experiences where your convictions are over here, and your mood, your feeling, you're just not feeling it. And they're at odds. I'm not feeling this at all.

[22 : 40] He says, we have to expect that as Christians. And so what he goes on to talk about is the fact that faith involves the intellect, and it involves the emotions. They deserve a place at the table. But faith is actually more than either of these.

And the best way to think about it is that faith is a habit. Faith is a habit that we cultivate. If you look at the metaphors used in the Bible for conversions, you see things like this.

A change of citizenship. Or a marriage. Or an adoption. Right? So all of these involve both an initial decisive moment of commitment, but then that is followed by a lifestyle filled with habits that reflect that commitment, that deepen that commitment.

And so marriage is a great example of this, right? You fall in love with someone, and you decide to commit yourself. There's emotion involved. There's an intellectual decision involved.

You decide to commit yourself. You say, this person is worth it. I want to give the rest of my life to this person. And then you have the wedding. But then after the wedding, marriage involves an entire lifestyle that's meant to uphold and cultivate that intimacy and that connection.

[23 : 54] So it doesn't work in marriage for you to say, I'm just not feeling married today. You know, just this weekend, I'm just not feeling very married to you. So I'm going to go do my thing, and I'll see you Monday.

That doesn't work for marriage, because your entire life is meant to align with that commitment that you made, right? And so you cultivate habits that continually renew the vows that you made to one another over and over and over every single day.

One that has been a longstanding habit for my wife and I, Laura and I, is no matter what's going on, no matter how busy the day is, we have three kids, but we try, after the kids go down, even if we're really tired, we try to at least get 20 or 30 minutes where the devices are off, the TVs are off, it's as quiet as we can make it in a house of three kids, where we just make eye contact and we just have a conversation.

And we just try to really talk to each other. How are you doing? How are you doing? We try to talk about emotions. I'll give you a bit of advice. What we used to do is to talk a lot about the content of our day, what we did, who said what.

We realize that there's a lot more that can happen with a lot less time if you focus on your feelings. You know, I was really feeling insecure today. A person said something and it really made me feel small.

[25 : 14] When you focus on the feelings, you don't really need a whole lot of time to have a lot of connection. And so this habit over the years has deepened and strengthened our connection.

It's deepened and strengthened our intimacy. And that's the kind of thing that we need to think about when we think about faith. It's the same exact thing with faith. You know, faith is not just a decision that we made at one point in our lives.

And it's not just a feeling that you may have and you may not have. Faith is something that has to be fed continually, like intimacy in a marriage. Now, somebody might object and say, well, the way you're talking about this is kind of weird.

I mean, I always thought faith was a gift. And isn't faith something that God gives you? And I would say, absolutely. God gifts us with the capacity for faith. And some people may have a much larger capacity than other people.

God gives us the capacity. But it's still something that we need to cultivate it. We need to put it into practice. We need to have habits that feed it and strengthen it, right?

[26 : 15] And so we have to continually build our connection with God through things like reading Scripture or prayer or worshiping together. And this is partly why faith is something that by design, it can't be cultivated alone.

Faith requires the support of a community. And there is no doubt that Damaris and Dionysius joined the local church. I mean, number one, in this day and age, it would have been utterly inconceivable for anyone to come to faith and not join the local church.

So it's absolutely certain that they would have done that. And then on top of that, the fourth century historian Eusebius actually writes that Dionysius went on to become the first bishop of the church in Athens.

You know, I can't prove it, but I have a hunch that the majority of people over the years whom I have seen leave the faith, I've seen people come to faith, but I've also, very sadly, I've seen people leave the faith, leave the church.

I can't prove it, but I have a hunch that the majority of those people who have left the faith didn't leave the faith because of some clear intellectual break with the faith.

[27 : 22] They didn't have a moment where like, you know, I just, for these reasons, I don't believe this anymore. They simply allowed their faith to starve to death. They simply did nothing.

They never fed their faith. And it just faded and faded and withered and died. And this is the thing that we need to recognize. If you don't feed your faith, it will wither and die. Simple as that.

And this is why, starting in the season of Advent, starting next week, we at Church of the Advent are going to be embarking on a journey, sort of coming out of all the tumult of this past year, recognizing that there have been so many aspects of life that have been disoriented.

We've recognized, and as we've prayed, we've felt the Spirit prompting us, we need to go back to the foundations of our faith. We need to root ourselves in the things that give life to Christians.

And so we're going to be embarking on a journey at Church of the Advent, and one of the things that we'll be doing right away is you'll be hearing about a prayer guide, and you'll be receiving one of these, that Pastor Kevin worked on and adapted for our use.

[28 : 31] But this prayer guide is meant to be one of the ways that we encourage everybody to root themselves down in these habits that feed our faith. And my personal heartfelt goal for our community, and the thing that I sort of come back to when I pray again and again and again about our church, is that I would love to see the day where every member and regular attender of Church of the Advent is reading their Bible and praying every day.

That that is the norm. That that's the norm. Right? In order to be the kind of gospel-proclaiming, justice-seeking, holy-fear-it-spilled, God-glorifying community that God has called us to be in the city, we need a well-fed faith.

We can't do it without that. Right? So these are the three responses that Paul gets in Athens, just to kind of pull all this together. Contempt, procrastination, and then faith.

And listen, for those of us who are Christians, who are hoping to see the culture renewed, I think this passage does a really good job of helping to set and manage our expectations. There will always be those who mock.

There will always be those who procrastinate. But then there will always be people like Dionysius or Damaris. People whom we might least expect whose hearts are being opened by the ministry of the Holy Spirit in ways that maybe aren't even apparent on the surface.

[30 : 00] And you won't know that until you preach the gospel. And then you recognize that you have just stepped into a process that's been happening spiritually maybe for years.

And you just have the honor of being there in the right time and the right place. And that's really what successful evangelism is. It's I just happen to be here in the right time and the right place experiencing the fruit of a work that God begun in a person years ago.

And I just happen to be here for it. And if Paul had quit because of the mockery, if he had been intimidated, if he had allowed himself to be shut down, if he had quit because of the procrastination, these people will never make up their minds.

He would have missed out on the opportunity to see these people come to faith. And this is perhaps the best point to end on as we think about the gospel and culture.

Our calling is to be faithful with all that God has entrusted to us. But we must always trust him for the outcome. Let's pray.

[30 : 57] Lord, we thank you for your word and we thank you for your ministry in our midst. And we thank you that even though the kingdom is not often something that arrives with a big bang and an explosion and lights, that your kingdom advances one person at a time, one heart at a time, one soul at a time.

Like leaven, it spreads throughout the world. The kingdom is growing up in our midst, Lord. I pray that you would enable us to have this kind of spiritual lens through which we view the culture around us.

And we pray that we might have the courage, that we might have the kind of well-fed faith that enables us to respond in faith and to be part of what you're doing here. And yet we pray always that we would trust you and rely on you and depend on you to do the things only you can do.

So that this might not be to our glory, but for your everlasting and eternal glory, Lord. And it's in the name of your glorious son, Jesus, that we pray, amen.