

Paul: From Persecutor to Preacher, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 7: The Unknown God: Engaging the World at Athens

Acts 17:16–34

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This lesson places us with Paul in Athens, around A.D. 50, in one of the most famous evangelistic encounters in Scripture. The historical setting is the cultural and intellectual center of the ancient world, saturated with idolatry and philosophy. Provoked by the idols, Paul reasoned in the synagogue and the marketplace and was invited to address the Areopagus, the venerable council on Mars Hill. His speech is a model of engaging a pagan, educated audience: he begins where they are, with their altar to an unknown god and their own poets, and leads them to the living Creator, the call to repent, and the risen Christ who will judge the world.

Several doctrinal themes deserve attention. The lesson exposes the nature of idolatry, ancient and modern, and presents a rich portrait of the one true God as Creator, sustainer, sovereign over the nations, and yet near to each person. It sets forth the universal command to repent and the certainty of judgment by Christ. The heaviest doctrinal block (Question 9) handles Paul's appeal to the resurrection as God's assurance of coming judgment, and uses it to confront the popular pluralism that treats all religions as equally valid. Keep the focus there on the bodily resurrection of Jesus and the coming judgment by the one appointed Lord; this lesson also quietly prepares for Lesson 10 on the hope of the resurrection.

This lesson aims squarely at the formation of the student as a witness in a secular age. Most believers feel the pull either to withdraw from the surrounding culture or to condemn it from a distance. Paul models a third way: a provoked but loving heart that enters the marketplace, engages thoughtfully and respectfully, and proclaims Christ without compromise. Press students to identify the idols competing for their own hearts, to live as though God is truly near and sovereign, to repent where God commands it, and to engage their world with courage and respect. Send them home stirred, equipped, and unashamed of the risen Lord.

Question 1

Student Question:

Luke tells us that in Athens Paul's "spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols" (Acts 17:16). What does this reaction reveal about idolatry and about a heart that loves God and people, and why is misplaced worship such a serious matter to God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul's reaction is the key that unlocks the whole scene. He was not impressed by the artistry of Athens or merely curious about its religion; his spirit was provoked, stirred to grief and holy

indignation. This is what the glory of God being given to idols does to a heart that loves Him. The idols were not harmless cultural decoration; they were a theft of the worship due to the Creator alone.

Notice that the provocation flowed from love, not mere disapproval. Paul grieved both for God, robbed of His honor, and for the people, enslaved to lifeless gods that could not save them. A heart aligned with God feels the weight of idolatry on both counts. This is very different from snobbery or culture-war irritation; it is compassion mixed with reverence.

Explain why idolatry is so serious. To worship anything other than God is to exchange “the glory of the immortal God for images” (Romans 1:23), to give our highest love to what is not God. It dishonors the Creator and degrades the worshiper, who becomes like what he worships (Psalm 115:8). This is the first and deepest human sin, and it lies beneath all the others.

Apply it to the believer’s heart. Paul’s provoked spirit invites us to ask whether we still feel anything when God is dishonored and people are enslaved, or whether we have grown comfortable and numb. A living faith is not indifferent to idolatry, beginning with the idols of our own hearts.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Idolatry as the theft of worship due to God alone (Romans 1:23)
- A heart that loves God grieves when He is dishonored
- Compassion for those enslaved to gods that cannot save
- We become like what we worship (Psalm 115:8)

Discussion Prompts

- What provoked Paul, and why was it grief rather than mere disapproval?
- Why is misplaced worship such a serious matter to God?
- Do we still feel anything when God is dishonored?

Question 2

Student Question:

Idols are rarely statues today; they are anything we love, trust, or serve in the place of God. What are the idols competing for your heart and for the hearts of people around you? Does the spiritual lostness of others stir you the way it stirred Paul, or have you grown used to it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question moves idolatry from ancient Athens into the student’s own heart and culture. Help students see that modern idols wear respectable clothes: money, success,

comfort, approval, romance, family, reputation, even good things loved too much and trusted in God's place. An idol is whatever we look to for the security, identity, or joy only God can give.

Invite honest naming. The test of an idol is what we sacrifice for, what we cannot bear to lose, what we turn to when we are anxious or empty. Encourage students to name one idol competing for their own heart, without shame but with honesty, since unnamed idols keep their power.

Then turn outward. Ask whether the lostness of people around them still stirs them, or whether familiarity has bred numbness. Paul's provoked heart is a rebuke to our complacency. Encourage each student to ask God to renew both their loyalty to Him and their compassion for those still enslaved.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Modern idols: money, success, comfort, approval, even good things loved too much
- The test of an idol: what we sacrifice for and cannot bear to lose
- Naming idols as the first step to dethroning them
- Renewed compassion for the lostness of others

Discussion Prompts

- What idol is most competing for your heart right now?
- What do you turn to when you are anxious or empty?
- Has the lostness of people around you stopped stirring you?

Question 3

Student Question:

At the Areopagus, Paul began with respect and even quoted their own poets, yet he moved steadily toward proclaiming the true God and the risen Christ (Acts 17:22–28). What does Paul's approach teach us about engaging thoughtfully with people who do not share our faith, without watering down the message?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Study Paul's method, because it is a masterclass in evangelistic wisdom. He began respectfully ("I perceive that in every way you are very religious"), found a point of contact (their altar and their poets), and built a bridge from what they knew to what they did not. He took their culture seriously enough to understand it and engage it on its own terms.

But notice he never softened the message to win approval. From their unknown god he moved to the Creator who needs nothing, to the folly of idols, to the command to repent, to judgment

and resurrection. He was respectful in manner and uncompromising in content. The bridge always led somewhere; it led to Christ.

Teach the balance students most need. Some are bold but abrasive, winning arguments and losing people; others are gracious but silent, building rapport that never arrives at the gospel. Paul holds courage and respect together: he listens, he understands, he honors what is honorable, and then he speaks the truth plainly.

Apply it practically. Effective witness usually starts by understanding people, their questions, fears, and beliefs, and finding genuine common ground, then leading from there to Christ. This requires both love (to take people seriously) and conviction (to tell them the truth). Encourage students to grow in whichever they lack.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Engaging the culture with both respect and conviction (1 Peter 3:15)
- Finding genuine common ground as a bridge to the gospel
- Adapting the approach without compromising the message (1 Corinthians 9:22)
- Holding courage and gentleness together in witness

Discussion Prompts

- How did Paul build a bridge to his audience?
- How did he keep respect without softening the message?
- Which do you need to grow in, courage or gentleness?

Question 4

Student Question:

Paul neither hid from the culture of Athens nor simply condemned it; he entered the marketplace and the council to proclaim Christ. How do you tend to relate to those outside the faith, and what would it look like for you to engage one person or setting this week with both courage and genuine respect?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses Paul's example into the student's own posture toward unbelievers. Many Christians default to one of two unhelpful stances: retreat (keeping safely within Christian circles) or condemnation (criticizing the world from a distance). Paul did neither; he went into the marketplace, among the people, to engage and proclaim.

Help students identify their own tendency honestly. The one who retreats needs courage to step into conversations and settings they have avoided. The one who condemns needs the humility and warmth to actually love and listen to people before, and while, speaking truth.

Move toward one concrete engagement. Ask each student to name one person or setting, a coworker, a neighbor, a family gathering, where they could engage this week with both courage and respect, looking for genuine common ground and a way to point toward Christ. Specific intentions are far more likely to bear fruit than vague resolve.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Engagement rather than retreat or condemnation
- Courage for the timid, humility and warmth for the harsh
- Loving people enough to listen before speaking
- Intentional, specific witness in everyday settings

Discussion Prompts

- Do you tend to retreat from or condemn those outside the faith?
- What would courageous, respectful engagement look like for you?
- Which person or setting will you engage this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul described the living God as the Maker of all things, who does not live in temples, needs nothing from us, gives life and breath to all, rules over the nations, and is not far from any one of us (Acts 17:24–28). How does this portrait of God expose the emptiness of idols, and what difference does it make that the true God is both the sovereign Creator and yet near to each of us?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Walk through Paul's portrait of God, because it is gloriously different from the idols. He is the Creator of everything, so He cannot be contained in temples made by hands. He needs nothing from us, so He cannot be bribed or fed by our offerings; rather, He gives to us life and breath and everything. The idols, by contrast, are made by us, housed by us, and utterly powerless. The contrast exposes their emptiness.

Highlight His sovereignty over the nations. Paul says God made every nation from one man and "determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place" (Acts 17:26). History is not random; the rise and fall of peoples is under God's hand. This is a sovereign God, not a local deity competing for territory.

Then hold sovereignty together with nearness. Astonishingly, this transcendent Creator is "not far from each one of us," for "in him we live and move and have our being." The God who rules the nations is intimately present to every individual. He is both high above and very near, a combination no idol could ever offer.

Apply it to worship and trust. Because God is the self-sufficient Creator, we owe Him everything and can add nothing to Him; because He is near and sovereign, we can trust Him with our lives and seek Him with hope. This God is worthy of the worship the idols stole, and able to meet the longing the idols could never satisfy.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God as self-sufficient Creator who needs nothing and gives everything
- The emptiness of idols made, housed, and powered by men
- God's sovereignty over the nations and the course of history (Acts 17:26)
- The transcendent Creator who is also intimately near (Acts 17:27–28)

Discussion Prompts

- How does Paul's portrait of God expose the emptiness of idols?
- What does it mean that God needs nothing yet gives everything?
- How does holding God's sovereignty and nearness together change your trust?

Question 6

Student Question:

Paul said of God, "In him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). Do you live as though God is truly this close and this involved, the One in whom you exist moment by moment? Where would your daily life look different if you took His nearness and sovereignty seriously?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns the doctrine of God's nearness into daily practice. We may affirm that God is everywhere present, yet live as practical deists, going about our days as if He were distant or uninvolved. Paul's words insist that we exist moment by moment in God, dependent on Him for our very breath.

Help students imagine the difference this awareness makes. If God is truly this near, then no moment is secular, no decision is private, no fear is faced alone, and no joy is unwitnessed by Him. The Christian life is lived in His presence (*coram Deo*), under His eye and within His care, all the time.

Move toward one concrete change. Ask each student where a vivid sense of God's nearness would most reshape their day, in how they handle anxiety, temptation, work, or relationships, and to practice walking consciously with Him there this week, perhaps through brief, frequent prayer that keeps Him near in mind as He is in fact.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Practical awareness of God's constant presence (Psalm 139:7–10)

- Living all of life before the face of God
- Moment-by-moment dependence on the God in whom we exist
- The end of the sacred-secular divide in daily life

Discussion Prompts

- Do you live as though God is truly this near?
- Where would His nearness most change your day?
- What practice would help you walk consciously with Him?

Question 7

Student Question:

Paul declared that God “commands all people everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30), because a day of righteous judgment is coming. Why is repentance not optional or merely for the especially wicked, but a command of God for everyone, and what does true repentance involve?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Mark the universal scope: “all people everywhere.” Repentance is not a special requirement for the scandalous few; it is God’s command to every human being, because every human being has turned from Him to idols of one kind or another. The respectable Athenian philosopher and the notorious sinner stand under the same command.

Note that repentance is commanded, not suggested. Paul says God “commands” it. The God who once “overlooked” the times of ignorance now, in the light of Christ, summons all to turn. Repentance is the fitting response to the truth about God and ourselves, and refusing it is not neutral; it is disobedience to a divine command.

Define true repentance carefully. It is more than regret or feeling sorry; it is a change of mind that turns from sin and self toward God, issuing in a changed life. Paul elsewhere describes it as turning “to God from idols to serve the living and true God” (1 Thessalonians 1:9). Godly grief produces repentance that leads to salvation (2 Corinthians 7:10).

Apply it to everyone in the room. Because the command is universal, no one is exempt, including lifelong church members. Repentance is not only the door we enter at conversion but a posture of ongoing turning from sin to God. Help students see repentance as a command to obey now, not a memory from the past.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The universal command to repent (Acts 17:30)
- Repentance commanded by God, not optional or merely for the worst sinners
- True repentance as a change of mind issuing in a changed life (2 Corinthians 7:10)

- Turning to God from idols to serve the living God (1 Thessalonians 1:9)

Discussion Prompts

- Why is repentance commanded of everyone, not just the worst?
- How is true repentance different from mere regret?
- How is repentance an ongoing posture, not only a past event?

Question 8

Student Question:

God's command to repent is for everyone, including the religious and the respectable. Is there an idol, an attitude, or a sin in your own life that God is calling you to turn from? What would genuine repentance, not just regret, look like in that area?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question applies the universal command to the student personally. It is easy to hear 'repent' as a word for other people, the obviously sinful, the not-yet-converted. But Paul's 'all people everywhere' includes the faithful churchgoer. The Spirit often presses His finger on a specific idol, attitude, or habit we have tolerated.

Help students distinguish repentance from regret. Regret feels bad and changes nothing; repentance turns and changes course. Many of us have 'repented' of the same sin a hundred times in feeling while never actually turning from it. True repentance names the sin, forsakes it, and walks in a new direction.

Move toward concrete turning. Ask each student to name one area where God is calling them to repent, and one specific step that genuine repentance would take this week, removing a temptation, making a restitution, breaking a pattern, seeking help. Repentance is proven by its fruit (Acts 26:20).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Repentance as a present call to believers, not only to the unconverted
- The difference between regret that changes nothing and repentance that turns
- Naming and forsaking a specific sin or idol
- Repentance proven by its fruit (Acts 26:20)

Discussion Prompts

- What is God calling you to turn from right now?
- How is genuine repentance different from feeling sorry?
- What concrete step would prove repentance in that area?

Question 9

Student Question:

Paul grounded the certainty of coming judgment in a historical fact: God “has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead” (Acts 17:31). Why does Paul point to the resurrection of Jesus as the proof that He will judge the world, how does this confront the popular idea that all religions are equally valid paths to God, and what do the three different responses at Athens (mocking, delay, and belief) teach us about how people still respond to the gospel?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal summit of the lesson, and it carries several threads. Start with the logic of Paul’s appeal. He does not ask the Athenians to take coming judgment on blind faith; he points to a public, historical event as God’s guarantee. By raising Jesus from the dead, God has both vindicated Him as the appointed Judge and given “assurance to all” that the day of judgment is real and fixed. The resurrection is the hinge on which the whole message turns.

Establish what the resurrection proves. It declares that Jesus is who He claimed to be, the Son of God (Romans 1:4), that His death actually accomplished salvation, and that He, the risen Man, is the one God has appointed to judge the world in righteousness. Christianity is not founded on a philosophy that might be true, but on an event that happened. This is why Paul preached ‘Jesus and the resurrection’ everywhere he went.

Now confront the pluralism of our age. Paul’s message leaves no room for the popular idea that all religions are equally valid roads up the same mountain. There is one Creator, one appointed Judge, one risen Lord, and one command to all people: repent and turn to Him. If God has truly raised Jesus and appointed Him as Judge, then no other path leads home. As Jesus Himself said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). This is not arrogance; it is the implication of the resurrection. If it happened, pluralism cannot be true.

Be ready for the offense. The Athenians were fine with Paul until he mentioned resurrection; that is where some sneered. The resurrection has always been the great stumbling block and the great dividing line. A merely inspiring teacher offends no one; a risen Lord who will judge the world demands a response. Help students see that the exclusivity of Christ stands or falls with the empty tomb.

Finally, study the three responses, because they are still the three responses today. Some mocked, dismissing the message outright. Some said, “We will hear you again about this,” the polite delay that so often becomes a permanent no. And some believed and joined Paul, including Dionysius and Damaris. The same gospel that divided Athens still divides every audience. Our task is not to guarantee the response but to proclaim the risen Christ faithfully and leave the results to God, praying that more will be among those who believe.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The bodily resurrection of Jesus as God's public assurance of coming judgment (Acts 17:31)
- The resurrection as proof that Jesus is the appointed Judge and risen Lord (Romans 1:4)
- The exclusivity of Christ against religious pluralism (John 14:6)
- Christianity founded on a historical event, not merely a philosophy
- The resurrection as the great stumbling block and dividing line
- Three abiding responses to the gospel: mocking, delay, and belief

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Paul rest the certainty of judgment on the resurrection?
- How does the risen, appointed Judge confront the idea that all paths lead to God?
- Which of the three Athenian responses do you most often see today?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over Paul's encounter with Athens, the provoked spirit, the thoughtful engagement, the living God proclaimed, the call to repent, and the risen Judge. Name one specific way you sense Jesus using this account to form you, whether to tear down an idol, to engage your world with the gospel, or to live in light of the God in whom you live and move and have your being.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone gathers the lesson's threads: a heart provoked by idolatry, wise and courageous engagement, the majesty and nearness of God, the command to repent, and the risen Christ who will judge. Ask students to name one concrete way the Lord has met them rather than offering a general reflection.

Offer the three doors. Some need to tear down a specific idol competing for their heart. Some need to engage their world, stepping out of retreat or softening their condemnation into loving witness. Some need to live in vivid awareness of the God in whom they exist, and in light of the judgment to come.

Close with hope and resolve. Athens was a hard field, and the response was mixed, yet some believed and the gospel took root. The same risen Lord sends us into our own Athens. Send students home stirred, engaged, repentant where needed, and unashamed of the One God raised from the dead.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Tearing down personal idols
- Engaging the world with courageous, respectful witness

- Living in awareness of God's nearness and the coming judgment
- Confidence in the risen Christ

Discussion Prompts

- Which door does this lesson open for you?
- What one idol, witness, or habit will you address this week?
- How does the risen Judge shape the way you live now?