

Paul: From Persecutor to Preacher

Lesson 7: The Unknown God: Engaging the World at Athens -- Acts 17:16–

34

Athens was the intellectual capital of the world, the city of Socrates and Plato, a place where, as Luke wryly notes, the people “spent their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.” Its streets and temples were crowded with statues, so many gods that one ancient writer joked it was easier to find a god in Athens than a man. Paul, waiting there for his companions, walked those streets and felt something stir in him. “His spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.” Not impressed, not merely curious, provoked. The glory due to God alone was being poured out on lifeless stone.

So Paul went to work, reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and day by day in the marketplace with whoever happened to be there. He drew the attention of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, the sophisticated thinkers of the age, who found his message strange and brought him up to the Areopagus, the council on Mars Hill, to explain this “new teaching.” Picture it: a tentmaker from Tarsus standing before the cultured elite of Athens, surrounded by the monuments of their wisdom, about to tell them they have missed the most important thing of all.

Paul begins not with an insult but with an observation. “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious.” He had noticed an altar with the inscription, “To the unknown god,” a hedge against any deity they might have overlooked. And Paul seizes it: “What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.” Then he unfolds the living God they did not know, the Maker of heaven and earth who does not live in temples, who needs nothing from human hands, who gives to all mankind life and breath, who made every nation from one man, and who is not far from any one of us, “for in him we live and move and have our being.”

Then Paul turns the corner toward the cross. The God who once overlooked the times of ignorance “now commands all people everywhere to repent,” because He has fixed a day when He will judge the world in righteousness by a man He has appointed, and He has given assurance of this to all by raising that man from the dead. At the mention of resurrection some sneered, some wanted to hear more another day, and some believed. This lesson watches Paul engage the thinking world of his day, and asks how we are to proclaim the one true God to a culture full of its own unknown gods.

Group Discussion: Paul’s spirit was “provoked within him” as he saw a city full of idols (Acts 17:16). When you look at our own culture, with its many substitutes for God, what is your honest reaction, indifference, irritation, or a stirred heart for people who are lost? What do you think provoked Paul, and should it provoke us?

Personal Reflection: Paul engaged the thinkers of Athens with both courage and respect, quoting their own poets while proclaiming Christ. When you interact with people who do not share your faith, do you tend to withdraw, to condemn, or to engage them thoughtfully? What holds you back from speaking about Christ in those settings?

Read Acts 17:16–34

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?

10. 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.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Romans 1:18–25, exchanging the glory of God for images and worshiping the creature; 1 Thessalonians 1:9–10, turning from idols to serve the living God and await His risen Son; 1 Corinthians 1:18–25, the message of the cross as foolishness to the wise of this age; John 14:6, Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life; Acts 14:15–17, turning from vain things to the living God who made all