

Mission to the Athenians

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[0 : 00] Shall we pray? Father, we ask that by your Spirit you'd help us be attentive, help us to be trusting in you, trusting that you speak to us through your written word, by your Holy Spirit working in us and among us, and we ask for mercy and grace to see the need around us as we think about mission, and we thank you for your word and this message Paul gave in the Areopagus, and we ask that it would be a living word for us today as well.

In Jesus' name, amen. Modern Athens, if you've been there, you'll have maybe seen all the tourists or joined in with all the tourists who flocked up to the Acropolis with their cameras and guidebooks. Some will then make their way, as I did some years back, over to the Areopagus where Paul gave the sermon we just heard read. And nearly 20 centuries divide us from that moment, but the challenge he gave, I think, is very, very much the same for us today as it was then.

Last Sunday we thought about mission, where we find ourselves, using text in 1 Peter 2, and we thought about how we as a royal priesthood and holy nation set apart by God are called to proclaim the excellencies of our God, of our living God.

And we do this recognizing that he's called us out of darkness and into his marvelous light, 1 Peter 2, 9.

[2 : 03] A guiding question, an overarching question for us this morning, is this. How do we connect mission where we are to the task of taking the gospel to the ends of the earth until the end of the age?

How do we think them into each other, if you like? That's an overarching question that we'll run through and also we'll come back to at the end. And I think the question has to be asked because we have tended toward one extreme or another in thinking about mission.

Let's call one extreme localism. If we're localists, we tend only to focus on the task as it faces us where we are.

We're guided by the motto, bloom where you're planted, or as we sang in Sunday school, brighten the corner where you are. But we don't tend to worry too much about how what we're doing here relates to the witness and needs and concerns of Christians in other places and times.

We lack a global perspective, in other words. But then there's another extreme, and that's the globalist one itself. If we're globalists, and I know that's a loaded word these days, but if we're globalists in this sense, when it comes to mission, we tend to think that all the real work is someplace else, not here in our own town or city.

[3 : 31] Some promoters of mission, and I've known many, and they're well-meaning to be sure, have sometimes given the impression that you'll surely waste your life if you don't get on the next plane or ship to a faraway place, checking your casket along with your two pieces of luggage.

And what we need, of course, is to get local and global in right relationship. Typically, we've thought of missions as going in one direction, from the West, Western culture, to the rest of the nations.

But now we realize that the practice of sending workers to identified special fields, as a term I used last time, is the practice of churches all around the globe.

In other words, our global here is another church's local, and vice versa. For instance, post-Christian Ottawa can be just as much a special field for the Christian student from Peru or Uganda, as a predominantly Hindu deli was for me and Stella when we lived there for three years. I say these can be special fields because it's quite possible to go there or come here physically and still not arrive as a special field worker.

[4 : 54] Just as it was tempting for John Stott to say nothing to that man on the train in Wales, if you remember from last Sunday, it's equally tempting for me and Stella to sail through one of her two- to four-year postings abroad as virtual tourists, as just one more expatriate couple passing

through.

And with that, I think we can turn back to our text in Acts, which records one moment in the history of the gospel going to the nations. And we want to look at two things.

What did Paul say to the Athenians there? And how is the message a word for us today? So let's look at the context.

What occasioned his message in verses 16 to 21? Well, here he is in Athens. He's on his second missionary journey. His first had taken him basically just to Turkey, modern-day Turkey.

And in this second trip, which begins in Jerusalem, he's gone as far as Macedonia. So he's gone much further west to Philippi, to Thessaloniki, to Berea, which you read about in the first part of Acts 17, and then down to Athens before heading eastwards to Ephesus, back into Turkey, modern-day Turkey, and then back to Jerusalem.

[6 : 26] While he's in Athens, he can't help but notice something. The city is full of idols, as we read. So he sits down and he writes in his travel journal, Athens, a city full of idols.

Fascinating. What grandeur in the temples. What a remarkable, what remarkable form and beauty in the statues. Right?

No. I made that up, right? Because that's not what happened at all. The images and statues of the many gods literally, literally, tore him up inside.

That's what the text says. His spirit was provoked within him. Maybe he doesn't quite state it. Other translations say greatly distressed.

Casiodoro de Reina, the fellow who I've been studying, a Spanish Protestant reformer, in his translation of this, says, Su Espíritu, and I know we have a few who speak Spanish here, Su Espíritu se deshacia en él.

[7 : 31] His spirit was disintegrating inside him. The many shrines spoke of a city that was given over to idolatry. So, what did Paul decide to do about this?

Well, he decided to raise the issue. In fact, he raised it daily, the text says. First, he discussed the matter with who? Well, the Jewish people.

That's who you went to first. And he discussed the matter with the Jewish leaders, along with those God-fearers that we know of, who were drawn into the orbit of the synagogue, and who were listening to the things and ways of God, but not Jewish.

They were God-fearing Gentiles. So, he discussed it with them, too. And then, he would go into the marketplace and discuss it with whoever he happened to meet there. And at some point, enter, here we are on a stage, enter some very learned philosophers into these conversations.

Their passion is for novelty. And they were curious. Along with all the other expats there in Athens, who were from Rome and who knows where else, these thinkers didn't want to miss out on any of the latest ideas that might be coming around their way.

[8 : 48] And there were two groups among these philosophers. We read the Epicureans, and well done, Matt, pronouncing these. The Epicureans believed that gods were not involved in the world, and believed in the pursuit of pleasure.

The Stoics said, no. The good life has to be disciplined, has to be virtuous. And as for their understanding of God, well, the Stoics didn't have God way up far off and remote.

The Stoics had God enmeshed in creation, God and creation basically confused. Someone among them decided to dismiss Paul as a babbler, as if to say, well, this guy's really unsophisticated.

But someone else said, wait, let's hear him out, because he seems to be talking about some new gods that we might really want to know about. They go by the names Resurrection and Jesus.

So they brought him to the Areopagus so he could explain things formally to the group. Once there, and we know, and we're now moving into the message itself, starting there in verse 22, Paul does something quite remarkable.

[10 : 05] Ultimately, he uses the opportunity to address the people on the matter that troubles him the most, which we've seen, their idolatry. But he doesn't actually start there.

Had he been addressing a Jewish audience, he would have started with the Old Testament, with the Hebrew scriptures. But he uses natural religion, if you like, or natural revelation as a kind of bridge.

The bridge isn't just the fact that they have an altar that's dedicated to the unknown God. That's part of it. The bridge is that general seeking after God that is common to all humanity.

It's a general religiosity, if you like, which is manifested in a desire to make sense of things, such as divine providence, the fact that God rules the earth, that God governs the world that he made and loves.

We know Paul has this in mind when we read verse 26. Where he says that God has determined allotted periods and the boundaries of our dwelling place.

[11 : 19] And they have a sense of this. They have a sense of this truth. And that's why they have, their philosophers, that is, their poets, have come up with phrases like, in God we live and move and have our being.

And we are his offspring. In other words, their best wisdom had led them to conclude that God was close at hand and that humans, in some way, were like God.

And of course, Paul can affirm this. These true things that God has revealed through natural means. But then, at that point, he starts to challenge them, doesn't he?

He tells them that God is maker of all things. He's not part of creation. He's not one item within it.

He tells them that God is sovereign Lord of heaven and earth.

In other words, he's not in any way limited by it. He tells them that God is not in need of anything.

Rather, we need him. We depend on him. And he says that God is not to be thought of as contained in anything.

[12 : 24] or pictured as any created thing. Now, the Epicureans would have been tracking a little bit with some of that.

They probably enjoyed hearing that God does not need anything. To that extent, they were going along. But not so with the Stoics who had God confused with the world.

And this spoke directly to their confusion. But Paul continues, and this time he challenges the Epicureans as well because he tells them that God from one man made the nations and guides them providentially.

And this went directly against their belief that God was not involved in his creation, that things were governed by chance. And it also contradicted the Athenian belief that the Athenians themselves had sprung up from where?

Well, from their own soil directly. Attica. So what do all these things imply about their religion and what God now requires of them? Well, as far as their religion goes, Paul says that it belongs to that period of ignorance, that period of sins, which in Romans 3 he says is a time that God passed over in order to display what?

[13 : 44] To display his righteousness in Jesus. When it comes to what God requires, Paul says that the grand event of Jesus' resurrection from the dead, which anticipates the judgment of the world by Jesus, means that all people everywhere must now turn from their sins.

And on that occasion, well, most hearts remained hard. We can say that their tradition, the weight of their tradition was weighed heavy.

Their greatest minds had taught them to think, well, a body is evil. And so that resurrection was really quite out of the question. It sounded like just sheer nonsense.

And only a few on that occasion believed in Paul's message as we read. So, let's move from that to our second question. How is this a word for today?

I think it's a word for us in three possible ways. it's a word for us this morning if we've wandered into Athens and we've gotten lost in the city.

[14 : 54] It's a word for us this morning if we've gone to Athens as mere tourists. And Paul's message is a word for us today if we're asking what is our place in the task of taking the gospel to the nations.

So let's start with the first. Getting lost in Athens. As many of you I expect know, the story of Christianity has been described as the story of two cities.

Athens, Jerusalem, and Athens. Others have taken that up and identified other major cities further on down the road, but fundamentally Jerusalem and Athens.

Jerusalem stands for our foundation in the prophets and apostles and in the mighty deeds of God in history. Whereas Athens stands for what? Well, Athens stands for human wisdom, traditions of men, all understood as a kind of evolving work in progress.

So Paul can say to Timothy, he already notes that, he can say always learning and never able to arrive at the knowledge of the truth. Always learning, but never able to sink your teeth into truth and grasp it.

[16:10] What makes Christianity a story of the two cities is that our marching orders from the beginning involve learning how to announce, how to proclaim a message that originates in Jerusalem, but in such a way that Athenians might be able to understand it and turn to the living God along with us.

But sadly, we sometimes forget those marching orders and we get lost in Athens. And here are six steps we might take to do that. Now, please note, this is going to sound like I'm trying to promote these ideas.

I once got in trouble because I took the approach of Uncle Screwtape in an article I wrote and I had it posted online and all the, you know how you can read the comments down below and they said, this man's a heretic, let's get him out of here.

And I wasn't actually advocating these views, I was expressing them as how we might get lost in Athens, right, if we weren't careful.

Step one, concerning Jesus, consider the thought that what matters most about him is an idea, the idea of mediation between God and humanity.

[17:26] Call it logos, call it reason, which means reason, but don't ground it in any particular moment in history. When it comes to the teaching about his death and resurrection, well, don't get bogged down in discussions about the tomb and whether it got emptied or not.

Consider that what really matters is that he now lives in our hearts. Step two, concerning God and creation. Consider the possibility that we can't really know God as he is in himself because really all we have are these images, these metaphors that we all invented.

And from there, consider how beneficial this metaphor might be in our ecological age, creation as God's body. Just as I am my body, but more, so the universe is God's body, but more.

That will help us get away from the idea of that distant God. After all, didn't Paul affirm that in him we live and move and have our being? step three, concerning the Holy Spirit.

Try on the idea that the word, well, that belongs to the past. Well, it's the spirit who now guides us in the present. This will help us get away from the idea that Christianity is all about things you have to believe.

[18:48] When we know that beliefs, well, they basically just divide people. Well, the lived experience of walking in the spirit unites us. speaking of walking, consider the possibility that the past and the future are an illusion.

As the Spanish poet said, *Caminante no hay camino*, which as a poem as a whole teaches us this, Pilgrim, there is no road as such, since roads are things we ourselves make as we walk them.

What this means is that we should not go looking for truth in the past, in past events. We shouldn't look for truth in promises that point us to the future, since it's really only in the present that we can know things at all.

Step four, concerning prayer. With the idea of being attentive to the spirit, consider that our regular habit in prayer should be to let go of thoughts, words, and emotions, as one little booklet teaches as we approach God.

In this way, the spirit can speak to our hearts directly, bypassing things that have been written down. Step five, concerning justice, as we learn to live in the present and discover our deep unity with the spirit, consider the possibility that evil is something that's not really mainly inside us, but out there in the world, manifested in the various isms that we want to eradicate, like racism and sexism and heterosexism and casteism and elitism and all such things.

[20:26] Step six, concerning hope. When it comes to the question of hope beyond this life, consider that our deepest intuitions tell us this, death is not the enemy, but just a transition from one room marked time and space to a room marked eternity.

After all, death means the release of the I into the we so that we all finally reunite with the reality that we came from and take our place in the fullness of God's body.

That would be a lost in Athens catechism for us if that's what we chose to let happen. Take these things to heart and I can assure you that you will be lost in Athens.

I have encountered it in so many different ways, trying to think Christianly about different things and that kind of encapsulates it as best I can tell.

In fact, if you take these things to heart, when you are lost in Athens and you recall Jerusalem, you'll think of that city basically as a crutch that you needed in your spiritual infancy.

[21 : 42] God's word is so let's suppose that we say a big no to all of that. Let's suppose that we believe that Jesus rose bodily from the grave, that God is not in any way confused with creation, and that by the spirit God's word is real and active in the present.

Let's say we believe that. Let's also suppose that we believe that prayer begins with listening to God as he's revealed himself in his word. word. Let's suppose that we believe that communities will only change as people repent and turn to Jesus.

Let's suppose finally that death is a real enemy, but one that Jesus has defeated on the cross, so that if we are united to him in his death and resurrection, we don't have to fear death, but we have a living hope.

And let's suppose that we keep our Jerusalem passports, but decide we might spend a few weeks in Athens as tourists. Here's what I think Paul's message says to us in that case.

Consider the lostness of the Athenians, which is the same thing as saying, consider the lostness of your condition before God's grace in Christ came to you.

[23 : 01] God's grace in the past. The fact that God overlooked the idolatry of the past is no reason to trivialize the idolatry. Paul was deeply troubled about it.

He could see past that excellent craftsmanship and declare that the idol worship of the people of Athens was demonic. If you think that's too strong a word, have a look over at what he says in 1 Corinthians 10-15.

what pagan sacrifice they offered to demons and not to God. I don't want you, Corinthians, to participate with demons.

John Stott records in that little book I mentioned last time how Henry Martin, a 19th century missionary to India, reacted to the worship which he observed there among Hindus.

As it happened, he had taken up residence in an abandoned Hindu temple. And he wrote this, he wrote that as he watched people prostrating themselves before their images, he said this excited more horror in me than I can well express.

[24 : 12] Well, why the horror? Stott says that like Paul in Athens, Henry Martin was motivated by a passionate love for the name of Christ.

And I'll quote from that book again. And here's where Stott brings us to Acts chapter 17. In the synagogue with the religious, in the marketplace with the casual passers-by, and on the Areopagus with the philosophers, the apostle preached the gospel persuasively and diligently.

It was jealousy for the name of God and of Christ, profaned by heathen idolatry, which gave him his zeal for evangelism. Indeed, jealousy and zeal are the same word.

He burned with longing that the Athenians should know and honor the God they either ignorantly worshipped or actually, by their idolatry, denied.

So what's this business of in the name? What's in the name? Stott says that love for Jesus' name is not a sentimental attachment either to his personal name, Jesus, or even to his official title, Christ, or to any other designations in scripture, a sentimental attachment of feelings.

[25 : 34] Instead, it's a concern for the honor, for his honor in the world. And so what Stott's implying in all this is that we may have to put our image of God to the test.

It's true that God is love and all love, not just in part. His nature is love. But it's precisely because of his love that he's jealous. Think of this.

Think of it if someone is trying to insert themselves as a third party into a marriage relationship. It's actually unloving to tolerate that person who would attempt to do that.

And it's profoundly out of love that God is a jealous God, that he's intolerant of worship of other gods. I am the Lord, he says through Isaiah.

That is my name. My glory I give to no other. So let's turn to the third way that Paul's message can speak to us today.

[26 : 41] As God's spirit reminds us of his holiness, of his desire that all people everywhere should turn to him as the living God and that Christ is our one hope in life and death as we sometimes sing.

I think we can be encouraged and challenged to go to the nations with a love for Jesus' name. The Epicurean Society, if we can call it that today, is alive and well.

For modern Epicureans, God is not a God really for us because he's seen fit to just let nature run its course. we're on our own and we're left to be confident in our own powers.

The Stoic Society is alive and well too. For modern Stoics, there's no misguided worship in the end because all things are divine. So Epicurean and Stoic bring us to the same place as does any

man-made religion.

We're left with an inflated sense of our own capacity to know what is true and good and lovely and we let ourselves off the hook all the time. So what are we called, to what then are we called as we go out to make contact with such people?

[27 : 55] Well, we're called to burn with a zeal for God's glory, first and foremost. Yes, we respond to Jesus' command and we obey. But what really, really, really motivates us is the zeal for God's glory, that God's glory will be manifested more and more.

It involves recognizing that apart from faith, trust in Jesus, we're, as Paul says in Ephesians 2, we're without hope and without God in the world. And it involves praying, praying for openings to raise the issue with modern Athenians.

And it involves doing some homework because we need to get to know their world of ideas, their habits, and their worship, since all of these are bound up together. It involves accepting their offers to speak when they come.

And it involves declaring what they most certainly won't want to hear, but trusting that the Spirit might use that very testimony to change their hearts and their minds.

So, let me raise our guiding question once again. What does the local task have to do with the global one?

[29 : 12] You're probably wondering. I've left you wondering, I hope. Paul's visit to Athens represents one moment in the story of the early global movement, the Jerusalem to Athens movement.

Is that moment, is that movement still a global one today? Well, Jesus says in Matthew 24 that the end will come when the gospel has been preached to all nations, to all people groups.

And the last time I checked, the end hasn't come. Therefore, we can conclude that the gospel is still going to the nations. That would be the short version.

So, is that going to the nations a local or global task? What's the answer? Yes. Right? And local and global really only make sense when we hold them together.

When we think them into each other. So, how do we decide where we fit in? Whether we should go to specially identified fields, far from home if necessary, or stay home and reach out and evangelize modern Athenians here where we are.

[30 : 28] And I think this, in this business, there's going to be two basic vocations among us or callings of God on our lives. Some of us are going to be special field people with a desire to be sent out from our home culture and our home congregation.

And we're going to be restless until we actually get on board with that. I think that's key. We're going to be restless until we get on board with that. I figure my parents were this sort of send me out people.

Thinking, the sooner the better. Mom felt she was called to foreign missions even as a young girl. And dad, well, he was converted on his way home from military service in Germany.

And then, I mean, there in that moment, even on his return, he had dedicated his life to God and said, whichever way you see fit, please use me.

And he wasted no time in committing himself to lifelong service in Mexico. For him, I think it was really simple. He's a straightforward guy. He said, the need is great, the workers are few, the churches here at home are many, and I'm available and ready.

[31 : 43] That was his thinking and that's probably what he would say to me if I asked him right now. On the good advice of my uncle, he didn't go immediately.

He got some Bible training. And the truth is that the need in so many parts of the world is great. I don't have the numbers right here with me.

But there are people groups, ethnic groups, in parts of Africa, right over to Asia and through the Middle East, that are defined as what the missiologists called unreached peoples.

They lack, this is what it means, they lack a community of Christians that's able to evangelize the rest of their people group without outside help.

Now, if you think you might be in that category vocationally, then I would just encourage you to speak to someone whose life, whose calling is to a special field of work.

[32 : 50] There are many ways to serve, whether you're young or retired or in between. And for the younger crowd, there's the Logos Hope, which I know about quite well because of the ministry my parents were with.

And it's a good way to explore spending a year or two, if you're a younger person, getting to know global mission from a ship, which docks all around and sends teams out and has all kinds of jobs for people on board as well.

Now, apart from special field people, there are come over and help people. Check out Acts 16, just before our passage, and the call that Paul received to go and help the people in Macedonia.

That's how he got over there, right? These are Christians who see the great need where they are and who acknowledge that God is in the business of sending people to help them in their work, just as much as he's in the business of sending people out from among them.

And you say, well, it doesn't sound too efficient, does it? One sent here, one received over here.

Why all the coming and going, especially when we're trying to cut down on our carbon footprint?

[34 : 05] Well, think of it this way. The sending and receiving reminds us that we're interdependent as God's people.

God sees fit. He has seen fit to bless us as we receive the stranger and sojourner in our midst, receive what they have to say. And he also blesses us as we go and identify with other cultures for the sake of the gospel.

So if we belong to the come over and help us group here in Ottawa, I think we can do like George always says, let's pray big. Let's pray for a flood of godly immigrants whose testimony is firm.

Along that, let's pray for the grace to work together in reaching out to the Athenians right here in our city. And in all of this, and here I close, may our hope be fixed on God's promise to draw the nations to himself so that his glory will finally be over all the earth in Psalm 57 5.

Amen. Young, thank you.

[35 : 36] Thank you. You're welcome. You're welcome. We'll see you next time. We'll see you next time. Halfway to allow for■■■■x. Yahweh. Halfway to about our women's lives hep quieren learn about hobbit of?

What happens? Appeals deux ago? Three books hundred■■■■■