

Acts 17:16-34

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[0 : 00] Lord, we thank you for the gift of your word, and we ask that your spirit will guide us today as we study it, that you may give us life and turn us towards you. In Jesus' name, amen.

That's it. Good morning. As been mentioned earlier, my name is Kevin, and I'm one of the Apiso apprentices, and I'm from King's Cross, and it's really great to be here with you all this morning. So, in our passage today, we are looking at the Apostle Paul in the city of Athens. It's the cultural capital of the Greco-Roman world, and this is where Paul gives his famous ariotic speech. And this speech is a masterclass, a masterclass in defending the faith in a holistic, multicultural society, much like our city today. But as much as we should learn from how Paul presents the gospel in the speech, that's not really what we're going to do this morning, because this speech is not primarily a blueprint for us to follow.

So, it's actually a warning for us to heed. And it's a warning against idolatry. And it shows us that there's much more to idolatry than meets the eye.

[1 : 23] So, we're going to look at that three forms of idolatry today. One, the first one, is very easy to recognize. It's what we think about when we think about idolatry. And there are two others that are a lot more hidden and mirrorful in cities.

So, let's get into it. So, first, when we think about idolatry, we think statues, temples, rituals, sacrifices. And these things come to mind when we hear the word.

And in the Greco-Roman world, idol worship was not really optional. It wasn't a lifestyle choice. It was woven into the fabric of society.

And if you lived in a city, your city would have its own thoughts. If you work in profession, the profession would have its own thoughts. If you came from a prominent family, you might even have your own household thoughts.

And, of course, everybody worshipped the thoughts of fertility and wealth and power. And if you know anything about the city of Athens, if you've been there or you've been seeing pictures of it, you know, it's famous for its temples and shrines, the architecture.

[2 : 29] And so was the case in Paul's day as well. He saw the city was full of idols. And they are all very impressive. But this is what he says about them. These idols, they live in temples.

They're served by human hands. They're made from gold, silvers, and stone. And they're fashioned by the art and imagination of men. And Paul argues that this is not at all what a true God is like.

The true God made everything. He does not live in little temples. He gives us food and life and breath, not the other way around. So Paul is making his case, and he calls for repentance.

And so far, this all sounds very standard. It's the kind of thing that Paul says every time he's talking or speaking to Gentiles, pagan arguments. And if you're reading through Acts, you can start to feel a little bit repetitive, even.

But there's a lot more to this passage. And I think the key to this passage is at the very beginning. So Paul is preaching in the marketplace. And in verse 18, this is what we read.

[3 : 40] Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus. So this seems like an offhand detail remark of how Paul ended up at the Areopagus.

But it matters because it tells us the kind of audience Paul is speaking to. See, most of the time when Paul speaks to Gentiles, we're not really told who's there.

It's just a kind of nameless, baseless, blog, if you will, pagan people. And how I sometimes imagine it, it's kind of like those reality shows where you see interviews of random people on the street.

Right? You hold up the map, and then you point to a country, you ask them if they know what country that is. And generally, they tend to make four of themselves. But that is not what we have

here.

Here, Paul is speaking to a highly elite group of people. Some of them are philosophers, as we saw. And that immediately tells us that they are wealthy.

[4 : 52] Because in that time, when you know, perhaps the vast majority of people were slaves or living in poverty, the only wealthy would have time for philosophy.

So we have these philosophers there. And they bring him before the Areopagus. And the Areopagus, if you know, is the council that ruled the affairs of the city of Athens.

So these are influential people, connected people, the cultural, the intellectual, the political elites. These are not people you pull off the streets.

These are the kind of people you would invite to panels, conferences, talk shows. And specifically, we're told that some of them are Epicureans and Stoics.

And these are two very influential philosophical groups, philosophical traditions, if you will. And we still have their writers today. And we know what they believe about God, about ethics, about the universe, and so on.

[5 : 54] And they disagree about many things. But there is actually one thing that they share. One belief that they share. And it's a belief that I think might make us rethink this whole passage.

So get this. Neither of them believed in idols. That's right. By and large, they dismissed idol worship as superstitious. And in fact, they would look down on the masses who mindlessly follow the popular religion of the day.

And so here's the question for us all. Why is Paul preaching against idols to this group of people who are already skeptical of them? Why would you accuse them of idolatry?

And this might be the most interesting question about this passage. And I think it's trying to show us that idolatry is far more subtle than a matter of rational belief. And there are two ways this can play out.

First, even if you don't believe in idols, you can still practice idolatry. Just because you don't believe something rationally doesn't mean you can't do it.

[7 : 06] Just because you don't believe in, say, homeopathy doesn't mean you can't drink a liter of the stuff. And some of these philosophers probably still participated in civil religious rituals.

Others may not have participated in them directly, but would have sanctioned them, would have perhaps funded them, to let them continue. And it's not so difficult to imagine why they would do that.

Perhaps they looked at Athens' awe-inspiring temples, and they thought, you know, that's the proof of our cultural superiority. Perhaps they used religion as a tool to maintain social order and civil content.

And perhaps they simply went along to fulfill family traditions or civic duties. There could be lots of reasons you can probably think of a few yourself. But the point of these reasons is that they are the very same pressures and temptations that we face today.

There might be things that we rationally know is wrong or untrue, yet we're still tempted to take part or turn the blind eye.

[8 : 20] And so that is the first subtle form of idolatry that we see in this passage. And when you participate without belief, Paul goes one step further.

Because idolatry is not merely bowing down before false gods. It's also thinking falsely about the true God. Even if they didn't believe in any of these idols, and even if they never worshipped them or participated in the rituals, the issue is that they still did not know the true God.

So this is the other form of idolatry. And it's a distortion of who God is. So listen to Paul's charge in verse 30. The time of ignorance God overlooked.

But now he commands all people everywhere to repent. Repent of what? Ignorance. Paul is accusing them of ignorance. And I hope that we all see the irony here.

Because Athens was known for wisdom. The city was named after Athena, the goddess of wisdom. And it's the birthplace of Western philosophy. So the elites of Athens thought they were wise.

[9 : 40] But Paul says, no. You claim to be wise. But you really are fools. See, the Epicureans, they believed that God was distant or unevolved in human affairs.

And the Stoics believed that God was a force within the created universe itself. They thought they knew something about who God is. But they were profoundly mistaken.

And A.W. Tozer once wrote this. He said, what comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.

The most important thing. And it's right because our view of God shapes everything else in life. And today, in the unangelical world, we often hear idolatry described as a disordered love.

It's loving something, a good thing, more than God himself. And that rightly shows us this one aspect of idolatry. But here's the other aspect, which is often overlooked.

[10 : 48] And it's not about not love. It's not loving the wrong things, but thinking wrongly of God. And so having a distorted view of the guilt of God, or his attributes, is idolatry.

And us Christians can fall into that too. It's very easy for us to drift back into a kind of thinking that resembles these pagan philosophers. Sometimes we think like the Epicurians.

Perhaps when we indulge in our secret sin, we like to imagine a distant God who doesn't see, doesn't care. Or sometimes we think like the Stoicists, when we rely only on our own moral efforts.

Then we can imagine God as this impersonal moral force. And so Christianity turns into self-improvement. And our obedience just feeds our pride and hubris.

And so every time we replace the true God with a virgin we find more comfortable, useful, flattering, we fall right back into idolatry. And so I hope we see how this text reveals these subtle forms of idolatry to us.

[12 : 03] And Paul says that these two, God will bring to judgment. And that takes us to repentance. And this is what Paul calls for. He says, Turn from these false images back to the true God.

Because the true image, Jesus Christ, has come. And the good news for us today is that we can repent. And we can be reconciled with Him.

Because of what He has done. The God who does not dwell in temples came to be born in nature. The God who needs no human servant became a servant to all.

And the God who gives life and breath to all gave up His own life and breath for us. And this is the God who was crucified and has not been raised.

So let us turn to Him now. The true temple, the true wisdom, the true image. Amen. Amen. .

[13 : 05] .