

Paul's Sermon in Athens

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[0 : 00] Welcome here for this Sunday, July 13th, 2025. My name's Kent Dixon, and it's my joy to be the pastor here.! I feel like I need to say this again. Why do I say my name? You know my name. Because I post the sermons online, and I post them to a podcast that we have, so people may be listening who have no idea who I am, or who we are.

So I like to mention that, as well as the date, so people have kind of a touch point of where they're at. This morning, we're continuing in our ongoing sermon series, Acts to All the World, and we're pausing this series after this Sunday until I'm back.

But through this series, you know, we've been exploring the New Testament book of Acts. I talked to a friend of mine who's a pastor. His mother-in-law is not well, and she lives in Ontario.

So his wife has been with her mom in Ontario, and Brian, my friend, left Tuesday to fly to Ontario, got back home Friday night.

And I texted him, and I said, hey, how did it go? Safe travels, everything good? And he said, yeah. And he said, now I just have a sermon to write. And I said, gulp. And I said, for Sunday? And he said, yep. And I said, well, I know you're not an advanced planner like I am, but I'll be praying for you.

[1 : 21] So I checked in with him yesterday morning, and I thought, hmm, how is Brian doing? And he said, well, he said, I've got a good start. Checked in again at two, and he said, yeah, it's going okay. Long way to go yet. Checked in again last night.

And he said, well, I'm just kind of tidying things up now, and then I have to write my conclusion. This was about eight, so that's seven his time, but whew. So I believe preaching and sermons are important.

Maybe that seems like an obvious thing for me to say for a pastor who preaches almost every Sunday, but why do I think that? Why do I think that sermons and preaching are important?

Well, I feel really strongly, first of all, some of you know this about me, that a sermon shouldn't simply be like a spiritual TED Talk. It shouldn't be a short, relatively generic and uplifting message. Yay, you, you're doing a good job. That maybe then has a verse or two tacked in somewhere, tacked on at the end, to make it feel a bit more like a sermon. Maybe something that then feels like it fits a church setting a little bit better.

[2 : 34] Something that seeks to make you feel not too guilty, not wanting to challenge you or make you think too much, but more of a short and sweet pat on the head.

Something that then leaves you smiling and sends you on your way. Friends, that really shouldn't ever be the point. Preaching and sermons should be lots of things.

Let me go through them a little bit. Preaching and sermons should be instructive. They should teach us about concepts and truth from Scripture that are important, and more than that, can be applied to our lives today.

Preaching and sermons should reinforce. They should remind us of things that we may already know, but things that are important for us to remember and reflect on.

Preaching and sermons should challenge us. They should make us think or rethink assumptions or preconceived notions that we've had about things, causing us to view or think about something in a new way, or to even correct our views that we've held.

[3 : 46] Preaching and sermons should convict. Not in a sense of making us feel guilty or like we're bad people, but in recognizing our sinful or me-first behavior in our lives.

Reminding us of our desperate need for a Savior. One who makes a way for us to be forgiven and restored into a healthy relationship with God. Speaking of a Savior.

Preaching and sermons should always point us in some way to Jesus. Make the gospel message clear, at least in some way. Read a quote from a well-known pastor.

I won't share his name. It's not me. But he said, if a sermon doesn't have any connection to Jesus, it is worthless. Doesn't that echo back to the good talk that I talked about a moment ago?

They need to point us to Jesus. Preaching must point us to Jesus, at least in some way. So fortunately, the book of Acts gives us lots of examples of solid gospel preaching.

[4 : 59] Peter preached amazing gospel-grounded sermons in Acts 2, in Acts 3, Acts 10. Philip preached one in Acts 8.

And Paul preached one in Acts 13. So far, the gospel sermons we've examined in Acts have been sermons that were presented to people who already believed in God.

Do you recognize that? People, though, who did not know Jesus personally. Jews and Samaritans. Or Gentiles like Cornelius.

These were God-fearing people who just didn't know Jesus yet. Our sermon this morning is titled Paul's sermon in Athens. And now we have an opportunity this morning to consider a sermon that was delivered to pagan philosophers who were actually polytheists, people who believed in or worshipped more than one God.

This sermon happened during Paul's second missionary journey in the city of Athens in Greece. Our passage for this morning is found in Acts 17, verses 16 to 34.

[6 : 14] Acts 17, verses 16 to 34. So go ahead and look that up in your Bible, and I'll read it for us as well. While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.

So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day to day with those who happened to be there. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him.

Some of them asked, what is this pabler trying to say? Others remarked, he seems to be advocating foreign gods. They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.

Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where he said to them, may we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?

You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean. All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.

[7 : 25] Paul then stood up at the meeting of the Areopagus and said, People of Athens, I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walk around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription, To an unknown God.

So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship. And this is what I'm going to proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands.

And he is not served by human hands as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else.

From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth, and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands.

God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being.

[8 : 34] As some of your own poets have said, we are his offspring. Therefore, since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image made by human design and skill.

In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead. When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, we want to hear you again on this subject.

At that, Paul left the council. Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

This morning we're going to consider the setting of the sermon, this sermon to a pagan audience, as well as the sermon itself. And then we're going to consider some observations from the sermon, some observations from the reactions to it, and the ways people responded.

[9 : 51] So, Paul has just arrived in Athens, we understand from this passage, a city that was well known as a center of both learning and artistry, but also for its idol worship.

It was known for it. And the predominance of idol worship bothered Paul. We learned that right away. And it bothered him so much that he began to preach every chance he got.

And as I thought about that, I thought, as opposed to what? Paul always preached all the time. Except when he was asleep, I guess. So where did he start?

Any guesses? Where would he have started? Synagogue. Right. So as usual, Paul began preaching to Jews and God-fearing Greeks in the synagogue.

But he also, we read, preached in public spaces. So he was out in the market. He was out in the streets. He was sharing with whoever happened to be there. And eventually, we learned that he caught the attention of some Stoic and Epicurean philosophers.

[10 : 57] Now, unless you're a philosophy major, I was not. I did a little digging. Saved you the trouble. Stoics believe, and there are still Stoic philosophers and Epicurean philosophers to this day.

People ascribe to those views. They believe that virtue, wisdom, justice, courage, temperance, is the only true good, and thereby the foundation for a happy life.

So virtue leads to a happy life and true goodness. Epicureans are devoted to pleasure, comfort, high living.

So they're hedonistic more so, with a pinch of style thrown in for good measure. So they were about appearances and comfort. So some philosophers saw Paul as a person who was proclaiming foreign gods.

We learned that. Because he was preaching about Jesus. Because he was preaching about Jesus' resurrection. Those were flags for them that, wait a minute, he's talking about something we don't know.

[12 : 00] So they brought him to a place called the Areopagus. And if you ever, it's a beautiful sight. It's all white rock. And it is high and visible from a wide, wide distance.

It's also known as the Hill of Aries, or more familiar to some of you maybe, Mars Hill, it was also called. It's a rocky hill about 370 feet high.

And it's not far from the Acropolis and the Agora, the marketplace in Athens. And they wanted Paul to come to this high-profile place.

The Areopagus was a place where the Athenians and visitors gathered to hear and discuss new ideas. This was a center for knowledge and discussion. And in not having heard about the doctrine of Christ, they wanted to know more.

So knowing Paul and his enthusiasm for jumping on any and every opportunity to preach about Jesus, he was more than happy to do this, to accept this invitation.

[13 : 05] So what did he say? Well, Paul focused in right away on the idea that Jesus and the Christian God represented the God they did not know.

So he recognized that they had all these gods, these pantheons of multiple gods that they prayed to for different things. But at the same time, did you catch that? They're also thinking, just in case, there might be a God we don't know.

So we're going to hedge our bets a little bit and cover all the bases. So Paul had seen this altar to a God that was not named, to the unknown God.

So the people were clearly devout in the way and the things that they worship. Paul tells them, he commends them for their religiousness, essentially.

And they were so devout in what they were doing that they even sought, as I said, to worship a God they didn't know. So that's pretty intelligent to say, okay, we've got all of this and we've got this covered and we understand, we pray to them, we sacrifice to them.

[14 : 09] But also, what if there's someone else? So what a perfect opportunity for Paul then to give this message about the true God that they didn't yet know.

In his book, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World*, author and preacher John Stott, that name might be familiar to you, helpfully breaks down the five main points of Paul's sermon for us.

So Paul's first point was that God is the creator of the universe. As Paul says in Acts 17, 24, that's where he says it, God is creator.

God made the world, Paul says. He is the Lord of heaven and earth. And he doesn't live in temples made by human hands. Ultimately, Paul also says God does not need anything from us.

Paul's second point in identifying God is that he is the sustainer of life. Paul says that in Acts 17, 25. Paul gives the audience, and so all of us, really, an identifier that God gives breath.

[15:19] And everything anyone needs, it comes from God. And then he also says that God doesn't need our worship. God doesn't need anything from us.

He is self-existing and self-sustaining. Paul's third point is that God is the ruler of all nations. As Paul says, Acts 17, 26, and 27, that's where he points that out.

God has created every nation and determined their rise and fall. I love that concept, right? God knows, right? God knows when every political ruling system will last.

God knows when they will rise. God knows when they will end. He knows all of that. He also knows their literal political boundaries, but as well as their borders and their geographical boundaries, right?

God knows all of these things. Everything has been created and designed by God, Paul points out, to prompt men to seek him, right?

[16:23] How often have you been out in nature and thought to yourself, I mean, you believe in God, right? But how often have you been out in nature and gone, how is there any way to think otherwise?

Anyway, we went for a long walk in the River Valley on Friday afternoon. My hip is still complaining. But we went for a long walk, and we went down to the river. And I just took in a deep breath of air, and I thought, you all know me well enough to know that's where my batteries charge, right?

In nature. And so to be in that place, to hear the water, hear the wind in the trees, that's God all around us, all around us.

Everything has been created and designed by him to prompt men to seek him, right? We see that. Hearing a baby cry, sometimes it makes your hair stand on the back of your neck.

But I mean, life itself speaks to God. And the fact that he is never far from us, Paul points out as well. Paul's fourth point in identifying God is that God is the father of mankind, of humanity.

[17:30] Paul says that in Acts 17, 28, and 29. We come from God. That's where our origin point is. And in him we live and move and have our very being.

Our existence is within and under God's will. So recognizing that, we shouldn't in any way think that God is similar to an idol, right?

Similar to any sort of handmade object. That people might worship. Something made of gold or silver or stone, Paul points out. His fifth point is that God is the judge of the world.

As Paul says in Acts 17, 30 and 31, that's where he mentions this. While God may have tolerated or overlooked human ignorance in the past, did you catch that?

Paul makes it clear that this is no longer the case. I wonder how God is looking at us right now. Is he tolerating? I believe he's beckoning.

[18:33] I believe the time may be running short, but that doesn't mean God's love and God's grace isn't still welcoming us. God is now, as Paul says, commanding everyone everywhere to repent.

Why? Because Paul says there's a judgment that's coming. God will judge the world in righteousness. Remember that judgment.

We've talked about it in the past. That judgment is not human judgment, right? That justice is not human justice that often borders on revenge. God will judge the world through Jesus Christ, Paul says.

And Paul points then to Jesus' resurrection as proof that God's judgment is coming. Jesus, the Son of God, was raised by God to be the mediator, to be the one who will bridge the gap between humanity and God, who brings salvation as a possibility for us.

So what was the response? Well, very interesting. Paul mentions that the resurrection, when he mentions that, really got the attention of his audience, right?

[19:46] Some of them mocked the concept. So to many at that time, the idea of a bodily, physical resurrection would have been crazy, foolishness.

Made no sense to them at all. Which is interesting, because the same people who believe in a range of gods, for every need that you could possibly have, are resistant to the idea of a bodily resurrection.

Very interesting. But then we also learn that more people that listened were respectful. They were polite. And they also asked Paul to tell them more about that in the future.

They wanted to hear more about this. We learn in Acts 17, 33 and 34 that as Paul left, some joined him. Some followed him.

And they believed, it says. Now, I'm not sure why. We don't really know why. But there are two people specifically named. Dionysius, the Areopagite.

[20 : 44] Say that ten times fast. And a woman named Damaris. They're mentioned by name. But then also we learn that other people followed and believed Paul as well.

So I said that as we began this morning, that we're considering the setting of the sermon and the sermon itself. So now let's consider some of the things that we can learn and observe from the story.

Well, some observations to begin with. Paul was sensitive and tactful with his audience. Did you catch that? But he wasn't beating them over the head with something that they didn't know.

He took the time and was compassionate and read the crowd. He got a sense of who they were, what they were about, what they knew. So we shouldn't hesitate to acknowledge someone's devotion.

Someone who's seeking after God. Even if it's misguided, we have the opportunity then to still point out who God is. To direct them.

[21 : 47] To correct them. And also, I believe, we need to be open to being corrected ourselves. Right? So Paul began with their present spiritual condition in mind.

He took the time, as I said, to figure that out. Paul's audience already believed in supreme beings. Paul noted that. But they just didn't know the true God yet.

It's interesting that when he spoke to a Jewish audience, Paul began with the law. Right? He began with what they knew. And then with the Gentiles, he began with the nature of God.

So we should also, when we're trying to share the gospel with someone, trying to share our faith with someone, it's important for us to recognize the current state that they are in.

And not just pounce on them with what we want to get across. When we take the time to get a sense of where someone is at right now, it better leads us into conversations with them about Jesus.

[22 : 46] So Paul made use, maybe you noticed, maybe you didn't, Paul made use of an accepted authority when he was talking to them. So in his message, Paul quotes from a familiar poet.

A poet that would have been familiar to his audience when he's making his point. So when appropriate, I think, we can also appeal to a source that someone else might know already.

Someone else might know and respect a source, and we can use that as a way to communicate. A way to bridge a gap in relationship into talking about Jesus.

Some more observations. Paul led his audience to the main themes of the gospel, and he didn't even take that long to get there. He talked openly about repentance.

He talked about God's judgment. He talked about Jesus and his resurrection. Paul has modeled for us there that the ultimate goal in preaching should always be the gospel message.

[23 : 48] Now, it's not like every Sunday that I preach, I need to talk about, well, remember, Jesus was born, Jesus died, now everybody come forward and receive Jesus. No, you don't need to have an altar call every Sunday.

But at the same time, if I don't connect you somehow to God's truth, God's love, Christ's sacrifice, the possibility of redemption in your life, restoration in your life through Jesus.

I'm missing the point. Paul used the resurrection of Jesus as the ultimate proof for pointing people to God. By raising Jesus, God has given the assurance of coming judgment.

Right? We know that is coming. And then also, if Jesus truly did rise from the dead, it's proof of a lot of things. The existence of God.

The truthfulness and trustworthiness of all the claims God has made. The resurrection of Jesus also emphasizes and highlights the reality of sin.

[24 : 52] The judgment that is coming for that. And also the need to repent. That's why it's so important for us to develop a strong apologetic.

A strong way of having a conversation with someone about our faith. And then a defense as well for the resurrection of Jesus. Because the resurrection of Jesus Christ, if it did not happen, what have we heard over and over?

Our faith is in vain. Did Jesus rise from the dead? Yes? There's the answer. Say it again.

Did Jesus rise from the dead? Amen. A couple amens. Excellent. So, some observations about the response to Paul's message.

Because this is important to unpack as well. People responded to Paul's message. Maybe you recognized it. Maybe you didn't. There's kind of three different ways. One was rejection.

[25 : 52] Right away. Because those people mocked it. Right? We heard that. Then there was reluctance. So, others said, Interesting.

We'd like to hear more about this. Right? So, a little bit of hesitation, but still open. And then reception. Receptiveness. Some men joined him and believed.

People believed what Paul said. They heard the message, and then they acted on it. So, of those who responded favorably, it basically says, they believed.

That's what the passage says to us. But should we conclude that that is all they did? Remember, we talked about last week, if there are things that we don't recognize in a particular story of conversion, does it mean they weren't there?

Does it mean that it wasn't important? Well, no. So, it says that they believed. And I think it's reasonable for us to assume that the term believed that's used in this passage encompassed more than simply acceptance of the facts.

[26 : 57] Yeah, I heard what you say. Yep, sounds good. There's more to it than that, what Paul had preached to them. It suggests that their belief involved a complete and sincere receiving of the message.

Do you think that's fair? That message that was preached to those people was received by the people who believed. Whether Jew or Gentile, highly or simply educated, whatever someone's circumstances are in their life, the gospel of Jesus Christ is for everyone.

Agree? When it comes to sharing the gospel, how we share can and should begin with an understanding and appreciation for the spiritual condition of our audience.

And where we end must always be the same. Jesus, friends, is the only way to salvation. There's your summary.

Through the power of the Holy Spirit, when someone becomes convicted of their sinful condition and their need for Jesus, the proper response should always be the same no matter who we are.

[28 : 15] Faith in Jesus as the Son of God who died for our sins and was raised from the dead. Repentance from sin. Baptism into Christ for the forgiveness of sins through his sacrifice on the cross.

Take some time in prayer this week and ask God to point people in your life who need to know the good news of Jesus. Maybe there's a name or a face popping into your mind right now.

Ask Jesus to give you the opportunity to share. Because as we've talked about many times in the past, this is the gift that we must share.

Not out of obligation only, but because we love him and because of what he has done for us.

Amen? Amen. Amen.