

Challenging the Philosopher

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[0 : 00] I'd like to share with you what I think is one of the most universal human tendencies and also one of the most stupid.

And that is that all of us have a tendency to want to domesticate our maker. All of us want to put God in a box and control him and make him smaller than he is and tame him and make him more predictable and more of what we would like him to be to put us in charge.

Everywhere you go you will find people trying to do this and Paul found it in Athens. People like the idea of having a God, sure, but they want God to be safe.

They want him to be more safe than he actually is. They want God to only make predictable and doable demands of us. They want God to be kind of lonely and inadequate and need us to sort of fulfil what he lacks.

People want God to be so safe that we can manipulate him when we have, say, a health crisis, but when that's sort of averted then we can just put him back on the shelf or back in his box.

[1 : 20] We want a safeguard that will keep our children out of trouble but won't call them to missionary service and take the grandchildren overseas and in danger for the gospel.

We want a safeguard that somehow blesses our household and is there on the plaque on the dining room wall or something but is not actually the lord of the relationships in this household or doesn't actually command and transform the way people relate in this household.

We don't want that but we just want God to somehow bless it in a vague, safe way. This is everywhere we go. People wanting to domesticate God and it is not only ignorant, it is stupid and foolish.

As Paul the apostle visits the ancient city of Athens pretty much at its peak of glory as an intellectual capital of philosophy and of religion and of the arts and the sort of best of what human creativity has to offer, he's not happy.

He visits Athens and well, let's see what happens. So follow with me in chapter 17 verse 16. While Paul was waiting for them, that's Silas and Timothy in Athens, he's waiting for his ministry team to come.

[2 : 42] He was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. Athens was smothered in attempts to domesticate God and it upset Paul because he has met the risen Jesus.

He's met the glorified Son of God. He knows the true and living God and so he's upset when that God is not heeded and known and proclaimed and when he's denied by these creative human expressions of domesticating God, of idolatry, of our temples, of images.

Idols make no demands of you. Idols are dumb, they don't speak. And idols can be visible and invisible. They can be statues. They can also be in your heart. But when you domesticate God, that's idolatry.

No real sacrificial demands are made of you and you're allowed to nurture your cherished sort of sins with an idol but not with the living God.

And in fact, as Paul engages with this, he not only preaches the gospel in the synagogue, which is his practice, he has a debate in the marketplace in the public square with some of the Athenian philosophers and they really seem to have no idea what he's talking about.

[3 : 59] They think he's proclaiming foreign divinities. They think he's proclaiming two gods actually. One god called Jesus and another god called Anastasia, which is the Greek word for resurrection.

So Paul's there trying to debate and argue with people rightly about the truth about the resurrection of Jesus, the son of God. And they think he's talking about different divinities, one called resurrection and one called Jesus.

Now the question for us today, and I think this is going to be how Paul challenges the Athenians, is, is the God that you worship as a Christian the true and living and unsafe, uncontainable God of the Bible or have you actually got God smaller than he is?

Have you actually domesticated God in your Christian faith? Have you actually got God in a box? Because if that is the natural human tendency, it won't go away even though we're Christians and we worship Jesus.

We're still going to try and find ways to limit God and to make him need us in ways that aren't biblical. So let's see what Paul says to them about God.

[5 : 09] He kind of gives them kind of a theology 101 or the ABCs of what you should know about God. He tells them, Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way.

For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, to an unknown God. So where is Paul now?

Well, he's at Mars Hill. He's at the Areopagus Forum and Council of the Philosophers of Athens. And he's addressing them. And this is really the first sermon in Acts to such a group of complete pagans and thoughtful pagans.

But, you know, they are a long way from knowing anything about the God of the Bible. And so you can really see Paul giving to them Christianity 101, the very basics about what we should think about our maker.

And he says, you're very religious, but pretty much the best you've got amongst all this sort of idolatry is the one that says to an unknown God. I think the implication is they're admitting defeat.

[6 : 15] They're admitting by having even that idol that the whole realm of their idols is just guesswork. So he says, what you proclaim as unknown, I'll proclaim to you as known.

I'll bring to you as authorised by Jesus, as an apostle, Paul brings true revelation about who God is. He says, it begins with creation.

The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands.

So Paul begins with a pretty harsh refutation of everything they do religiously by saying, God is the God who is the creator.

He's the God who made Mount Everest. He's the God who makes continents. He makes the planets. He makes the stars. He's the God of the universe. You cannot think that that God lives in a shrine made by human hands.

[7 : 17] Do you see how foolish that is, is what Paul is saying. He's the ever-living, all-powerful, all-sustaining God. How can you think you can just make something and say that's what we worship?

That's the stupidity of idolatry. That's the stupidity of the human tendency to want to domesticate God. So Paul begins by telling the Athenians, don't fool yourself.

Don't fool yourself. So again, we need to ask that of ourselves. Do you think that you can have God on tap just when you need him as a Christian and then ignore him most of the days of your week?

Do you think that you can just call on God when you're feeling a bit too guilty? You can just come to church and confess your sins and then go about ignoring God and sinning more and more until the next time?

You can't just draw on God in that kind of casual, once-in-a-while way. You can't think that you've done God a favour by giving one day of the week to him but not serving and obeying and loving and worshipping him the rest of your week.

[8 : 27] As you enter the workplace, you can't put God on the shelf and leave him at home. That's actually, in effect, keeping God in the shrine of Sunday, if that makes sense.

God does not live in shrines, is what Paul is saying. Made by human hands, you cannot contain him. And Paul gets more controversial in verse 25. I think this is probably the most stunning part of the sermon.

So God, this is a very basic truth, but one forgotten that God does not need us.

God does not need anyone. He's not served by human hands as though he needed anything. I mean, it's very humbling for us to think about that. God is self-sufficient.

He has no weaknesses for which we are here to prop him up. He has no deficiencies or needs for helpers or servants or workers.

[9 : 38] He's God. He's overflowingly self-sufficient in himself. He is overwhelmingly happy in himself.

Remember, this is what the Trinity means. God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit within himself forever, eternally. God's never been lonely.

Never will be. So we cannot think that as Christians, God needs us or that we feel a hole in God's heart. That God is lonely and kind of needs to fill heaven to have some company.

He does not need that. He's God. That is Paul's God, the God of the Bible. And he never gets tired. He never needs our help for some tiredness or some fatigue on his part.

He doesn't get down. He's God. This is Paul's God. So different to us. So different. My life is like a graph that goes up and down. I have times where I'm thriving and times where I'm down and depressed and thriving again.

[10 : 50] My life's a roller coaster. And I get fatigued and my energy splutters. God is not like that, is he? He can't be.

He's God. He made us. He's giving us life. And he sustains life. God is like the never-ending waterfall of just self-sufficient glory.

That is God. That is Paul's God. And so to the Athenians, well, to some of them, that's bad news. Because they're in the trade of domesticating God and imaginatively, creatively giving people idols. Safe gods. But that's not who God is. And telling people that they need to do these things with the idols. Otherwise, the idol needs their help. And God needs them to lay fruit or to make the shrine bigger or something like that.

God doesn't do that. That's not God. If you've come today thinking that God needs you here, you're doing God a favour by being here, well, that's wrong.

[11 : 54] He doesn't need you. If you think that by doing your good works or even by working hard at the Autumn Fair, you're helping the kingdom of God in a way that it otherwise would be hindered, that the whole kingdom of God would stop if you didn't help, well, clearly that's not true.

If you take pride in thinking that you help God with a weakness or an inadequacy, then you're so wrong. But if, on the other hand, you know that you're a flawed human being, you know that even your best efforts for God contain much sin of pride and bad motives, bringing glory to yourself, you know, really, end of the day, you've got nothing to give God.

Well, then this is the best news in the world. Because flawed people, that's me, needy people like you and me, we now have somewhere to go to, to the God who has no needs.

We have somewhere to go as needy people to the God who has no needs. So our God is a God who delights in actually sharing his self-sufficient glory with us in our need, but he doesn't need us. Think about, did Jesus teach this? I think the most important thing Jesus ever said was this, The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

[13 : 30] Jesus made very clear that he doesn't need us to serve him. His mission, the gospel, is about God serving us, and God dying in his Son as a ransom to redeem us.

We do not contribute to that, and even as redeemed Christians, there's a sense in which God does not need us. It's a beautiful thing that God delights to serve us, and share in the kingdom with us, and overflow grace and bounty with us, and to invite us into his company, into his eternally joyful, glorious presence.

presence, that's for our privilege and honour. In fact, I think even that's why God commands you to serve. Not because it's needed, but because it's for your benefit.

It's for our honour, and it's our privilege to serve God. It brings, the hymn we sung had a line there, doing his will is our soul's pleasure.

That's a good way to describe it, that it's actually for our benefit, that we have to work hard for the kingdom. It's not for God's benefit. And not only does God not need us, Paul goes on to say, from one ancestor, he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth.

[14 : 50] He allotted the times of their existence, and the boundaries of the places where they would live. Now, this is important, because so often when you establish that God is God, and not only are we separate, but he does not need us, the other tendency then is to sort of say, well, God's gone away.

You know, deism. God is just a long way away, and he's just left the universe doing its thing. That's not true. Paul says, God is intimately involved in sustaining the universe, in allotting where people live, and which nation and which country they are born into, and where they go.

And so God has been intimately involved in all our lives, and to put us where we are, to put us in Doncaster, and not Geelong, or, you know, not Sri Lanka.

You know, we are here because God has placed us here, and when we have moved, God has moved us, and taken care of us, wherever we have gone. So God is intimately involved in sustaining us, in our lives.

Even people who do not acknowledge him, are dependent on him. And he's done this so that they would search for God, and perhaps grope for him, and find him, though indeed he is not far from each one of us.

[16:07] God's will is this, that we would reach out to him, that we would grope for him, not because he can't do anything until we grope. I think that the illustration is that, in acknowledging our dependence on him, we would cry out to him.

In surrendering our illusion of autonomy, our illusion of independence, our stupid illusion of freedom, that we would reach out to God, and know him, and have our needs met by him, and in his son.

Paul quotes some of their own philosophers. In him we live and move and have our being, as even some of your own poets have said, for we too are his offspring.

And since we are God's offspring, and he quotes their poets, and then kind of turns it on its head, and rebukes them as well. Since we are God's offspring, as you say, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, or an image formed by the art, and imagination of mortals.

Paul is telling them very strongly, that their whole spirituality, their whole religion, is wrong. It's fanciful, it's being imaginative, it's being creative, but it's not how God is.

[17:33] It's not how God is. So often you hear people talk like this, they say, talking about God with someone, they say, I like to think that God is X, Y, Z.

I say, I like to imagine that God is kind of like X, Y, Z. And really what they're acknowledging is, they're just sort of projecting, what they would like God to be like, rather than basing it on God's own revelation, through the scriptures.

We cannot actually know God through guessing. We can only know God through revelation, and that revelation comes in the form of the scriptures. And ultimately, the scriptures peak, in the giving of the incarnate Lord Jesus, where God reveals himself by entering the world.

And that's where Paul's headed, in the climax of his sermon. He says, while God has overlooked, the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent.

To repent of their imagination God, to repent of their domesticated God, to repent of their idols. The time has come for that to stop. Why has that come now?

[18:43] Because of Jesus. Because of Jesus. Because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged, in righteousness, by a man whom he has appointed.

And of this he has given assurance to all, by raising him from the dead. Paul doesn't mention the name Jesus at this point, but it's clear he's talking about.

He's saying that in the resurrection of Jesus, God has declared him to be the judge of the world.

And that's been the message of the book of Acts, actually, that in the resurrection and ascension, Jesus declared our Lord and Christ, king of the world, the world's true Lord, and the world's true judge.

And therefore, because the resurrection has happened, we cannot let people stay in ignorance any longer. We must point them to Jesus, to the true and living God, his Father.

And we must do that before he returns to judge. Instead of just letting us stay ignorant, God has been so good. He's actually, in his mercy, shown us what he is like.

[19:54] He's revealed himself to us in his Son, so that we don't have to guess, we don't have to domesticate him, we don't have to play games and just imagine. We can actually know what he's truly like.

Friends, let me encourage you to not fool yourself about where you stand with God. He doesn't need you. You need him. Now, you may ask the question, you know, if God doesn't need us, why does he want us to grope for him and find him?

If God is happy in himself, why does he save us and bring us to him? We've answered this in part, but I think the Bible all throughout says that God works for his own glory.

God delights in, he takes joy in giving joy. He takes joy in sharing his glory with his creation. He takes joy when needy people come to him for help.

So when we come to God, we don't give him things that help him, we give him our needs. Do you see? What do we give God? We give him our needs and then he gets the glory. We give him our need, desperate need for forgiveness and he meets it in the gospel and forgives us.

[21 : 15] We give him our desperate need for daily help in prayer and he meets it by taking care of us and carrying us through the day. We give him our need for eternal life and he grants it to us.

We give him our need for insight with all the decisions that we face and he grants wisdom and help. See, we do not need God.

We need God, but he does not need us. Got to get that right. God doesn't need us. Now let me just close with this illustration. Imagine that you are on a shipwrecked boat.

You're on a lifeboat and there's about sort of eight people on the lifeboat and the Titanic sunk. You're the survivors. You're on open sea.

There's no hope of rescue or anything. You're just you on the boat. And immediately some of the blokes say, let's start fishing and get some fish. Someone's made a little shelter in the boat to protect you.

[22 : 14] But everyone knows in the boat the biggest problem is going to be water. Without water you won't live and there's no clean water. And just say that you happen to have done scouts and you know on the boat how to desalinate water with a piece of plastic and you happen to find a little piece of plastic and you get a cup and you work all day every day to put some seawater on and whatever you do to desalinate water.

I don't know how it works. I'm not that guy. But say you're the water guy and every day you get one cup of water and people live.

And you're just hoping that someone's going to find you over the weeks. Now you might feel good about yourself because people are going, I'm glad that water guy's here. You know, we'd be dead without him and you're working all day for a little cup of water and everyone gets a little sip.

You might actually start to feel good about being on the boat that you have a role to play that you contribute. But then one day you see a seagull and then you see an island. It's a big island and you get to the island and what's there?

Well, there's a massive waterfall. What are you going to do? You're suddenly not needed. You know, you're going to say let's stay out on the boat where I can make you water.

[23 : 31] You're going to let them go to the land and you stay on the boat. Well, what would you do? You would go to the island. You would throw away your plastic and your cup and all your little paraphernalia.

You would go to the waterfall and get on your knees and drink and be satisfied. That's what you would do. And that is what it's like knowing God. You just drink from God and be satisfied and know him and enjoy him and love him and praise him for the fact that he has included you in his kingdom. That is what it's like being a Christian. God has no need of us but we need him and he delights to involve us in the preaching of the gospel.

He doesn't need us for it but he delights in sharing us in it. So friends, let me encourage you to remember don't contain God.

Don't try and domesticate God. God delights to turn us from those futile idolatrous tendencies and he loves us to come to him with unwavering submission to his beautiful all-sufficient son and that is what being a Christian is.

[24 : 45] So let's praise him. Lord Jesus, we honour you. God the Father, we honour you. We praise you that you are all happy within yourself, that you are all sufficient, that you have no needs.

Lord God, we praise you that you have delighted to not only expand or express your glory in creation, that you have delighted to express your glory to us in salvation.

We thank you for this privilege and we pray that we may be ever mindful of this and ever seeking to be satisfied by you, seeking to be satisfied by your word from where we alone get clear revelation of your greatness and of your power.

So Lord God, protect us from the tendency to want to domesticate you and from the new and novel ways which people create to do that and make us faithful and bold in speaking the truth about you to your world.

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