

# Presenting Jesus To Polytheists

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Preacher: Rev James Maciver

[ 0 : 00 ] Let's turn together now to Acts chapter 17. Acts chapter 17, the passage that we read a short time ago.

I'm going to look at the passage as we find it before us, but we can actually focus on verse 22, 23, 24, and so on.

If we read at verse 23, As much as you can, try and put yourself in Paul's shoes at that moment. Here he is in the leading city of Greece in this time, under the control, of course, of the Roman Empire. But it is the leading city of Greece, a metropolis, an intellectual and cultural center of the time, a metropolis of science, arts, philosophy, religion.

And here is this man who has just arrived in Athens, a man who himself has not been long a Christian, but is nevertheless committed to proclaiming the Lord that saved him so dramatically.

[ 1 : 34 ] How do you actually present Christ to polytheism? How do you present the claims of Christ in a city that's just crammed with idolatry?

How do you proclaim Jesus as Savior in a world that really is so committed to everything that's an alternative to the Christian religion?

And that obviously is a very up-to-date question. How do we present the gospel in the world of our day to those around us?

You don't find idols in the form in which they were found in Athens, all kinds of images, carved images of various kinds, that sort of display of idolatry.

But there is nevertheless a massive idolatry around us. People serve so many gods of their own creation, not least the God of human self.

[ 2 : 36 ] How do you present the gospel? How do you actually approach that situation? What would you and I do in Paul's shoes in Athens, in this great metropolis?

Of course, you admire God's providence in bringing him here. When you read through the chapter, indeed the earlier chapters, the various steps that led to Paul being placed in Athens in the providence of God.

That's a great study in itself. All the various turnings of events, the rejections, all the things that happened in these other cities and towns that he went through until here he is in Athens.

And while he was waiting for the others at Athens, we read in verse 16, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. That's the first point to note is, Paul's stirred up heart.

And then we'll look secondly at Paul's stirring message. Paul's stirred up heart, first of all. He is, as we read here, provoked.

[ 3 : 39 ] His spirit was provoked within him. His very soul was moved and provoked. And that word provoked literally means sharpened or put to the edge or set on an edge.

And you can see how worked up Paul was, not with anger or frustration, but with a sense just of how indignant he was against all that has caused this idolatry instead of worshipping the true God that he was bringing to them in his message.

You could imagine it was a combination of that plus grief of spirit and compassion for these people that were in such darkness.

His soul was stirred. It was really set on edge. Just like you would take a knife and sharpen the edge of it, here is what he is seeing around him, sharpening the edge of his soul.

And what he was led to actually say in the name of God in many ways rose from what he was seeing around him. He was provoked, as the word is here, into this kind of spirit, this kind of mindset, which led to him proclaiming the gospel in that particular setting.

[ 4 : 52 ] The cause, of course, was that it was full of idols. The city, when he saw that it was full of idols, his spirit was provoked within him.

And it raises the question, doesn't it? Are we provoked by the idolatry around us? We know about it. We pray about it. We've prayed about it tonight. We've appealed to the Lord to come and intervene, as he has in the past.

But how much are our souls really stirred up? How much are we really stirred up when we see other religions, for example, that we know are full of idolatry, set alongside the religion or the Christianity or the name of Christ and the exclusiveness of Christ that we know is to be protected by us and shielded and exalted in our own lifestyles?

Are we tonight provoked? Do we have that palpable sense of outrage at seeing the distortion of human activity on idolatry rather than it to be devoted to God, to the only through God?

Have we become somewhat so used to the situation that our souls have become somewhat numbed? Have we just come to the point or near the point where we say, well, that's just how it's been for such a long time.

[ 6 : 18 ] What can we do about it? And it's not likely to change. Are we losing our encouragement? Are we losing our sense of being provoked into action in regard to these things?

Well, there's the question that arises from looking at Paul's own spirit being provoked. He wasn't at all of the mind as he came into Athens to say, well, this is just how it is and I'm just one person.

What can I do about it? He came there knowing that God was with him, that he had the message that was far superior to anything that he would come across in this famous Areopagus and in this famous city of Athens that was so much known for its philosophy and its philosophers.

He was not ashamed of the gospel of Christ. He knew that it was superior. He knew that whatever views people had of it, in itself, he had God in the way that he had presented this gospel to Paul to actually present then to his fellow human beings.

And the next thing you see is 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.

[ 7 : 38 ] He's still waiting for his companions to come but he's not idle. He's not just looking for a place to sit down with a book and put his feet up and wait till something happens or to wait for his companions.

He didn't rule, he didn't say in his heart, well, I'll just have to wait for the others. Anyway, what can I do? I'm just isolated. I'm just here on my own and when my companions come then I'll be able to do something about what I see around me.

He reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews. He went to the synagogue, of course, where he began in the synagogue, as he often did, because one thing he knew about was the scriptures, the Old Testament scriptures, were readily available in the synagogue.

And he knew that he could reason from the Old Testament scriptures to Christ, that he would come from these prophecies and from these predictions and from these laws of the Old Testament and all the other scriptures of the Old Testament and that he would actually work his way towards this Jesus Christ and then present Christ as the fulfillment of these great prophecies of the past.

And he did the same when he came to the marketplace. He wouldn't have disputed there in a way that presented the scriptures the same way, of course.

[ 8 : 55 ] But there's something that really begins to show you that Paul is very adaptable as far as presenting the gospel is concerned. He doesn't present a different gospel, he doesn't present a different message, but he doesn't have the same starting place.

We'll see that in a minute. He doesn't have the same starting place in the synagogue as he has in the Areopagus. He can begin in the synagogue with the scriptures. He knows the people there know the scriptures.

When he goes to the Areopagus, they don't know the scriptures, so he doesn't begin there. But he comes to reason with them in the synagogue. And he also meets with devout persons, those probably who had actually been proselytized to join the Jewish religion, and also in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.

And of course he met the philosophers. There's a couple of types there mentioned, the Epicureans and Stoic, different branches of philosophy that he met with in the course of his reasoning.

Now, as he went to the marketplace, of course he would meet with people in a different way, but this is something that's important. Paul is not just an intellectual, a man of mighty intellect.

[ 10 : 11 ] He's quite concerned also for those that he meets with in the marketplace, if you like the ordinary people, not just the philosophers, not just those who are trained in religion somewhere in the synagogue, not just those who know their religion, but in the marketplace, where he meets with people in their daily business.

What is he doing there? He is reasoning with them. You see, the word reasoning, it actually covers what he does in the synagogue, what he does with the devout persons, what he does in the marketplace every day.

That's important, because although he presents it in a different style, though he presents it from different starting points, he presents this gospel from different starting points, he is in every sort of context reasoning.

He is reasoning because he knows that God has created the human mind with a capacity for truth. Even though it's a fallen human mind, even though it's an idolatrous human mind, nevertheless he knows the importance of getting to the mind of those that he's dealing with, whether it's in the marketplace, or in the synagogue, or with the devout persons, he wants to reason with them. And that's used often in Acts. You'll find it later as he comes to the likes of Felix and with Agrippa. He reasons with them. He doesn't just present truth to them and says, now this is what I have to tell you.

[ 11 : 35 ] This is the account that I'm going to give you of Jesus Christ and of the gospel. Here it is. Just make of it what you will. No, he reasons with them. He wants to try as far as possible to get into the workings of their mind, to just drive the truth into their mind.

Now, Paul knows very well he's not going to convert these people himself. He knows very well that not all the reasoning in the world will itself convert human beings from what they believe as they are in Athens to what they should believe about Christ.

He's not going to be able to do that. But nevertheless, he reasons with them as he prays for God to bless his message. He does his own utmost to reason with these people to get at their minds and so must we.

And there are so many different ways open nowadays. One of those who prayed tonight mentioned the way in which God has provided us with so many means by which we can actually bring the gospel to the world of our day.

A world that doesn't want it, but nevertheless a world that actually has the same sort of means used for other purposes. Social media, television, video, just spoken words.

[ 13 : 00 ] When you interact with people, you're meeting people that have an access to all of these. And you have access to all of these and others. And even if it's just what you might say is just ordinary, simple talk.

When you come to speak about Jesus, when you come to present the truth of God, the claims of God, think about reasoning it. It doesn't have to be an expert in linguistics.

You don't have to be someone trained in apologetics. It's simply as Jesus, as we saw in the Lord's day, said to the demoniac that he had cured of his demon possession.

And when he said to him to go back to his own city, what did he say to him to say to the people of his own area? Tell them what things the Lord has done for you.

That's reasoning your way into the mind of those who are listening. You tell them what God has done. You tell them how he's changed your life. You tell them how it's come about.

[ 14 : 07 ] You tell them that he can do this for them too. Well, he reasoned with them. And then, that was Paul's stirred heart, how the stirring up of his heart was over this idolatry he saw around him.

And how you next read about him reasoning in the synagogue, the reasoning out of the scriptures, of the gospel, of the way in which Jesus is at the heart of things. And he comes then to the Areopagus.

They took him, in verse 19, they took hold of him and brought him to the Areopagus saying, May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting. That brings us to Paul's stirring message. Now, the Areopagus was an important place and it's really significant that in the providence of God, these people themselves brought him to the Areopagus. The Areopagus was like an open court which had developed into, in Paul's day, it was really the place or the court that supervised the morals and the education and the religion of the times.

So it was a really important place in Athens. It was a place where all of that sort of combination of things took place and where a lot of different arguments took place and where people just spoke out to those things and where decisions were made about morals and education and religion.

[ 15 : 37 ] That's where Paul found himself. That's where they brought him, just to the very place where he could actually present the gospel most openly to those around him.

And first of all, he looked for a connecting point. he looked for a connecting point with the reason, with the minds of these people. I can just see him working out just, now where am I going to begin with this message that I have to present?

And of course, the temptation is to rush ahead and just speak about Jesus Christ or to rush ahead and tell them, well, actually, God has given us the Bible, God has given us the scriptures, that's what you need to believe, that's what you need to accept, you need to put your own philosophy books aside and you need to really choose this one.

That's not what he did. He didn't begin with the scriptures, he didn't begin with Christ. He led them to Christ, but that's not where he began.

And there's a huge lesson in that for ourselves, because so much of that world out there that you need to present Christ to, you cannot begin with saying to them, but the Bible says, because what they'll tell you is, so what?

[ 16 : 53 ] I don't believe the Bible, I don't accept that that's the Word of God, you say it's the Word of God, it's fine for you, but it's no use to me. So you can't begin with the Word of God and say, this is an authoritative Word, this is the Word that God actually has given us as a rule of life and faith and manners.

And I used to think myself in my early Christian days when people said, you don't necessarily begin with the Bible when you're dealing with people who are basically just pagan in their outlook or have nothing to do with the Christian religion, you used to find it difficult to accept that and to say, well, surely you have to begin with the Bible.

Well, that's not what Paul did. And here's a pattern for ourselves. He didn't begin with the scriptures of the Old Testament. He began with their own religion. He began with what he had seen as he had come through the streets of Athens.

Athens. And he began by saying something that was actually very true of them. Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious.

You are very religious. Now, of course, you come across a lot of people today that are not religious in the sense in which the Athenians were religious.

[ 18 : 10 ] What he meant by religious, of course, was not godly. It wasn't religious in the sense in which sometimes you might use the word it didn't actually mean that they were actually good, saved, godly people.

It was religious in the sense of being so much taken up with idolatrous practices. Religious in the sense of cramming their lives full of gods. That's where you begin with people here as well.

You can tell them. You can bring to them, look, your life is crammed full of things that whether you realize it or not, you're actually enslaved to your worshipping. You're putting at the very basis and foundation of your life.

I perceive, he said, that you are very religious. But then, as I found also an altar with this inscription to the unknown god, and then this is such a wonderful emphasis here, the altar with this inscription to the unknown god, then he says this, what therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.

He's working his way towards God, towards God in Christ, towards the redemption that's in Christ, but he's still at the early stage of presenting things to them. This altar that I found to the unknown god, why was there an altar to the unknown god in Athens?

[ 19 : 28 ] What did that really signify? What did it mean? Sometimes you might read that this altar to the unknown god was actually, in a sense, the Athenians saying, well, we know that perhaps there's another supreme god that we haven't accounted for, so we'll just leave this as the unknown god, the supreme god above the other gods.

It wasn't actually really anything like that at all. It's much more like just a kind of plan B, if you like, or a fallback. Some of their own gods failed and not come to this unknown god.

So it's just a kind of safety mechanism, really. And here he is saying to them, well, this unknown god that you have inscribed this altar to, I'm here to tell you about him.

I'm here to reveal him to you. And then he began speaking about this unknown god. And he first of all spoke about him as the creator.

Now they could relate to that. Because of course they regarded some of these other gods that they themselves worshipped amongst this choice of gods that they had.

[ 20 : 41 ] They could relate to them as gods that had created the earth or created the heavens in different ways looking at them from a creative point of view. But he actually presents the true god, the god, he says, who made the world and everything in it, being lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man.

Now you see, of course the lord is guiding him. The lord is really giving him this insight and this way of presenting the truth to these people. And you see what he's saying here, the god that's unknown that you've ascribed to, this unknown god, I'm here to present him to you, to tell you about him. And then just in case they might think that he's just one of these other gods, Paul is being very exclusive and he's saying, this is the god who made heaven and earth and he's the lord of it and everything in it.

And he moves then to speak about not just creating the universe, but himself in his greatness needs nothing.

He is not, he doesn't live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands as though he needed anything. They, you see, had to pacify their gods.

[ 22 : 02 ] They had to make contributions to keep them on their side. They were very fickle. They could turn against them any moment. And so they thought of these gods living from, as they lived from day to day in slavish adherence to these gods.

They never knew what they were going to be like from one day to the next. But Paul is presenting this great God, this consistent God, this unchangeable God, this dependable God who made the heavens, the earth, and, he says, all mankind.

He has given them life and breath and everything. You see, he's bringing it now right home to their minds. He's reasoning the truth into their mind and conscience, beginning with the unknown God and saying, now I'm going to reveal him to you.

And he is this God who has created the heavens and all that's in them. He is in his greatness. He doesn't need anything from us. He's self-sustaining. He is, in that sense, independent of us.

It doesn't depend on us or our contributions. But he made us too. He brought us into being. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth.

[ 23 : 19 ] Having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place. So he's presenting him as the creator, as the self-sustaining creator, the one who created the universe.

But then you see he's moving next to his availability. Instead of presenting this God as their gods were so remote, so remote that you couldn't touch them, that they couldn't actually in any way have a meaningful relationship with any human being.

Well, he's saying this God didn't just make all of the creation and all mankind to give them life and breath and everything. But he did it in such a way that set the boundaries that they should seek God in the hope that they might feel their way towards him and find him.

Yet he is actually not far from each one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being. You see, he's now really bringing the truth right into their heart and into their conscience.

And he's getting them to think, well, let's leave all the other gods behind. Let's see what he's saying about this God. And what's he saying? He's saying that this God actually made us, that he created us, that he created us for himself so that we might find him, so that we might seek after him, that we might have a relationship with him, that he might be our God to the exclusion of all others.

[ 24 : 54 ] And that's what he's saying in verse 29 as he reaches that conclusion, 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.

In other words, he's really saying that because this is true about this God and what I'm telling you about him is indeed the truth and we are his offspring, and that's in the sense of we have been created by him, what he's really saying and driving now into their conscience and reasoning into their minds, he is saying, ought we not to know him then?

Seeing he is not far from anyone of us. God's availability, humility, and you notice what he's doing as well, very significantly, he's actually quoting from their own writers.

You and I might think that to actually go to pagan writings, the writing of these Greek philosophers, or these Greek poets as well, even some of your own poets have said, for we are indeed his offspring.

What an educated man Paul was. He knew what these philosophers, these writers, these poets had actually said. He obviously read some of that and learned some of that in his journey.

[ 26 : 15 ] Now he's really playing this back to them and saying, actually, your own poet said this. And in the highest sense, this is what they meant, even if they didn't understand it. That in him we live and move and have our being, and we are indeed his offspring.

See where he's taken them, he's taken them right, as it were, into the lap of God. And he's more or less saying to them, now you look up into his face and you'll see that what your own writer said is actually true of this God.

And that means that we too have to use what's available to us by which we can present God. Because as you look out over the world and think that there's nothing in there but darkness and the songs of the world and the writings of the world and all that you find that you can lay your hands on so readily that people of the world say and which they express their feelings and their philosophy and their view of life.

What's the point of going to that? That's all worldliness, that's all darkness. There are people there who are searching for truth, searching for meaning, searching for purpose. And even if they put it out in doubting terms, we need to try and familiarize ourselves with how the world is thinking. Why does it put it in these terms? And you can use that and you can latch on to that and you can say, well, this is what you've said and this is something you've written or this is something you've sung in your song.

[ 27 : 43 ] But you know that connects with someone that I know, with a God I know, and I want to tell you about him. all of that is in this wonderful presentation of Paul in his stirring message.

So he begins with the connecting point, and that's what you and I must ask ourselves too. Where is the connecting point for us with these people that we meet?

Obviously for many of them can't be the Scriptures unless you know that they know the Scriptures already. But you begin with what they do believe, even if it's very contrary to believing about God. And you try and move towards presenting God to them. I know this is something that requires us to give studied attention to the world and to the way people think and how things come across, even in news reports and so on, but that's all educative.

It's there so that we can inform our minds of how to present the truth of Christ to the polytheism of our day. And then he moves from there finally, he moves to speaking about judgment.

[ 28 : 54 ] One of the things, of course, that people don't like to hear about. Well, what is he saying? He says, well, the times of this ignorance, because God is not, we're not to think of him like these images that you see, gold, silver, stone, and so on.

The times of this ignorance, God overlooked. Until Jesus came, God, it wasn't that he wasn't interested or just didn't think of sin as serious, but he knew that people were still in darkness and until the light of Christ and his resurrection and the gospel went out into the world.

But now he's saying, now things have changed, things are different, 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.

Where did he begin? He began with their own religion, he began with the unknown God, he then said, I'm going to present him to you, he moved on to speak of from them being very religious to presenting this creator to them, and from the creator he's moving towards his availability, and now he's coming to speak about or present God as having appointed a man, and that's very significant and clever, if you like, of Paul under God's direction.

He speaks about a man, they can relate to a man, he's not distant from them, he's like themselves in that sense, human, but he's a man that God has appointed to be the judge of the world in righteousness.

[ 30 : 35 ] remarkable thing, something that again connects with their mind, reasons its way into their mind, and of course that is Jesus Christ.

He will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all, how? By raising him from the dead. And you can see why it is that people or the

workings of the devil behind people's own reasoning, dismiss the idea of the resurrection of Christ as having any validity or something that is very much an impossibility.

Because if you do away with the resurrection of Jesus, then death rules. If you do away with the resurrection of Jesus, there's no possibility of a judgment day, because there's no longer a judge. It's all very clever on the part of the devil too, of course. But he's not as clever as God, or the wisdom that God gives to his people.

Because here is Paul saying, he has appointed this man to be the judge of the world in righteousness. Not just any kind of judgment, but judgment in righteousness, judgment that really will focus upon the truth, and upon God's standard.

[ 32 : 00 ] And he has given assurance, he has given proof that that day of judgment is set by him. How? By raising him from the dead. You know, if Christ is not raised from the dead, if there's no such thing as resurrection and a day of judgment, one of the most important things of all has completely gone from us.

justice. Yes, there's such a thing as human justice, but what's that? Justice has to be based upon righteousness, upon God's own standard.

And if there is no day of judgment, then what happens to justice? If Christ is not risen from the dead to be appointed by God as the judge, the righteous judge, well, what's going to happen to justice? justice, it doesn't matter then what you do in this world, and however badly it affects other people, whatever crimes you commit at the end of the day makes no difference, because there is no justice, there's no tribunal to meet with, there's no righteous judge.

Now, Paul is saying, that cannot be. justice needs to be maintained, and as justice is maintained, it's maintained by God appointing a righteous judge who will judge the world on the day that he has fixed.

[ 33 : 34 ] And then you find when they heard of this, some mocked, but others said, we will hear you again about this. So Paul went out from their midst.

Now, if that chapter finished at verse 33, we would be missing a tremendous truth. Just imagine it just reaching that point and then being cut off there, and then you begin chapter 18.

Paul went out from their midst. But then, thanks be to God, you have verse 34, some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius, who is he?

He's an Areopagite. He's a member of that court. He's an important man. He's a man of influence. And that presentation of the gospel by Paul in the Areopagus left one of themselves a convert. And who knows what influence that man would have in the days ahead. Paul went out from them, from their midst, but some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius, the Areopagite, and a woman named Amaris, and others with them.

[ 34 : 45 ] You might see very unlikely that this one man coming to this great city of Athens was going to achieve very much, even if he was able to stay there for a while.

But even before his companions came and joined him, through Paul, God had made an impact in this metropolis of idolatry.

There were conversions that Paul left behind, even in Athens. That's what fixes our faith for us as well, isn't it?

That's what fixes our mind upon what God is able to do through this gospel. However unlikely it may seem to us, however opposition may actually ridicule us for what we believe and present.

Never forget that God's truth is dynamite. And in the Areopagus it made its own effect through God, through blessing, through this one man that some were turned to be disciples of Christ.

[ 36 : 00 ] May God bless these thoughts to us. Let's pray. Lord our God, we give thanks for the confidence that we can place in your truth. You have placed a gospel in our hands and you have given us a mandate to go out and make disciples of all nations, teaching them about what you have commanded and that you are with us even to the end of the age.

We pray, O Lord, that all the witness that you people set up in the world and continue in the world, the opportunities that you give us to present the gospel, that we may avail ourselves of them and that you would bless them.

And bless us, we pray, towards influencing people for good in a positive way. Remember the upcoming presbytery camp for our young people. We ask, O Lord, that you would bless the camp as it takes place in the days to come.

Pray for the leaders too and give thanks for them. We ask, Lord, that you would bless them. We pray for those tonight who mourn in our town. Lord, we know that we have had two funerals already in this building today.

We pray for these families. We pray that what they heard of your word and of their participation in worship might be blessed to them. And we pray that as they mourn and continue to know the loss of loved ones, that they would come to know the one who said of himself and of those that the Lord the Father had given him, that of all whom he had been given, none should be lost.

[ 37 : 31 ] And we thank you, Lord, for the truth of that. We pray that we may constantly bear in mind that we are secure eternally in your hand. Bless us then, we pray now, for Jesus' sake.

Amen. We're going to conclude now by singing to God's praise in Psalm 96. Psalm 96a, that's on page 126.

We'll sing verses 1 to 10, these six stanzas, because they're very closely joined together, these stanzas. Psalm 96a, page 126, we'll sing a new song to the Lord, sing praises to his name.

Amen. O sing a new song to the Lord, sing praises to his name, and his salvation day by day let all the earth proclaim, his glory and his mighty deeds to every land declare, how great and awesome is the Lord, with him love God's compare.

For other gods and wood and stone, the Lord made never fight, all power and majesty at his, he dwells in glorious light, all nations to the Lord outstrobe, the glory that is true.

[ 39 : 35 ] Glory and strength ascribe to God and praise his name anew.

Heaven that is with joy and ring and offering with you.

Worship the Lord in holy fear, all and feet for him bow.

Tell every land the Lord is king, established is the earth and cannot move, the Lord will judge the people in his truth.