

30th March 2025 - See differently, stand up, speak in

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[0 : 00] Thank you, May. Do have your Bibles open at Acts 17 so you can follow along as we try and work through this passage together.! Let me just pray before we do that. Lord God, we thank you. We thank you so much that we have peace and freedom in our country. We thank you, Lord, for the many blessings that we've received from your hands, things we couldn't have given ourselves.

But we thank you beyond that, Lord, for this precious gift of your message to us, which is a light to our paths, which is the hope of the world. We pray, Lord, that you would help us to understand it, to love it, to share it. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Amen. I wonder if anything has upset you this week. Anything upset you this week? Maybe you've just sort of stayed cool as a cucumber the entire week. If you have done that, please can you come and tell me your secret? Because I would love to know it.

Maybe it wasn't this week. Maybe it wasn't this week. Just think of the last thing that really upsets you. When do we get upset? I think we get the most upset when something that isn't right happens to someone that we really care about. Right? Maybe ourselves. Maybe somebody else.

Maybe ourselves. Now, if an accident happened to someone that is very close to you that you really loved. That is a different kettle of fish. That can floor us, can't it? That's natural.

[1 : 51] How we react. How we react tells us something about the depth of our relationship with that person, doesn't it? Now, if you're in that situation and that happens to somebody that you know, especially somebody that you love, then you do something about it, don't you?

You turn that upset into action and you speak for that person. That's what we do. And we don't worry about, you know, oh no, am I going to make it to the office on time or what about if this happens?

In that moment, if you care about somebody and something happens that isn't right and you're going to stand up and speak for them, you don't worry about the consequences. You just do what needs to be done. I'd love you to hold that thought about how we feel when something happens to somebody that we love.

And just try and think, how does that link in with what we are talking about today from Acts 17? Hopefully it will be clear by the end. If it isn't, then I've done a bad job. Please come and ask me at the end and I'll try and explain it more simply.

So we're looking at Acts, where we've been in the past and we've come back to, haven't we? And we're looking particularly at how Paul and the other followers of Jesus talk about the good news.

[3 : 09] The good news that Jesus came to earth, lived to show us the way, died to pay the penalty for our sins, and rose again to assure us that we can have eternal life.

We need to hear that good news, don't we? We need to hear it today. We need to hear it every day. And we also need to learn it. We need to learn it so that we can share it with other people.

And that's what we're trying to do from Acts. And you might be thinking, how on earth is this speech that Paul gave in ancient Greece to a bunch of philosophers in the middle of a room that I really know nothing about, relevant to me today?

How can I connect with this? Well, how about this? Epicureans, one of the groups in the Areopagus, basically believed in living for the moment. So if they were going to go around waving placards, then what would be written on there would be, you only live once.

Sound familiar? Or how about this? There is a YouTube channel, which you can sign up to, I don't recommend it, called The Daily Stoic. 1.22 million subscribers.

[4 : 21] Stoicism is having a massive revival in our time. It speaks particularly to men. Stoicism is that thing about the stiff upper lip. How are you? Well, I'm basically always fine. It doesn't matter what's going on. When the going gets really tough, I just get tougher.

That's Stoicism. Not really expressed that way anymore. It's probably expressed like this instead. Things get bad, I'll beast my way through it. That's how it's expressed.

Which is fine, of course, until it isn't. And God has a better way for us. First of all, I think the Lord Jesus would love us to see things differently.

Learn to see things differently. Let's look at verse 16, right at the very beginning. While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.

Don't know if you've ever been to Athens. I think if we wander around Athens, you'd probably think, wow, look at this architecture. Look at the beauty. Look at the history.

[5 : 30] Paul, when he wanders around Athens, he does not admire the classical architecture. He sees temples. He sees spiritual outposts. And when he goes around, he doesn't just see incredible sculptures of the highest quality, fine art.

What he sees is idols. Cruel captors. That's what he sees. And when he sees the Greek people, he doesn't see intellectuals wandering around in togas.

You know, the smartest minds in the land. He sees people enslaved to ideas which will die with them. That's what he sees. That's a different way of seeing, isn't it?

See through open eyes. That's what Paul does. I wonder, do we see like that? It doesn't mean we see demons behind every hedge.

That's just a bit weird, isn't it? It does mean, though, that when someone says, for instance, that they would rather spend their Sunday doing sport or watching sport than being with their saviour or being part of a mission that will change the world for better forever, that we don't just say, well, reasonable option.

[6 : 48] Fair enough. And you affirm them. Fair enough. You instead think, what is it that is holding this person's heart captive? And how can I show them what real freedom looks like?

Because that's what idols are. They are things that hold people's hearts captive. Sometimes it's a good thing. You've heard this before. It's a good thing that we've turned into a God thing.

Sometimes it's not a good thing.

Power. Drugs. Alcohol. Whatever it may be. And Paul looks around and he sees them everywhere. I think if you translated it into a modern image, this is the kind of thing he'd see. Let's dig a little bit deeper.

What is this idol stuff? What do we really mean when we talk about an idol in the Bible? Well, we all kind of build our lives around things that we believe in, right?

[7 : 52] Things we believe are the reason that we're on this planet. Things that we desperately want. Things like love or success or fame or health or free time.

Those are the sorts of things that we pursue and we daydream about it in our spare moments. And we plot how we're going to get it and we work for it and we hope for it. That's worship.

That's what we're doing. What does that describe in your life? Whatever that describes in your life, that is your idol.

Here's the idol detector phrase. It's coming up. You got this? If only I could have more... Then my life would be worth living and I would be happy.

Whatever that... is, that's your idol. Whatever that thing is, that's up here. Okay?

[9 : 00] That is the God that you're worshipping. Here's another way to think about it. All the things that we think are important, maybe some of those I just listed. Family, career, love, sanctity of life, redistribution of wealth.

Whatever it is that really gets you going. Who gets to put those things in order of priority? Because whoever gets to put those things in order of priority in your life, that is your idol.

We need to see things differently. Don't we? Why? Why do we need to see things differently? I think we need to see things differently, Jesus would tell us, so that we can be deeply troubled here by people worshipping those things.

Let's look at verse 16. Paul was waiting for them in Athens. He was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. Deeply troubled. He was moved.

Do you remember that question we asked at the beginning? What has really upset you this week? Or maybe recently? If we really, really love Jesus, we will be deeply troubled that people are

worshipping other things.

[10:19] If we really love others, we will be deeply troubled that they are held captive by those things. Those things that cannot give them life.

Are we? Are we deeply troubled when we see those sorts of things? Or are we basically okay with it? John Stott says, we do not speak as Paul spoke because we do not feel as Paul felt.

See, Paul knows what it says in Isaiah 42, verse 8. He knew his Bible, didn't he? It's the Lord speaking.

I am the Lord. That is my name. I will not yield my glory to another or my praise to idols. So what does he do about it?

Verse 18 of our passage. A little way down, he seems to be advocating foreign gods. They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.

[11:22] And that is the key. I can see differently and I can really feel that way if I let the good news of Jesus and his resurrection and God's glory capture my heart and my mind.

That's how we do it. I think sometimes that I subconsciously treat my relationship with Jesus, my spiritual life, the truth, a bit like a tanning shop.

Bear with me. I'll pop into church on Sunday and I'll get a little top up and then I'll go back out into the dark, cold world but it's okay because I feel a little bit browner than when I went in.

Do you ever do that, do you think? I don't mean go to the tanning shop. I mean treat your spiritual life, your walk with the Lord, the truth like that. That's not Paul, is it?

Paul's living in the sunshine. He's not popping into the tanning shop every now and again. God's light shows him the truth about the world around him, the people in it, and warms up his own world all at once.

[12:34] That's what it's supposed to be like, living in the sunshine, to see things differently. So we need to see things differently.

What does Paul do about all of this? We said if you really care, you do something. Right? What does Paul do? He doesn't hide that light. He lets it shine into the light of others, doesn't he?

Starting with verse 17, so he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. In other words, he discusses with anyone, anywhere, wherever he can find them, whoever is willing to listen, he reasons with them.

That's why we have rational discussions with people about Christianity. The fact that Christianity is truthful and reasonable. That's why we have what's called apologetics.

So we talk about the issues as well as talking about Bible passages. That's why we have Jesus the evidence happening here. But that reasoning is only the beginning of standing up and speaking in, because that's what we're supposed to do.

[13:43] Stand up and speak in. Let's follow it through to verse 22. Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said, there you go, he stood up, he said, people of Athens, I see that in every way you are very religious.

And immediately we think, well, that's no good, is it? Because when we look around, we see immediately that people are not very religious. Are they?

I think they are. Religion is just what you do about what you believe. That is all it is.

So if you believe in social justice, you sign petitions and you're probably a bit of an activist. Right? If you trust in therapy, you might train to be a counsellor. If you believe in God, you will go to church.

If you have faith in Man United, you might be an atheist by now. That's all it is. It is what you do about what you believe. And Paul picks up on those expressions of faith, those religious expressions, and he says, let's talk.

[14:57] Let's talk. And it is talk. We must speak. You ever heard that expression, a picture is worth a thousand words? No, it isn't.

At least, not when it comes to God's word. That's why God didn't give us a picture book. That's why Jesus is called the word and not the walking illustration.

we must stand up and speak in. Here's something else we often hear, I think, in Christian circles.

We've just got to love them into the kingdom. Of course, we have to love people.

That's what Jesus did. But our love gives us an opportunity to speak. Doesn't it? And that's exactly God's pattern. God creates.

That's an act of love. And then he instructs us. He loves us. Then he speaks to us. It's exactly what Jesus does.

[15 : 56] He comes near to us. Then he teaches us. So we must speak. It's love and truth. Because, of course, it's the truth, God's truth, that sets us free.

Not our acts of love towards people. valuable, important though they are. Here's Romans 10, verse 14.

How can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone explaining to them? We have to stand up and speak in.

Let's come back to standing up for a minute. So Paul stands up in the Areopagus. You notice what he doesn't do? He doesn't stand up and walk out. That's, I think, how we often think of it in our world today.

My loudest message is by voting with my feet. That's protest, isn't it? Stand up and walk out. Paul doesn't do that. He stands up in the Areopagus and he speaks in.

[17 : 01] That's different. That's not protest. That's proclamation, isn't it? That is God's way. Go in.

Stand up. Stand up. Speak in. Not stand up, walk out, protest. What does that look like? Well, I think the Areopagus is probably a little bit like the House of Commons today.

Maybe a bit like a university as well. I think it looks a little bit like this. This is Danny Kruger. He's an MP. This is him speaking in Parliament against the Assisted Suicide Bill.

That's what it looks like to stand up and speak in. Hasn't left the system, has he? He's not haranguing. He's standing up. He's speaking in.

How do you think Paul felt? He's looking at this guy. How do you think Paul felt when he stood up and spoke in the Areopagus?

[18 : 02] Do you know what? I don't think he thought, do you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to give a speech so good they're going to have to put it in the Bible. I think he was probably nervous. I think he was probably worried about his ability to say anything coherently because actually he wasn't known for his speaking gifts.

I think he probably remembered Jesus' promise. Don't worry about what you will say. The Holy Spirit will give you the words. I think he probably remembered what the leaders of his people had said about the disciples who took note that these men, inarticulate, inexperienced fishermen, had been with Jesus.

That's all we need. We need to be with Jesus. We need the help of the Holy Spirit. Then we can stand up and speak in. Might never be in Parliament, although I would love it if somebody here went into Parliament.

But there comes a point, whether it's in a private relationship or a public setting or a place of work, where we need to stand up and speak in.

Not protest. Stand up and speak in. Even if we're scared. Some of you have sat in these seats for years and you have never stood up to confess your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

[19 : 31] Maybe because you're worried about what it will cost you. Might have to get down off the pedestal yourself. But folks, if that is you, this is not the unknown God, is it?

You know this God. When are you going to give yourself to the Lord of life? how much longer?

So we need to stand up and speak in. What does Paul say, though? This is our last section. Paul speaks of a God who gives life.

He says, you are worshipping things that are made instead of the maker. That's what everybody who worships idols does. Even if you're standing on the pedestal, you are worshipping something that God made instead of the maker.

You are worshipping things that he has given life instead of the giver of life. Speak of a God who gives life.

[20 : 46] God isn't made up. He makes us. We don't get to create God because then he's just human. God doesn't need us. We need him because he is the one who gives life.

And that is the truth. The only thing that is worth putting on that pedestal, the only one who is worthy of being on that pedestal is the one who can give you life.

Anything less than that is just a counterfeit. And amazingly, Paul says, that God is near us even if we're far from him.

Isn't that amazing? How God can be near us even if we're far from him. He's near us just like a TV is near a power socket. The maker of all is near you.

And do you know what? More than that, Paul says, God has ordered things in history. God has put you in this time and this place so that you might reach out to him.

[21 : 55] Which means your life is not an accident of history or biology. It is deliberate. God has put you here deliberately so that you can touch his hand. God has put you in this time.

How do we know that? Because Jesus came. Jesus comes, doesn't he, to show us that God is near. To show us the way. To die so that our sins do not stand in the way between us and him any longer.

To rise to show that God is the giver of life forever. And if there is a resurrection, that means that any lifestyle or philosophy, stoic epicure, whatever it is, any lifestyle or philosophy that ends in death is not worth it.

And Paul says, God has mercifully and patiently waited while people have ignored him and lived in ignorance. but now he calls you to repent.

That means turn away from your sin and trust in Jesus' work on your behalf. Because God will not let injustice continue forever.

[23 : 11] Paul says that too. He will not leave counterfeits on his throne. One day he will judge the world through Jesus. which means that it is time to stand up, isn't it?

Listen, there is no other message like this. Other gods are not like Jesus Christ. They are not more or less the same. And do we know that? Paul has just explained it for us.

Do we know how our God is different? Could we explain it to someone else if they asked? Do we know it as well as we know our pin codes so that it becomes muscle memory? You know, somebody did that once.

They wrote down their pin code. Don't do that. And then for every number of their pin codes, they just wrote five words to help them explain God's news simply to a friend.

And then every time they put in the pin code, it was there. Speak of a God who gives life. I have this new to you.

[24 : 16] You've never heard this before. Isn't it amazing? A life-giving God who draws near to you dies for you, gives himself for you, gives you life, patiently endures your rebellion, calls you home to himself, tells you this right now so that you will reach out to him.

we need to learn from Jesus to see spiritually, to stand up and to speak in. And what will the reaction be?

Well, like it says at the end of our passage, some people will sneer and scoff and mock. There will be some who respond with curiosity and some will respond with joyful faith. We've seen that all the way through the Acts and we see that all the way through history, don't we?

But if we do that, if we stand up, speak, see differently, we will have reasoned, we will have been courageous and kind and then we will be resurrected. That is the hope. Those of us who let our desires and feelings lead like the Epicureans I think are a bit like this, a bit like water.

It's very flexible under pressure, isn't it? So life is likely to feel easy if you go with that whatever I feel in the moment thing. like the Epicureans.

[25 : 32] But water never breaks the hold of gravity and in the end it all just leaks away. Stoics I think are a bit like this.

Strong, like a bit of two by four, but if you bend it hard enough it will break, won't it? If you soak it in water for long enough it will rot. If you hold a flame to it for long enough it will catch a light and burn away.

In Christ you are strong like a ray of light from the sun. What happens when someone breaks up a ray of light from the sun?

This is what happens. It will split into all the colours of the rainbow and it will still bring light in the darkness. So what do we have to fear when God calls us to see differently and stand up and speak of him?

This is what we're like, church. This is what the people of God are like so we can take heart and we can learn from Jesus how to see differently and stand up and speak in with the good news of a God who gives life to all who will receive it.

[26 : 46] Let me pray. Lord God, we thank you for Paul. We know although he's written about in the Bible lots of times, he was an ordinary human being.

We thank you for what he shows us, what you are showing us through him. We thank you for good news that Jesus died and rose again. We thank you that it is for all people, for all who will come.

Lord God, will you have this good news and your glory grip our hearts and minds so that we respond to you, so that we come to you in faith, so that we have courage to share that with other people.
We pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.