

The Unknown Known
January 14, 2018
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Acts 17:22-34

In today's text the Apostle Paul confronts the elite philosophers in the Greek city of Athens. It was a city filled with man-made objects of worship, elaborate statues and shrines to many false gods. Question: **What are some of the "objects of worship" of people in our culture today?** (See 1 John 2:16)

Some context:

After leaving Philippi (Acts 16:40), Paul went to Thessalonica, where he had a brief but successful ministry. The Jews became jealous and attempted to bring the missionaries before the public officials. Some of the brethren had hidden Paul and Silas, and later that night sent them off to Berea, where Paul's message was received with enthusiasm. The Jews from Thessalonica came to Berea and created such a furor that Paul was sent on to Athens. When Paul's escorts left him in Athens, he gave them instructions to have Silas and Timothy join him as soon as possible (17:1-15).¹

- As Paul was "cooling his heels" in Athens, he did some site seeing.
- Verse 16: **What made Paul extremely upset? Why was he so bothered? How is that a very convicting example for us today?**
- Verse 17: **What did Paul do in response?** Verse 18: **Who did he get into a debate with? How did it go?** Verse 19: **What happened next?**
- *"The Epicureans were materialists and atheists, and their goal in life was pleasure...The true Epicurean avoided extremes and sought to enjoy life by keeping things in balance, but pleasure was still his number one goal."ⁱⁱ*
- *"The Stoics rejected the idolatry of pagan worship and taught that there was one "World God." They were pantheists, and their emphasis was on personal discipline and self-control. Pleasure was not good and pain was not evil. The most*

*important thing in life was to follow one's reason and be self-sufficient, unmoved by inner feelings or outward circumstances. Of course, such a philosophy only fanned the flames of pride and taught men that they did not need the help of God. It is interesting that the first two leaders of the Stoic school committed suicide.*ⁱⁱⁱ

- *“The Epicureans said “Enjoy life!” and the Stoics said “Endure life!” but it remained for Paul to explain how they could enter into life through faith in God’s risen Son.”*^{iv} Neither of them believed in a physical resurrection.
- So they took Paul to the Areopagus (meaning Mars Hill)^v where the great philosophers of the day sat for hours at a time discussing new ideas.
- Verse 20: They said, “Paul, ‘you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.’ ”
- Let’s see how Paul responded to these arrogant, educated men who believed they had it all figured out.

Acts 17:22–34 (ESV)

Paul Addresses the Areopagus

²² So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. ²³ For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.

- **With all their many gods, why would the Greeks have statues to honor an “unknown god?” What were they trying to accomplish?**
- **What is Paul doing in taking this approach?**
- So Paul proceeds to “define” who the “unknown god” is in detail:

²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. ²⁶ And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, ²⁷ that they should seek God, and perhaps feel

their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, ²⁸ for

“ ‘In him we live and move and have our being’;
as even some of your own poets have said,

“ ‘For we are indeed his offspring.’

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. ³⁰ The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ 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.”

³² Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, “We will hear you again about this.” ³³ So Paul went out from their midst. ³⁴ But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

Let’s unpack the points Paul made to these skeptical philosophers:

- V. 22 – *“I notice you are very religious!”* **Was that a compliment? How was Greece in that similar to our world today?**
- Paul’s points about who the “unknown god” really is:
- V. 24 – God made everything (creator) and is Lord of everything (ruler.)
- V. 25 – God doesn’t need man’s efforts – He is the giver of life.
- V. 26 – God controls the destinies of all nations.
- MacArthur: *“All men are equal in God’s sight since all came from one man, Adam. This teaching was a blow to the national pride of the Greeks, who believed all non-Greeks were barbarians. God sovereignly controls the rise and fall of nations and empires (cf. Da 2: 36– 45; Lk 21: 24).”*^{vi}
- V. 27-29 – God wants to reveal Himself to all people. And, in fact, through nature He HAS revealed Himself so we have no excuse for ignoring Him (Romans 1:20). Paul paints a picture of people groping in the dark trying to find God in many ways, yet God is *“not far from any of us.”*
- V.30-31 – God is the judge who *“commands people everywhere to repent of their sins and turn to Him.”* God had been patient,

but Paul creates a sense of urgency by saying that God has “set a day” for judging the world and appointed a “man” for that job, Jesus who God raised from the dead.

- Some have criticized Paul’s speech in a couple of ways. First, in verse 28 Paul quoted two of the Greeks’ own pagan poets to make his point ^{vii}. Paul was not commending or validating these writers, he was simply giving their words definition by applying them to the one, true God.
- Secondly, some have said Paul didn’t give a complete gospel presentation. **What part of a gospel presentation might people criticize Paul for leaving out?**
- John Stott: *“I believe Paul did preach the cross in Athens. Luke provides only a short extract from his speech, which takes less than two minutes to read. Paul must have filled out this outline considerably, and his conclusion (30–31) must have included Christ crucified. For how could he proclaim the resurrection without mentioning the death which preceded it? And how could he call for repentance without mentioning the faith in Christ which always accompanies it?”*^{viii}
- Let’s look at how this text might apply to us today.
- **How should we be more like Paul in reacting to our “post-Christian” society? How should what we see and hear around us make us feel?**
- Stott: *“Why is it that, in spite of the great needs and opportunities of our day, the church slumbers peacefully on, and that so many Christians are deaf and dumb, deaf to Christ’s commission and tongue-tied in testimony? I think the major reason is this: we do not speak as Paul spoke because we do not feel as Paul felt. We have never had the...indignation which he had. Divine jealousy has not stirred within us. We constantly pray ‘Hallowed be your Name’, but we do not seem to mean it, or to care that his Name is so widely profaned.”*^{ix}
- At first Paul was reasoning with the Jews in the Synagogue. Not all were believers but at least it was a “churched” crowd. Then he preached in the marketplace, it was more like witnessing at work or school. But Mars Hill was different. These were true skeptics with their own views of “religion.”

- **What did Paul NOT do (that some Christians are tempted to DO) in speaking to these skeptics? What approach did he take instead?**
- **We're probably not going to be invited to a university to debate and defend the faith. How might you or I get "dragged" into a similar situation as Paul did?**
- **Follow up: How can we prepare for this? How can we adapt Paul's method of witnessing to these skeptical Greeks?**

So, What's the Takeaway?

- The Life Application Study Bible has several good points:
 - Study to be PREPARED - *"It is not enough to teach or preach with conviction. Like Paul, we must be prepared. The more we know about the Bible, what it means, and how to apply it to life, the more convincing our words will be. This does not mean that we should avoid presenting the gospel until we feel adequately prepared. We should work with what we have learned, but always seek to know more in order to be an effective witness and be able to respond to people's questions and arguments."*^x
 - Find COMMON GROUND - *"When you witness to others, you can follow Paul's approach: Use examples, establish common ground, and then move people toward a decision about Jesus Christ."*^{xi}
 - Paul clearly did NOT compromise the message, however he did build a bridge to these intellectuals. As he wrote in 1 Cor. 9:22 – *"I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. ²³ I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings."*^{xii}
 - RELIGION doesn't equal RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD - *"Paul explained the one true God to these educated men of Athens; although these men were, in general, very religious, they did not know God. Today we have a "Christian" society, but to most people, God is still unknown. We need to proclaim who he is and make clear what he did for everyone through his Son, Jesus Christ. We cannot assume that even religious people around us truly know Jesus or understand the importance of faith in him."*^{xiii}

- Don't get DISCOURAGED - *“Paul’s speech received a mixed reaction: Some laughed, some wanted more information, and a few believed. Don’t hesitate to tell others about Christ because you fear that some will not believe you. Don’t expect a unanimously positive response to your witnessing. Even if only a few believe, it’s worth the effort.”*^{xiv}

ⁱ Explore the Bible Leader Guide – Lifeway 2017

ⁱⁱ Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible exposition commentary* (Vol. 1, p. 472). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid*

^{iv} *ibid*

^v (Gk. *Areios pagos*, ‘the hill of Ares’, the Greek god of war, corresponding to the Roman Mars). - Bruce, F. F. (1996). *Areopagus*. *New Bible dictionary* (3rd ed., p. 79). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

^{vi} MacArthur, John. *The MacArthur Study Bible, NASB* (Kindle Locations 264900-264904). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

^{vii} 17: 28 in Him we live and move and exist. A quote from the Cretan poet Epimenides. † 17: 29 the children of God. A quote from Aratus, who came from Paul’s home region of Cilicia. not ... like gold or silver. If man is the offspring of God, as the Greek poet suggested, it is foolish to think that God could be nothing more than a man-made idol. Such reasoning points out the absurdity of idolatry (cf. Is 44: 9– 20). MacArthur, John. *The MacArthur Study Bible, NASB* (Kindle Locations 264912-264917). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

^{viii} Stott, John. *The Message of Acts (The Bible Speaks Today Series)* (Kindle Locations 5259-5262). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

^{ix} Stott, John. *The Message of Acts (The Bible Speaks Today Series)* (Kindle Locations 5277-5281). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

^x Tyndale. *Life Application Study Bible NKJV (LASB: Full Size)* (Kindle Locations 168863-168866). Tyndale House Publishers. Kindle Edition.

^{xi} *ibid*

^{xii} *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2016). (1 Co 9:22–23). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

^{xiii} *ibid*

^{xiv} *ibid*