

AM Colossians 2:16-23 Not rules, but Christ

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[0 : 00] In our studies in Acts, whenever I've been preaching here recently, we've now reached Paul in Athens.

! His spirit was provoked within him, as he saw that the city was full of idols.

So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.

Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, what does this babbler wish to say?

Others said he seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities, because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, may we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting.

[1 : 22] For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know, therefore, what these things mean. Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.

So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said, Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious.

For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, To the unknown God.

What therefore you worship as unknown, This I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, Being Lord of heaven and earth, Does not live in temples made by man, Nor is he served by human hands, As though he needed anything, Since he himself gives to all mankind, Life and breath and everything.

And he made from one man every nation of mankind, To live on all the face of the earth, Having determined allotted periods And the boundaries of their dwelling place, That they should seek God, And perhaps feel their way toward him, And find him.

[3 : 03] Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, For in him we live and move, And have our being, As even some of your own poets have said, For we indeed are his offspring.

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 has 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.

We will come back to that passage shortly, But let's bow our heads now. On the lectern here, Because the angle of the light means that I can't actually see the clock.

[4 : 56] I was once preaching in a church that expected a sermon of at least 45 minutes, And I was unaware that the clock had stopped.

So I kept on preaching, And kept on preaching, And I think it must have been an hour and a quarter or so. They didn't complain, But I'm sure that they found it over long.

I don't want to over weary people, Especially with children present. I know a very long sermon can be quite hard for you. But let's turn to the Bible, And Acts 17, A passage we read, Beginning at verse 16.

Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, His spirit was provoked within him, As he saw that the city was full of idols.

The gospel of Christ is a gospel for the whole world.

[6 : 08] It's not just a gospel for the simple folk of Galilee, Where Jesus first preached. But it's a gospel also for the sophisticated folk of Athens, And other great cities.

Likewise today. It's a gospel for the great cities. Glasgow, Edinburgh, London, Paris, New York, Beijing.

But also a gospel for small towns like Dumfries as well. It's a gospel for everyone, Everywhere. That is apparent in the Great Commission, Jesus had commanded his disciples to go, And make disciples of all nations.

Well that certainly included Greece, Where Athens was. His final words before he ascended were, You will be my witnesses, In Jerusalem, And in all Judea and Samaria, And to the ends of the earth, Athens and beyond.

In the book of Acts, We see Paul fulfilling that great commission. Preaches in Acts 16, To the country pagans of Lystra.

[7 : 40] Now in Acts 17, He preaches to the clever philosophers of Athens. They all need salvation. The whole of Acts, In fact, Is the fulfillment of that great commission.

From Jerusalem, To Rome. From the capital, Of Israel, To the capital of the world, As it was then. And this visit to Athens, Was an important step, Along the way.

If Jerusalem, Was the religious capital, Rome, The political capital, Athens, Was the intellectual capital, Of the world.

And it had to be conquered, For Christ. This was perhaps, Paul's greatest challenge.

Athens was, Not as important, In Paul's day, As it had been previously, At the height of the, Greek empire. But it was still a great center, Of learning.

[9 : 00] Someone has called it, The Oxford, Of its day. There were clever people there. But they were still pagans. They were still lost.

And they still needed, The gospel. Now there's much for us to learn, In Paul's visit to Athens.

We live today, In a sophisticated, But pagan, Society. Okay, Dumfries is not a great center, Of learning.

Though we do have a university. But the people around us, Are intelligent, Educated people. But they have one big thing lacking.

They don't know Christ. True, We have a Christian heritage, Here in Scotland. But it's largely forgotten.

[10 : 02] We live in a post-Christian society, Where people once again, Have to be taught, The basics, Of religion. Even the cleverest people, Are often ignorant, Of scripture.

I like to watch, University Challenge on TV, And it's quite embarrassing, How they struggle, With simple questions, About the Bible.

The molecular structure, Of atoms. Yeah, They know all about that. Eighteenth century, Feminist poetry. They're all over it. But simple Bible stories, They haven't a clue.

Paul's message, To these Athenians, Two thousand years ago, Might well be his message, To Scotland today.

A simple gospel, To a sophisticated people. I want us to look at it, In three unequal parts.

[11 : 09] Paul's ministry, In the synagogue. Paul's ministry, In the marketplace. And Paul's ministry, In the Areopagus.

First of all though, Let's just remind ourselves, Of the background. Paul has come to Athens, By sea, From Berea, After persecution, Had made it too dangerous, To stay there.

Silas and Timothy, Had been told, Back in verse 15, To join him later. But Paul couldn't wait, Until they came. His heart was moved, By the spiritual need, Of Athens.

And he had to start preaching. Says in verse 16, His spirit was provoked, By all the idols.

The Greek word, Paroxeno, Related to our word, Paroxysm. Sudden outburst, Of emotion. He was angry, At all this idolatry.

[12 : 21] And his heart, Longed, For these people. Let me ask you, If you are a Christian, Are you, Moved, By all the, Ungodliness, By all the unbelief, All around you.

Does your heart, Go out, To the people, Of Dumfries. Paul's heart, Yearned for the people, Of Athens. And therefore, He preached to them.

So, First, We have Paul's ministry, In the synagogue, In verse 17. He reasoned in the synagogue, With the Jews, And the devout persons.

Easy to overlook this, Because when we think of Paul in Athens, We think immediately of the philosophers. But before he met the philosophers, He began where he always began.

With the Jews. His principle was always to the Jew first, And afterward, To the Gentile. And he began in exactly the same way, As he did in Thessalonica, And Berea, Reasoning with them.

[13:41] Showing them, No doubt from the scriptures, That Jesus, Was the Christ, The Messiah, Promised in the Old Testament. It's still good for us today, To begin with, Those who, Do know something, Of the scriptures.

People who might be, Sympathetic to the Bible. The emphasis may be, In this passage, On getting out there, Into the marketplace.

But don't forget, This little episode, In the synagogue. Preaching today, In the churches, Is still important. This is where Paul started, But it's not where he stopped.

He didn't keep, To the synagogue. We read secondly, About Paul's ministry, In the marketplace. Paul went out, It says, Every day, Into the marketplace.

The agora, Where people, Would have met. Our nearest equivalent, Would be the town centre. Either round by the fountain, Or, Maybe further up, At the Queensbury statue.

[15:03] That's the kind of, Congregating place. People who spend the day, In Dumfries, That's where they will sit. And, That's the centre of our town.

The agora, Was the centre, In Athens. There in the marketplace, It says, Paul, Reasoned with those, Who happened to be there.

Whoever they were, He didn't plan it. Jew or Gentile, He'd talk to anyone. And it's there, That he first met, The philosophers, In verse 18.

Some of the Epicureans, And stoic philosophers, Also conversed with them. The Epicureans, Were followers of Epicurus, Who lived in the 4th century BC.

They were materialists, Who believed that the world, Was made up of atoms, That always had existed, And always would exist. They had no room, For creation, In their philosophy.

[16:13] They were sceptical, About everything religious, And of all superstition. They didn't deny, The existence of the gods, But they denied, That the gods, Had anything to do, With our lives.

You can already see, Plenty of points of conflict here, With Paul, And with us. Most famously, They believed that, Pleasure, Was the ultimate, Aim of life.

Now that has, Sometimes been misunderstood, As if it was, Sensual pleasure, That they wanted. Indeed, Indeed, The word, Epicurean, Has come to mean, Someone who, Indulges in gourmet food, And fine wines.

But in fact, Pleasure to them, Meant freedom, From pain, And fear. And they tended, To live, Quiet, Restrained lives, Without any great excess.

They had no place, For the afterlife. There's a famous, Saying on, Epicurean tombstones.

[17:33] I was not, I was, I am not. I do not care. I think there are, A lot of people today, Who would say, Pretty much the same.

The Stoics, Meanwhile, They were the chief, Rivals of the Epicureans. Followers of Zeno, A third century, B.C. Philosopher. Name came from, The Stoa, Or the gate, Where Zeno taught.

They taught, That the world, Must be understood, By logic. The chief aim, Of man is virtue, Achieved by, Prudence, And fortitude, Temperance, And justice.

I was about to say, Good old English values, I shouldn't say that here, Should I? Good old Scottish values, As well. The word stoic, Has come to mean, Calm endurance, Rather like the, British, Stiff upper lip.

They taught, That we should be free, From passion, And they too, Had little interest, In religion, Either in the gods, Or in the afterlife.

[18:56] This was the audience, That Paul, Faced, In the marketplace, And we can recognize, Some of these views, In Britain today, Can't we?

People who live, For pleasure, People who just, Want a quiet life, People who, Live by science, As they understand it, People who have, No time for religion, Who neither believe in God, Or in the world to come.

Those were the people, That Paul encountered, We meet the same sort of people today.

Presumably, Paul preached to them, They call him a preacher, In verse 18, But also, They

conversed, With him.

This was a two way process, There was a discussion, Going on. Now I don't say, That we must all go, And preach, In the town centre.

Some, Are called to that, As Paul was, We're very thankful, For the help of Douglas Young, In open air preaching. And if, Any of you, Feel that you have a gift, For that kind of preaching, Well, Go for it. [20 : 24] We need, Open air preachers. But we're not all called, To that kind of preaching. But we can, All hold conversations, We can all talk, Can't we?

We manage that, Every day of our lives. We talk about the weather, We talk about sport, We talk about our hobbies, We talk about the garden, We talk about the farm, Or whatever it might be. Why not talk about religion as well? As we go about our, Ordinary lives, Look for opportunities, There are probably more of them, Than you think there are.

Opportunities, To just to talk, With people, Who knows, Where it might lead. The point though here, Is that Paul, Was not confined, To the synagogue, He went out, Into the world, And he talked to people, In their own environment, About the things of God, We must do the same.

But don't expect, A rapturous welcome, Paul certainly, Didn't get a rapturous welcome, Did he? I think it would be fair, To say that these philosophers, Regarded Paul with contempt.

[22 : 00] Some said, What does this babbler, Wish to say? Babbler, The Greek word here, Is a word, That was used of birds, Picking at seeds. Maybe Paul, Lacked the, Rhetorical elegance, That they were used to, From their Greek philosophers.

And it all just seemed, Like a jumble of ideas. Others said, He seems to be a preacher, Of foreign divinities, Because he was preaching, Jesus of the resurrection.

Maybe they thought, That these were two new gods, That they hadn't heard of. All the same, But here's the important point, They were curious.

They didn't just, Wave him aside, And walk on. They actually, Wanted to know more. And so they take him, To the Areopagus, Literally, The hill of Ares, Or the hill of Mars, That's the Roman name, For Ares, Ares being the Greek god of war.

That was where, The Athenian council met. They wanted to have, A top level discussion on this, With the leaders of their city.

[23 : 20] May we know, What this new teaching is. For you bring some strange things, To our ears. We wish to know, Therefore, What these things mean. Luke comments, That the Aresians spent, All their time, Just talking about, Anything that was new.

Perhaps, For some of them, This was just a bit of entertainment. But at the same time, It seems for some, There is a genuine search, For truth.

Never underestimate that. The spirit of God, Is at work in the world. And there are people out there, Who genuinely want to know. I remember, Before I became a Christian, Being quite perplexed, That the Christians that I knew, Didn't seem to want to talk to me.

I remember once, That the rector, Of the local church of England, Actually came to our door. He was wanting to speak, To my landlord, Who was out. But I'm thinking, Well talk to me instead then. But no, He wasn't interested. There are people out there, Who are interested. Try talking with people, And who knows, Where it might lead.

[24 : 39] So we come now, To the third and the longest part. Paul's ministry, In the Areopagus. Verse 27, Onwards. Whether Paul is on trial, As some people suppose, Or whether he's simply invited, To express his views, His ideas, Are certainly on trial.

What is this new doctrine, That he's preaching? So how does Paul, Answer these, Athenian philosophers, Athenian philosophers, And civic leaders, Well it's quite different, From his preaching, In the synagogue, Though it has the same purpose, In the synagogue, He would have gone through, The scriptures with them, Showing how they all pointed, To Christ.

There is no point, In doing that here. They don't know, The scriptures, They don't acknowledge, That the scriptures, Are the word of God. But although he doesn't, Quote scripture, He is preaching to them, The doctrine, Of scripture.

His aim is the same, As in the synagogue, To preach, Christ to them. Only here, He has to start, Further back.

He begins, Very wisely, Where they are, Men of Athens, I perceive, That in every way, You are very religious. They will have taken that, As a compliment, Even if there is a slight hint, Of sarcasm there.

[26 : 19] Then he hones in, On one, Particular altar. As I passed along, And observed the objects, Of your worship, I found also an altar, With this inscription, To the unknown, God.

This is his springboard. And very often, In our conversations, With people, There is some springboard, Something we see, Something they have commented on, Something in the news, That we can take, As a starting point, To talk about, The things of God.

What therefore, You worship as unknown, Paul says, That I proclaim to you, There were, Twelve principal, Gods, In the Greek, Pantheon, Known as the Olympians, But there were many others, They all had their own altars, And the city was full of them, But here is this one, That is different, An altar to the unknown God, Maybe they were afraid, That they had missed one, Or maybe they thought, That there might, Just might, Be a supreme God, Either way, The idea of an unknown, And unknowable God, Would have appealed, To these philosophers, And sadly, It's a common idea today, Some of you perhaps, Have seen, Browell,

On the way to Annan, And inscribed around it, Is an extract from one of Robert Burns's poems, O thou unknown, Almighty cause, Of all my hope and fear, In whose dread presence, Air and hour, Perhaps I must appear, How much vagueness, How much doubt, Is expressed in those poor words, The great fundamental truth, In Christianity, Is that God can be known, He may be unknown, To the world, But he's made himself known, In creation, In the Bible, And supremely, In Christ, Paul begins, With creation, The God who made the world, And everything in it, That will have jarred, With these Epicureans, But never mind,

This is the truth, He goes on, With the majesty of God, This God, Being Lord of heaven and earth, Does not live in temples, Made with man, Made by man, Nor is he served, By human hands, As though he needed anything, Since he himself, Gives life and breath, To everyone, And do you see, What he's doing here, In one sentence, He's just demolished, The whole of Greek philosophy, And interestingly, That point about, Not being served in temples, Made by human hands, Is exactly what the martyr, Stephen had said, And Paul will have heard it, I wonder if that, Lodged constantly in his mind, He now speaks of God's sovereignty, Over the nations, And over history, He made from one man, Every nation of mankind, To live on all the face,

[29 : 59] Of the earth, Having determined, Allotted periods, And the boundaries, Of their dwelling place, Covering a lot of ground, Isn't he, In very few sentences, But he's getting, To the point here, God's purpose, In all this, In verse 27, Is that they should, Seek God, And perhaps, Feel their way, Toward him, And find him, God, God actually, Wants the world, To know him, And although, They see him, As someone distant, He is actually, Not far, From any one of us, And at this point, He quotes, From two of their own poets, In verse 28, For in him, We live and move, And have our being, As even some of your own poets, Have said, Quoting, A poet called Epimenides,

For we, Indeed, Are his offspring, Quoting another poet, Aratus, To the Jews, He would have quoted scripture, To the Greeks, He quotes, Their own poets, Very clever, And very impressive, Impressive, That Paul, Knew, The Greek poets, We do need to have, Some wider knowledge, Of culture, So that we can, Communicate, With the people, Of the world, Around us, Paul now speaks, Of the folly, Of idolatry, In verse 29, Being then God's offspring, We ought not to think, The divine being, Is like gold, Or silver, Or stone, An image formed, By the art, An imagination of man, And then comes the crunch, Verse 30, The times of ignorance, God overlooked, But now he commands, All men everywhere, To repent, Repentance, That would be a new idea, To these philosophers, Greek word for repent, Is metanoia, Means literally, To change one's mind, It's a complete change, That is required, A complete about turn, I always love to quote, An elder at the church, At Lincoln, In one of his children's talks, He had, One of our deacons, Act the part of a soldier, With himself as the sergeant major, And, The deacon marched up the church, And then George Willows said, About, Turn, And Andrew knew, What he was supposed to do,

He was the good soldier, Clicked his heels, Turned round, And marched back, And George Willows said, That is repentance, Instant obedience, To the command of God, To change your ways, To reverse what you were doing, To go completely, The opposite direction, And that's what's required here, Turn from idols, And worship God, Idolatry, Is a serious sin, It's a breach, Of the first two commandments, You shall have no other gods, Before me, You shall make no graven image, God had put up, With the idolatry, Of the Gentiles, In the past, He would put up, With it no longer, This was not a matter, Of discussion, And conversation, Or polite,

Philosophical debate, This, Is a command, From God, And although, Paul's focus here, Is on idolatry, Because that was, Their most obvious sin, The same, The same could be said, Of all sins,

God commands, Everyone, Everywhere, To repent, Of all, Sin, Not just a matter, Of admitting, That we've sinned, Or even just a matter, Of feeling sorry, About it, God expects us, To actually, Turn, From our sins, And there are consequences, If we don't, In verse 31, He has fixed a day, On which he will judge the world, In righteousness, By a man, Whom he has appointed, A day of judgment, Really is coming, Maybe tomorrow,

[35 : 05] Maybe a thousand years, But it will come, And no one, Anywhere, Can escape it, These Athenian philosophers, Can't escape it, Neither can you, Neither can I, But who is that man, Who will be our judge, It is of course, Our Lord Jesus Christ, And God has given assurance, Of this Paul says, By raising him, From the dead, The resurrection, Is God's seal of approval, Upon Christ, As our saviour, And judge, Now at this point, Paul is interrupted, Verse 32, When they heard of the resurrection, Of the dead, Some mocked, This was just, Too much, And some will mock, Today, At our message, Whether it's creation, Or judgment, Or the resurrection, These things are an offence, To many, And they will reject them,

Paul never got to finish, His message, As far as we know, He never got to tell them, About the cross, Or about faith, That would have followed, I'm sure, That's where this sermon is headed, But he's cut off, Before he can say, Everything that he wants to say, And yet, God still used, What he had said, There was fruit, Even here in Athens, Not everyone mocked, Others said, We will hear you again about this, When Paul left, Some men joined him, And believed, Among whom were Dionysius, The Areopagite, And a woman named Damaris, And others with them, Yes, Even here in Athens, There were conversions, Even amongst these philosophers, There are not many wise, Who are called, But there are some, Dionysius and Damaris,

Were presumably, Well known in Athens, But here they are, Conquered, By Christ, And no doubt, Paul would go on, To tell them about the cross, And the whole, Council of God, So what are we to say, To all this, Well if you are not a Christian, Yet yourself, Then God's word to you, Is still the same, As it was to these Athenians, God commands, All men everywhere, To repent, Including you, The day of judgment, Is coming, Don't delay, Remember that the judge, Is also your saviour, He died, For our sins, He is able to forgive, He wants people, To seek him, He wants people, To be saved, And you can confidently, Come to him,

For salvation, And if you are a Christian, Paul's message in Athens, Is the message, That we must press, Upon this world, Of ours, Here in the church, We can preach freely, The whole message, Of salvation, Outside, Either in preaching, Or in conversation, We will probably, Be more restricted, People will only, Listen to so much, We may find, In any one conversation, We can only touch upon, One subject, One small aspect, Of Christianity, But that is enough, If it sets people, Thinking, A truncated message, Is better than no message, They'll go on to ask, And we can tell them, More later, What we have here,

Is only really, An introduction, To the gospel, God created the world, God rules the world, God wants the world, To be saved, The world must repent, Paul is a man, With a mission here, He doesn't linger, On the unknown God, Or even creation, Or on the poets, No doubt he would have, Debated any of these matters, If need be, But he wants to press on, He wants to talk about Christ, And he does get to Christ, As the risen Lord, The same for us, Wherever we start, Whether we talk with people, About creation, Or about culture, May be necessary for us, To start in all kinds of places, But our aim is to get, To the heart of the matter, Which is Christ, And him crucified, And Paul's experience in Athens,

[40 : 17] Shows that it is not a hopeless task, Even in the most sophisticated society, There will be converts, Oh that there might be a Dionysius, Or a Damaris, And even a few others, Here in Dumfries, And more than a few, May there be many, Who turn to Christ, Amen, Let's close, Let's close, Let's close,