

Believe
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Acts 17:17-34

How do we reach people who think they don't NEED Jesus? Some people believe they are too bad to be a Christian. Some believe they are good enough. Others believe they are already "spiritual" or "religious." In some ways the hardest to reach might be those who believe they are too intellectual, educated, enlightened, or sophisticated for the idea of a resurrected Savior who forgives sin and gives eternal life. In Paul's day, that last group would have been the leading Greek philosophers and thinkers in Athens.

How do we reach people who think they don't NEED Jesus? The good news is the Holy Spirit does the reaching, convicting, and saving. The real question for us is how do we APPROACH those who think they don't NEED Jesus? In Acts 17 we see a great example of how the Apostle Paul changed his approach in sharing the good news of Jesus in order to gain an audience with idol worshipping, intellectual, elite Athenians.

The point: Like Paul, when we share our faith, we must never change the message of the gospel because it contains "the power of God" to save everyone who believes.ⁱ What we must sometimes change is our approach. Like Paul, we need to find common ground with those who need Jesus. We need to meet them where they are.

Paul had to escape Berea running for his life and leaving Silas and Timothy behind. Verse 17:16 says, "While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply troubled by all the idols he saw everywhere in the city."ⁱⁱ Some people are not interested in "religion" but the ancient Greeks had "religion" – false religion with many false gods.

As always, Paul got busy sharing the gospel.

Acts 17:17 He went to the synagogue to reason with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and he spoke daily in the public square to all who happened to be there. **18** He also had a debate with some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. When he told them about Jesus and his resurrection, they said, "What's this babbler trying to say with these strange ideas he's picked up?" Others said, "He seems to be preaching about some foreign gods." **19** Then they took him to the high council of the city. "Come and tell us about this new teaching," they said. **20** "You are saying some rather strange things, and we want to know what it's all about." **21** (It should be explained that all the Athenians as well as the foreigners in Athens seemed to spend all their time discussing the latest ideas.)

- That last verse sets the stage. The ancient Athenians loved sitting around discussing and debating ideas, especially NEW ideas. The major "think tank" in Athens met on a rocky hill known as the Areopagus or Mars Hill.

- This elite group was also called the Areopagus. The Romans had their Senate, the Jews had the Sanhedrin, and the Greeks had the Areopagus.
- The Apostle Paul was invited to speak to them and he maximized the opportunity.

22 So Paul, standing before the council, addressed them as follows: “Men of Athens, I notice that you are very religious in every way, [opening with a compliment] **23** for as I was walking along I saw your many shrines. And one of your altars had this inscription on it: ‘To an Unknown God.’ This God, whom you worship without knowing, is the one I’m telling you about. **24** “He is the God who made the world and everything in it. Since he is Lord of heaven and earth, he doesn’t live in man-made temples, **25** and human hands can’t serve his needs—for he has no needs. He himself gives life and breath to everything, and he satisfies every need. **26** From one man he created all the nations throughout the whole earth. He decided beforehand when they should rise and fall, and he determined their boundaries. **27** “His purpose was for the nations to seek after God and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him—though he is not far from any one of us. **28** For in him we live and move and exist. As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’ **29** And since this is true, we shouldn’t think of God as an idol designed by craftsmen from gold or silver or stone. **30** “God overlooked people’s ignorance about these things in earlier times, but now he commands everyone everywhere to repent of their sins and turn to him. **31** For he has set a day for judging the world with justice by the man he has appointed, [Jesus] and he proved to everyone who this is by raising him from the dead.”

- Let’s look at how Paul approached these intellectuals.
- He literally met them where they were (Mars Hill) and on their own terms.
- Paul didn’t pick a fight; he spoke to these Athenian philosophers with respect as one intellectual to other intellectuals. He established common ground by quoting their poet Epimenides, ["For in Him we live and move and have our being,"]
- He addressed the sin of idol worship brilliantly by using their own altar to an “unknown god” to introduce them to the One true God.
- He changed his approach but did not water down the gospel message.
- Notice what he shared about God:
 - There is only One true God Who is not an idol made by people but the Creator Who made the world and controls everything in it. (vv. 23-26)
 - He does not need humans, we need Him. (v. 25)
 - God’s purpose is to draw people into relationship with Him. (v. 27)
 - God was patient with people but now commands people to repent of their sins and turn to Him. If not, there will one day be judgment. (vv. 30-31)
 - He appointed Jesus to judge the world and proved Who Jesus is by raising Him from the dead. (v. 31)
- Paul’s audience responded much as people respond to the gospel today. Some laughed, some scoffed, but some believed.

32 When they heard Paul speak about the resurrection of the dead, some laughed in contempt, but others said, “We want to hear more about this later.” **33** That ended Paul’s discussion with them, **34** but some joined him and became believers. Among

them were Dionysius, a member of the council, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

So, What's the Takeaway?

- What can we learn from this important sermon from the Apostle Paul?
- Reaching people who think they don't NEED Jesus requires two things:
 - We must adjust our approach to meet people where they are.
 - We must never change the message of the gospel from scripture.
- Our lesson writer summarized what we can learn from Paul's approach:
 - Find common ground.
 - In 1 Corinthians 1:22 & 23 Paul wrote: *"I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. ²³ Now this I do for the gospel's sake..."*ⁱ The NLT renders it: *"I try to find common ground with everyone, doing everything I can to save some. ²³ I do everything to spread the Good News and share in its blessings."* (NLT)ⁱⁱⁱ
 - How can we find "common ground?"
 - Build genuine relationships. Show interest in their lives and stories. Ask good questions. Care for them as people not "projects."
 - Look for common ground in shared hobbies or life experiences.
 - Address real life concerns and challenges offering practical help.
 - Acknowledge and appreciate positive aspects of their lives. Don't adopt an "everything secular is evil" attitude.
 - Avoid "church speak." Instead, be relatable to the unchurched.
 - Be patient. Building relationships takes time. Trust God on timing.
 - Here's a great article, <https://careynieuwhof.com/how-to-reach-unchurched-people-who-dont-think-they-need-god/>
 - Explain Who God is and what He has done.
 - Give listeners a chance to respond.
 - Accept the various responses. Some will scoff but some will believe.
 - Leave the rest to God. We do the sharing; He does the saving.
- Let's ask God to help us to better relate to those who don't think they need Jesus.

ⁱ Tyndale House Publishers. (2015). [Holy Bible: New Living Translation](#) (Ro 1:16). Tyndale House Publishers.

ⁱⁱ Tyndale House Publishers. (2015). [Holy Bible: New Living Translation](#) (Ac 17:16). Tyndale House Publishers.

ⁱⁱⁱ Tyndale House Publishers. (2015). [Holy Bible: New Living Translation](#) (1 Co 9:22–23). Tyndale House Publishers.

¹ [The New King James Version](#) (1 Co 9:22–23). (1982). Thomas Nelson.