

Acts 17:16-34

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- [0 : 0 0] The following sermon is from Grace and Peace Church in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Grace and Peace is a new church that exists for the glory of God and the good of the northeast suburbs of Hamilton Place, Collegedale, and Ottawa.
- You can find help more by visiting gracepeacechurch.org. This is one of those famous passages. I'm excited to dig into it.
- I read two articles this week that I thought were interesting. The first one was from a Wall Street Journal, and it was a story about a church that is being constructed in Berlin.
- In East Berlin, you know, East Berlin was kind of run by the Russians and the communists for 40 years or so. But this church is on the site of where Christian churches have been since the 13th century.
- So it's a historic site. And the church that they're creating is interesting because it has three kind of worship areas, three sanctuaries with a foyer in the middle that they all kind of open to.
- [1 : 0 8] It's a sanctuary for Christians, one for Jews, and one for Muslims. And the idea is that they would go and kind of worship themselves, and then they would come together in this kind of foyer space.
- And, you know, have kind of common life together. It almost kind of sounds like a Babylon Bee article. It's kind of ridiculous. I found it so fascinating that it seems as though this is a church that is dedicated to the modern ideals of, you know, of the modern ideals of diversity and multiculturalism and inclusion.
- It doesn't seem to have any knowledge of the true God. In fact, I would doubt that there would be many Orthodox Christians, Jews, or Muslims who would think that this is a good idea. It seems as though this is somebody coming along and building this who thinks that the main thing that we ought to be committed to is multiculturalism and diversity and inclusion.
- It's really a fascinating thing. That one of the things you see in that is that there is this hunger for God, but it doesn't seem to have a whole lot of understanding about who God actually is.
- We could put it in the language of idolatry that these are cultural idols, right? In the Western culture, cultural idolatry of multiculturalism and inclusion and diversity.
- [2 : 3 4] Those are good things. They have been promoted to ultimate things, unfortunately. And those cultural idols are just as real as the idols that I talked about in our confession.
- They're just as real as the idols we talked about from Isaiah, that we read about from Isaiah. Taking good things and making them ultimate things. And that kind of idea of idolatry is exactly what the context of this passage that James just read for us is in ancient Athens.
- Paul and his companions had been traveling around Turkey, around the Aegean Sea, and they hopped into Thessalonica and Berea, and there Paul jumped on a ship and went by himself to Athens.

And he was waiting for his companions in Athens. And so here's what I want to do is I just want to look at this passage really simply. Look at what did Paul do? What was it Paul was doing? What was it he preached?

What's his sermon? We'll look at that. And then what in the world does that have to do for us? What do we need to do with Paul's sermon? That's just how we'll walk through this. So what did Paul do? Well, he gets to Athens, and like any good tourist, he starts to walk around and observe things.

[3 : 47] My children, whenever we visit somewhere, I just am like hitting the pavement. I want to go. I want to see everything. It exhausts them. They don't like it. But I'm going to do it because that's how you should do it, of course.

But Paul does this. He's walking around. He's seeing the glory that is Athens. Athens was the center of Greek culture and Greek life. It was the place where it had the incredible architecture.

It had the Parthenon, right, that you can still see and visit that was on a hill right in the center of the city. It's a brilliant and beautiful place. It was also a place of incredible sophistication.

But that wasn't what impressed Paul. Look at verse 16. What was it that Paul noticed? While he was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was full of idols.

The phrase actually in Greek here is kind of unique because it's more than just meaning that something is full, like filled up. It means that it's like smothered.

[4 : 49] It's overtaken. It's like really good Tex-Mex enchiladas that are smothered in queso. That Athens was a city that was smothered by idols.

There's an ancient travel writer. You didn't think that there were ancient travel writers, but there were. It seems like a great job. They were ancient travel writers. And what this one man wrote about Athens was that it was a city that was small geographically, and so it only had 10,000 people in it, which was pretty big for that time.

10,000 people, but 30,000 idols. There were shrines on almost every corner. There were temples all around the city.

Inside those temples, there could be hundreds of different idols to various gods and various deities and personifications of values.

There were people in their homes, had their own little shrines and altars that they would put up. And so they were everywhere. In fact, James just read that Paul noticed one that was to the unknown God, which I actually kind of think is there's a certain admirable humility to that.

[6 : 02] The Athenians were even recognizing in themselves a sense of hunger for God, a hunger to know who God was, what He was about. And Paul takes that seriously.

That there was a hunger, even though they didn't know what it was for. They had a hunger for God. You know, it was an obvious hunger. Kind of pathetic, really.

Kind of like my dog being hungry for dinner. If you've been to my house and seen my dog beg for dinner, it is pathetic. He dances. He will not be satisfied. There's a hunger in him.

There was a hunger amongst the Athenians. And all of that moved Paul. In fact, the phrase that is used there in 16, that it provoked Paul's spirit, actually is the same word that's used in Isaiah for the way that God looks at the idols of the Israelites.

That God has provoked in His spirit. But just like with ancient Israel, Paul didn't come in with condemnation first. His first response was to be moved by the hunger of the people for something that they didn't understand.

[7 : 13] It moved Paul to preach to them. In fact, we could say that there's something about Paul in preaching to the people, in seeking to show them and reveal to them who the unknown God is that actually reveals the heart of God.

How God deals with people. So what did he do? Well, first we read that he reasoned and engaged in the synagogue with the religious people and the Jewish folks.

This is pretty typical. If you've been following along with us, that's pretty standard. He goes to the synagogue to the religious people first. And then he goes out in the marketplace and meets the random, normal people like us out in the marketplace.

And then he ends up talking to the intellectual elite, the philosophers and the important folks in the culture. And it says that he's doing this every day.

There seems to be an implication that Paul has been doing this for weeks or perhaps even months.

[8 : 19] He's gotten a reputation. He's begun to be known. He's got relationships. This is not just Paul showing up one day with a megaphone and going out on the street corner. It's not what he's doing.

He's cultivating an understanding with the people so that he can preach to them. And so he was invited to the Areopagus. If you visit Athens today and you go to the Parthenon, on the same, on the top of the complex up there is another building, the Areopagus.

And before this time, it was used as kind of a seat of government, like the Senate would go there and stuff. But at this point, it had become more of like a cultural council.

They were the ones who were the guardians of culture and life and morals and education in the city. And so they invite Paul to come and to preach to them.

And, you know, it sounds like they were somewhat interested because they're kind of intellectually curious. But it also sounds like they might have not taken him all that seriously.

[9 : 22] They called him a babbler, which I think is a great way to, you know, to shame somebody. So that's what Paul is doing. He's, you know, I think that the thing that I want you to see from what Paul is doing here is Paul doesn't hate the people because of their idolatry.

He doesn't dismiss them. He doesn't talk about how stupid they are. You know, all these idols, you guys don't know what you're talking about. But that's not how Paul responds because that's not how Jesus, that's not how God responds to the sinfulness of people.

And so let me just stop and say, if you are not a believer in Christ, if you're not someone who follows Christ, you need to see that the way that God deals with people is not first in condemnation, but in revelation, but in showing who he is.

In fact, Jesus says this, I did not come to condemn the world, but that through me the world might be saved. That's what Paul did.

Second thing, what did Paul preach? I just want to walk through his sermon here and read some of this with you. So verse 22, let's pick up there. So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said, Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious, for I passed along and observed the objects of your worship.

[10 : 47] I also found an altar with this inscription, to the unknown God. What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. That's his heart. That's what he's doing.

So what was the content? Paul actually has four points to his sermon. Very good, you know, sermon. It's not alliterated, so, you know, that's no good.

First thing, verse 24, The God who made the world and everything in it, being the Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man. First thing is that God is the creator.

That's the first part of his sermon. Paul was talking to at least two different groups of smart intellectual people. It names the Stoics and the Epicureans, and I'm not going to go into what they thought.

I don't think that's important right now. We could do that another time. I'm happy to talk about that. But the point is that each of these cultured and sophisticated people thought that the idea of God being somehow being in charge of everything was a foolish idea.

[11 : 53] That God is the creator. Paul is coming in to undermine their kind of seemingly sophisticated way of looking at the world. These people were just as secular as anybody you might meet now.

They had the same kinds of questions. Where did this all come from? Is there a purpose to it? Where is it headed? Is there an end in sight? Those are the questions that humanity asks.

And we come up with all kinds of ways to answer that. But Paul is being rock solid in one thing. There is one who is in charge of it all. There is a creator. It's verse 24.

So look at the end of 24. 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 breath, life and breath and everything.

That's the second thing. So not only is God creator, God is the sustainer of everything. Humanity does not give God anything that God cannot have on his own.

[13 : 04] There is nothing we can give God that he cannot have on his own. What that means is that God cannot be domesticated by us or tamed by us.

God not only does not fit in physical temples, God does not fit in your descriptions of him. The only description of him that can possibly contain him is what he has revealed by himself.

God is beyond. He is the sustainer of all things. We talk in the class that we've been going through, I made the creator-creature distinction. If God as the creator does not reveal himself to the creature, the creature would have no way to know who God is.

Other than the fact that God has made himself personally present in the world, that is the only way that we can know him. God refuses to come onto our terms.

The world is set up according to his terms. So, he's the creator. He's the sustainer. Third, he's the ruler of all. Look at 26. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on the face of the earth, having determined the allotted periods and boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him.

[14 : 24] 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 poets have said, for we are indeed 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 heart and imagination of men.

So, he's saying that God is not just the creator and sustainer, but he's the ruler of all. God is in charge of all history and all people at all times.

He is intimately and personally present in the world. I think it's cool that Paul even uses their pop culture to prove this point.

You know, they didn't have, you know, movies and music. Well, I'm sure they had music, but not like, you know, Spotify. And so he goes to the thing that they would have known.

They knew their poets. They knew the lyrics to these poetical songs. They knew this. And he's going to their own people to talk about the draw, the hunger that they have for knowing God, for knowing that there is a personal God who is personally present and active in the world.

[15 : 38] God himself, what Paul is saying is that God himself is the answer to your hunger. Okay. Creator, sustainer, ruler of all things. And fourth, look at verse 30.

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, meaning Christ, whom he has appointed.

And of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead. So Paul gets around to Jesus. By sending Jesus, what God has done is he has begun the judgment of the world that will ultimately set all things right.

But like Paul being provoked by the idolatry of the people, God doesn't first engage in judgment, but he sends Jesus as his revelation, as his one who would come to bring people to repentance.

And, you know, though Luke doesn't record any words about the crucifixion, this is probably a condensed version. I kind of think that Paul's sermon was longer than like two minutes. You know, he's a guy who could talk.

[16 : 57] So I think this is just Luke's condensed version of this. But because he's talking about the resurrection of Jesus, we can assume that he's telling the story of who Jesus was and about his death as well.

That in Jesus, God has entered the world in order to answer our hunger for God. You know, I think this is really similar to what the church might say today to people as we seek to answer the hunger that people have in our own culture for God.

The hungers to be known. The hunger for having a life that is meaningful. The hunger to be accepted, to be known, to have an identity, to have safety and security.

I mean, those are the things that most of your friends want, right? They want to be known. They want to have security and safety. They don't want to be just aimless in the world.

How does that sermon touch them? Well, I think it's really clear that if God is the creator, what that means is he's created you with dignity and purpose. You know, you can have an identity because of Christ that is not achieved, but it is received.

[18 : 16] It's not an identity that's built on your resume, on your accomplishments. It's an identity that is not something that you have to constantly be cultivating. An identity that is received from God because he is the one who created you.

That God is personally knowable. That he is active in the world. That he takes delight in his creation. That you can be known at a deep level.

Accepted for all of your weaknesses and frailties. That he is the ruler over all things. Which both gives us trouble because we don't understand all things, but it also gives us some confidence that there is someone who does.

It brings meaning to life. And we know that all of this is true because of the resurrection of Jesus. And in this Easter season, we need to hold on to that.

Because if the resurrection of Jesus is true, that means all of the other stuff is true. All of it. Every last bit of it. If you have the resurrection, you've got everything.

[19 : 23] And if you don't, you don't have anything. And what we know is that the resurrection of Jesus is as historically viable a truth as, you know, the conquest of Alexander the Great.

Of Constantine's victory and establishment of the Roman Empire. Historically, it is just as well attested. What you have to answer is, could Jesus really be raised from the dead?

So Paul answered the Athenian hunger for God with this robust vision of God being present in the world. And it was just as true for the people of ancient Greece and Athens of his day as it is true now for people who live in, you know, Athens, Georgia or Athens, Tennessee.

Very different kinds of places. And it's just as true for Paul's day as it is for our day. And I just want to say you may need to be, you might be a person who needs to hear that the unknown God that you hunger for is knowable and is full of grace.

He is. Okay, so what do we do with that? That's what he preached. That's what he did. What do we need to do with this? Well, I think it's funny.

[20 : 46] You know, this passage has inspired a lot of Christians. Preachers love to preach about this passage. But I don't really remember the last time that I walked by a street preacher and heard anybody actually listening to them.

Occasionally, you'll still see those and everybody just kind of annoys them or is annoyed by them and doesn't want to make eye contact. And typically, I think that the way that people process this passage is that they begin to think about, well, what is it that the people out there need?

You know, we make this big distinction between the people out there and the people in here. Well, Paul is preaching to the out there people. And so that's how we should, what we can learn from Paul is how to approach the out there, the other kinds of people.

One of my friends, Clark, who some of you have met, he's a missionary in Ukraine. Our church has supported him. He calls this the Fort God mentality. I love this. The Fort God mentality that, you know, that we as Christians are in Fort God.

And our job is to protect and to hold and to keep those people out. You know, the other people. To make sure that their ideas and their thoughts and their things don't get in here because then we'll become secular.

[21 : 58] Well, there's a problem with that is because there's just as much hunger for God inside the church as there is outside of the church.

The Fort God does not work. Earlier, I said I'd read two articles this week that I thought were interesting. The second one was, and I put both of these there, they're on the website under that little note sheet if you want to, you know, click your camera on the QR code.

The second one is from a writer and a pastor named Russell Moore. And he's a Southern Baptist guy and he was writing about this new Gallup poll that came out in the last couple of weeks.

You may have seen some news on this showing that for the first time since they began charting these demographics that fewer than 50% of Americans belong to a church of any type.

Fewer than 50%. That's the first time that's happened. The fastest growing religious group in the United States is what we call the nuns, people who have no particular religious affiliation of any type.

[23 : 02] And so as you look generationally, as you go down the generations, Boomer, Gen X, Millennial, Gen Z, there's a Y in there somewhere, I don't know where, the numbers fall dramatically in terms of the rates of belonging.

Philip Jenkins is a sociologist and he says this, that the future of the U.S. is none, is the nuns. That's where we're headed.

But when you begin to look behind the Gallup numbers, and this is what Moore was writing about, is what you see is that a big factor in the rapid secularization of the United States is actually that people are leaving the conservative, orthodox, evangelical, Bible-believing churches.

What we're seeing is that the problems are not just out there, the problem is in here. It's in the church. Fort God is not a thing.

That doesn't work. What Russell Moore is arguing is that people are leaving. Many of them are the young people, and this has been influenced by COVID, but this is actually predates, these trends predate COVID, and they're leaving for this reason.

[24 : 24] He says because they are disillusioned and cynical. Why? Well, I mean, there's, you know, the church scandals, there's the Roman Catholic sex abuse and abuse in other places.

There's clergy who are abusing their power in all kinds of ways. There's Christians who look no different morally from non-Christians. There's the perception that the church is essentially a vehicle for partisan politics on the left and the right.

Here's, I want to read an extended portion from what Russell Moore says. So listen to this. He says this, the problem now is not that people think that the church's way of life is too demanding, too morally rigorous, but they have come to think that the church doesn't actually believe its own moral teachings.

The problem is not that they reject the idea that God could send anyone to hell, but that when they see the church covering over predatory behavior in its institutions, they then have the evidence that the church must believe that God would not send our kind of people to hell.

If people reject the church because they reject Jesus and the gospel, we should be saddened, but not surprised. But what happens when people reject the church because they think the church rejects Jesus and His gospel?

[25 : 53] If people leave the church because they want to gratify the flesh with abandon, such has always been the case, but what happens when people leave because they believe that the church only exists to gratify its own flesh, whether in sex or anger or materialism?

That's a far different problem. And what if people don't leave the church because they disapprove of Jesus, but because they've read the Bible and have come to the conclusion that the church itself might disapprove of Jesus?

That is a crisis, he says. I want to summarize what Russell Moore is saying this way. People are leaving the church not because they don't have a hunger for God.

They're leaving the church because they have a deep hunger for God and they're not finding Him at church. You know, I think sometimes we read passages like this and with Paul preaching in this glorious setting and we just start to think about how we should get ready to go talk to all those people out there, but that is not the point.

The point is that Paul was so deeply connected to Jesus, so powerfully moved by the Spirit that when an opportunity to proclaim came about, he was ready for that.

[27 : 23] The point of this passage is not, Christian, go out and preach on the street corner. The meaning of this passage is, Christian, go and be united to Jesus.

Go, if you want to see people come to know Christ, here's what you need to do. You need to go home and shut your door and open your Bible and get on your knees and pray to the Lord of the one who makes people come to Him.

You need to go home and be united to Christ so deeply in your own life that when the opportunity comes that God might use you, you would be ready for that. We could say it this way, that grace and peace, we as a church, will never become a church that has a powerful presence in our community until God Himself has a powerful presence in the lives of His people in our community.

We will not be equipped to do the kind of restorative gospel work in this neighborhood until you have been restored by the grace of Jesus in your own life.

We will not be able to disciple our children until you have sat at the feet of Jesus. We will not be able to be a place of comfort for the hurting and the distressed until you have found the comfort of Christ in the midst of your own failures.

[28 : 51] We will not be a place that will feed the spiritually hungry until you yourself have been deeply fed and sit satisfied on the body and the blood of Christ.

Friends, what we're seeing of Paul here is a deeply intuitive spiritual life that is then put into practice to answer the hungers of other people.

Boy, wouldn't it be amazing if we were the kind of people that when they met us they knew that we could answer the hunger that they have for God. Wouldn't it be amazing if our children as they were raised up realized that their hunger for God was met in the church?

That we put our own pursuit of God as the first and primary thing about our church, not our reputation and our ministries and the stuff that we do.

It may not work. I mean, just look at Paul. Did you see the end of this? Verse 32, Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked.

[30 : 13] Some mocked. That's not surprising. Not everyone is going to come just because you are united deeply to Jesus. But others said, We'll hear you more.

So Paul went out from their midst. But some men joined him and believed among whom were also Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them. It's legend tells us, we're not sure if this is true, but legend tells us that Dionysius was the first bishop of Athens and also the first martyr in Athens.

I don't know what the story for grace and peace is going to be. but what I know is we will never be equipped to be a part of that unless we begin to pursue God.

Unless you begin to pursue Him in your own life. Unless your hunger is fed by Him. And every Sunday we give you the opportunity to feast upon Him as we come to the table.

It's the reason we do that is to remind you and that's part of the reason we only give you a little bit is to make you hungry. To make you hungry for Him. That you will not be satisfied with anything else.

[31 : 41] May that be so of us. We pray it in Christ's name. Amen. We don't pray it. I'm thinking about praying. We'll just end there.

Heavenly Father. I made you inoserta. Absolutelymee. Amen. Thank you. Have a great day.■ We'll see you next time.