

# Acts 17:16-34

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[0:00] Friends, while you're standing, let me pray for us. Heavenly Father, would you open our hearts to hear your word this morning. In Christ's name, Amen. Well, good morning, everybody.

Good morning. It's really nice to see you all. If you're brand new, my name is Aaron. I'm one of the ministers on staff here at St. John's. And if you are new, also, just to let you know, we're in a sermon series right now in the book of Acts, and we're looking at what happens when the gospel comes to a city.

And this week we're in Acts 17, and it's the story of Paul arriving in Athens. And I have two simple points to make, two simple points. Point one, let's be provoked.

Point two, but let's be smart. One, let's get provoked. Two, but let's be smart about it. First, let's be provoked.

Let's be provoked. So Paul arrives in Athens. And he's waiting around for his friends, and they're not there yet, so he decides to go for a walk.

[1:07] And Athens would have been a very impressive place. Super intellectual, culturally sophisticated, lots of amazing buildings, but it was spiritually very, very wonky, spiritually very quirky, spiritually very idolatrous, all over the show.

Verse 16. Now, while Paul was waiting for them in Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw the city was full of idols.

So, while Paul is walking around, he just sees temple after temple after temple after temple, and his spirit is provoked. Now, I don't know if you've ever had that kind of visceral, emotional response to a place before.

I have. I remember the very first time I went to Disneyland. I walked through the ticket booth, turned the corner, it was Main Street, there was the castle at the end, and I just started weeping with joy. It's a true story. I was 28 at the time. I don't know. This is true. Which makes the story slightly less cute.

[2:23] I appreciate that. So, Paul wasn't having tears of joy, though, was he? He was provoked in his spirit. Now, what does that word provoked mean?

Well, it's a mixture of grief and anger. He's sad because these people are spiritually lost, and he's angry because he wants God to be honored and worshiped, like we talked about in our opening scripture sentences, ascribed to the Lord.

He wants to see that happening, but all his worship is being wasted on statues, and God is being dishonored. So he's angry about that. He's sad, and he's angry. And one of the things I love about this verse here is that as tremendously as impressive as Athens was, culturally and architecturally and intellectually, Paul wasn't intimidated.

He wasn't intimidated by this place. No, he was grieved. He was angry. Our modern Western cities are much like Athens, aren't they? They're impressive places. A place like Vancouver, it's pretty educated, pretty prosperous, pretty advanced.

I think what I want to say to you this morning is don't be intimidated by Vancouver. Don't be intimidated by all the sophisticated people here. I just wonder if sometimes we might go to a gathering and we're afraid to be public about our faith because we're like surrounded by all these clever people with amazing careers.

[3:55] And we don't want to bring up our faith because we don't want them to think we're stupid or simple or at a step with such a wonderfully progressive place as Vancouver.

Friends, our gut response to Vancouver should be grief and anger because it's a spiritually really confused place.

We've just got to see it with spiritual eyes and not just cultural eyes. And I think if you look at Vancouver with spiritual eyes, you do that, you'll begin to feel what Paul felt about Athens. He grieved over it. Like Jesus grieved over Jerusalem in Luke 19, he wept. They both saw what people were giving their lives to and they had this visceral response to it.

We won't have the courage to be public about our faith unless we feel what Jesus and Paul felt about the cities that they were looking at.

[ 4 : 58 ] I read a while back that evangelism starts with sadness. That was really good. Evangelism starts with sadness. So let me ask you a hard question here.

Do you feel that grief about your non-believing friends? Did you once feel it but it's faded a bit because you sort of look at them and you think, well, you know what, they're pretty happy. They've got good careers. They're secure. They're nice people. Let's bring our hearts to God and let's ask Him to give us the love and sadness that Paul and Christ had for the people of their city so we would have the courage to talk about Jesus.

Okay, where are we in the sermon? Well, we're still just at verse 16 here. Paul, he saw the temples. He saw temple after temple after temple. He saw, he felt.

He didn't just notice the idols. He saw them and he thought and he thought and he thought and the indignation grew in him. He saw, he felt, and then he spoke.

[ 6 : 15 ] But he didn't just go in with indignation and rage or he wasn't just crying over them as well. He brought logic and he brought clarity and he was smart about it. So let's move to my second point.

Second point. So first point, let's be provoked by our city, not intimidated by it. Second point. But let's be smart about it. Let's be smart about it. What do I mean by that? How was Paul smart in how he engaged with people in this particular occasion?

Well, his strategy in part was to show them the discontinuity in their own belief system. What do I mean by that? What I mean is he pointed out a few things. He made some observations. He asked some pointed questions.

And he was able to show people that their worldview was not super robust, that there were problems with it. And then after doing that, he shows them an alternative worldview based on Christ.

[ 7 : 13 ] And the strategy is described really well by Francis Schaeffer, who was a 20th century American theologian. He said, he's blowing the roof off their current house so they'll seek shelter somewhere else.

He's blowing the roof off their current house so they'll seek shelter somewhere else. So let's look at how he does that. But first we need to set the scene for a moment here, okay? So let's go big picture for just a minute. So Paul's in Athens, waiting around for his friends.

He's moved by all the temples and idolatry he sees. He starts preaching publicly. He's telling people about Jesus who was resurrected. Then some of the local philosophers start listening to him.

And they're all like, what are you babbling about, Paul? Verse 18. For them, it's all a bit amusing. It's amusing to them. But it is something new. And these philosophers, they loved debating new ideas.

That was their whole jam. That's what they did all day. They just debated philosophy. So they bring Paul to this special place where ideas are debated.

[ 8 : 18 ] It was like the court of intellectuals. It was called the Areocobus. And amazingly, they give him a chance to speak, to explain all this new religion to them, to a larger group of thinkers.

They say, okay, Paul, have at it. Give us your pitch. Give us your pitch for this new religion, which brings us to verse 22, Paul's sermon. So let's get into it. Let's look at Paul's sermon here.

Verse 22. He starts by saying, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. That's interesting, isn't it? Like, I think it's a backhanded compliment.

Like, I think that's what's going on. I think it's a bit like that. I'm not 100% sure, but I think so. So it's a bit like if I said, well, David's here this morning.

If you'd joined us for the last year and you didn't know David, and I said, oh, David, yeah, you'll always feel more intelligent about yourself after speaking to him. Like, is that?

[ 9 : 17 ] Like, what am I saying exactly? Is that a compliment? Or is that an insult? I feel like that's what Paul is doing here.

It's like really marginal. I don't know. It could go either way. Welcome back, David, by the way. Acts 17. Acts 17. Okay. Let's get back to Acts 17.

Paul goes on, verse 23. I found also an altar with the inscription to the unknown God. What therefore you worship is unknown. This I will proclaim to you.

So the unknown gods were the safety net gods for the Athenians. They were the just-in-case gods. Just in case he's a god who could do something for me that I don't know about, I'm just going to worship that god, and then I'll be sort of covered.

I think that was the thinking there. So Paul cleverly says, I noticed this temple of the unknown God, this god that you don't know about. Let me tell you about him. And then he preaches. And the sermon is verses 24 to 31.

[10:16] Remember, his strategy is to show the discontinuity in their belief systems. And again, what I mean is this. He's not trying to win an argument, which is not what evangelism is. We don't try and win arguments.

It's to show people that perhaps there are some internal contradictions in their worldview and to suggest that Christ has a more coherent explanation for reality. I'll say that again because it's really important.

Paul is not trying to win an argument. He's trying to get people. He's trying to get people to consider Christ. And the way he's done that in this particular situation is to show the internal contradictions in their worldview and to suggest that Christ is a more coherent explanation for reality.

So that's Paul's strategy here. Let's see how he does it. So the first contradiction, verse 24. He says, The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord over heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man.

Paul says, God made everything. God made everything. So does it make sense that God who created everything could be contained in a building that you made?

[11:25] Does that make sense? Does that really make sense? And then he doubles down in verse 26. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on the face of all the earth.

Paul says, You make these buildings to house your gods. But isn't it that God made a home for us and not the other way around?

That God made the earth for us and you're trying to make a thing to put him in? Does that make sense? He's highlighting these internal contradictions. The second discontinuity he highlights, verse 25. Nor is God served by human hands as though he needed anything, since he gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.

The background of this is that the people worship these pagan gods just to get things from them. So the pagan gods had to be sort of massaged emotionally with round-the-clock food offerings and rituals in order to get them to give you stuff that you thought you needed.

So the gods were just the means to an end. You know, you wanted money. You'd go to the money god and you'd do some things to make that god happy. Paul says, If there is a god who created us, does it make sense that that god would be needy?

[12:52] That would need us to do things to make them feel better about themselves so they give us things? Does that make sense to you guys? That's what he's saying to them.

His big point is God does not depend on us. We depend on God. Let me rattle off a few of these Athenian gods for you just to sort of get the point across.

So Athena was the goddess of what? Anyone know? Wisdom? Politics? Apparently in the temple they had a painting of Zeus with his head being split open and somebody reaching in and grabbing out his brain.

If you wanted to be smart, you'd go to that. You'd go to Athena. Artemis? The goddess of what? Anyone know? Money and prosperity. You wanted those things? You'd go and do some things in that temple.

Nike? Easy one. Victory? Yeah, victory. So the athletes would go to that one. Aphrodite? Love, sexuality. Well, that one came quite quickly actually.

[14:03] Cloakina. Cloakina. You know that one? It's the goddess of the sewer system. It's a true one. Very important.

It was a very important... I don't know how you worshipped here. Sometimes we light a candle in our bathroom.

Is that idolatry? I don't know. I'm just saying. But I'm worried about it now. I'm worried about it. So to get what you wanted, you'd have to manipulate these gods.

You just manipulate them to get what you wanted. Paul is saying, you're just playing. You're playing with these regional, special interest, minor deities, trying to stay in their good books through rituals and sacrifices.

What are you doing? You don't need to manipulate the one true God. The one true God is a giver. Verse 25.

[15:09] Nor is God served by human hands. As though he needed anything. It's not needy. Since he gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.

See, the God we know, you don't need to leverage. You don't need to bargain with. This is not a bargaining religion, Christianity. We don't have a transactional relationship with Jesus.

I do something for you. You do something for me. It's a great reminder because sometimes I think we do think we have a transactional relationship with God. Now, you might have a job interview coming up this week and you're thinking, oh, I'm going to read the Bible every day.

I'm going to read the Bible every day leading up to this because then, like, somehow God's in your debt. Like, he owes you the job now. See, the Athenians found their God useful.

That's not how we relate to our God. The Athenians, their gods liked attention. They could be manipulated. It was consumer spirituality.

[16:16] And Paul is saying, no, God does not need us. He does not need us. Yet, yet God still pursues us. That's how good he is. He still pursues us. And he still gives himself to us.

That's the nature of the one true God. And then Paul puts the sort of final nail in the coffin here in verse 29. 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.

It's a great line, isn't it? Here's the argument, the discontinuity. If God is creator of all, if that's true, you're crazy to think you can reduce God to something you can just hold in your hands. This little gold statue.

It's tempting, isn't it, though, to create a God that you can pop in a corner and reach out just when needed. Our God is so glorious and so transcendent.

Imagine trying to reduce him to something like that, something manageable. So, those are the discontinuities Paul brings to this conversation.

[17:26] It's brilliant, isn't it? It's very clear, very smart. And how does he finish up? How does he land the plane, so to speak? With one final discontinuity, actually. He says, if God is creator, then we're accountable to him.

So, verses 30 to 31. Look at what Paul says. He says, the times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed the 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. My question is, why bring up Christ as judge right now? It's interesting, isn't it? Why not bring up the cross?

Why bring up judgment day? Well, I think Paul is reading the room. I think he's reading the room and is getting to the heart of their particular idolatry.

The thing they loved the most was what? It was their intellect. And remember, that only brought Paul in to judge him and all his wacky ideas. They were there to judge this new God.

[18:32] And Paul says, God is not answerable to you. He will not be answerable to you. You will be answerable to him. He's not answerable to you. But you are answerable to him.

You brought me here to judge me and this God. But it's actually God who will be the judge. I remember getting a day operation at a clinic years ago.

It was a small thing. And the doctor asked me, because you're just awake the whole time. He goes, oh, what do you do for a job? I said, I'm a minister. And he says, what do you do all day?

Which is a great question. And I said, admin. I meet with people. I write sermons. I study. And he said, so what do you say when you meet people?

And I thought, goodness. This is an opportunity, isn't it? So I told him about Jesus. And I told him that he should take the claims of Jesus seriously.

[19:36] And at the end of the conversation, when it finished, it got very quiet. And he looked at me and he said, if what you say about Jesus is true and I do nothing about it, then I'm in trouble, aren't I?

And I said, yes, you are. And he left the room. Friends, sometimes I think it's okay to put the fear of God into people. I think that's okay sometimes. Paul's God, our God, is not like the Athenian gods who can be emotionally massaged with a few candles and chants.

And Jesus is not some tribal deity you can play games with. He's the creator of the universe. And one day we will give an account to him. What I really like about what Paul did here is that he doesn't just have this philosophical discussion, this theological discussion.

Those are easy to do. What he does is he actually leads it to a confrontation. And he invites a response, a response to repent.

And know the forgiveness through Jesus. Now, how did this effort from Paul go? Well, a few weeks ago I preached a sermon that had two points.

[ 20 : 48 ] The points were, preach the gospel. Second point, results may vary. And I think this is a great example of it. Because right at the end in verse 32, it says, Some mocked him. They just laughed at him.

Some delayed their response. They said, you know, we'll hear more about this. And others started to follow Jesus, which is wonderful. So, mixed response. So, let's wrap it up here.

Whenever Jesus is denied his rightful place in someone's life, it should sadden us.

It should sadden us. Don't just feel that sadness. Do something about it. Say something. Friends, do not be intimidated. Can I remind you?

You have the Holy Spirit. Can I remind you? You have 20 centuries of rigorous theology behind you. Can I remind you?

[ 21 : 46 ] You have 2 billion people in your corner around the world. Don't be intimidated. Like Paul, let's get out there. Let's be Christians in the marketplace. Let's be Christians in the schools and universities, in the retirement homes, and in the community centers.

Let's be shocked by what people are giving their lives to. And let's not shy away from bringing our faith, our reasoning, and our clarity to these situations. Let's make the unknown God known to people.

A God who cannot be manipulated. A God who is not capricious or fickle. A God who can't be contained or housed or handled. A God who is not needy.

But a God who gives and gives and gives and loves and loves and loves and who judges. Let's make that God known.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.