

“Reaching a Secular World”
Acts 17:16-34
April 18, 2021

INTRODUCTION:

We’re concluding our series on the mission of the church today by considering Paul’s sermon in Athens. It is appropriate that we conclude our series here because Paul’s situation in Athens is very similar to our own in America in 2021. This sermon in Acts 17 is very different from the one Paul preached in the synagogue in Acts 13, for the simple reason that he was preaching to a different kind of audience. The Acts 13 sermon was preached to religious Jews and Gentiles, while this one to the irreligious and philosophical Athenians. This was a more secular audience, which is what makes it so practical for us today.

We all realize that our nation is growing more secular all the time. A new Gallup poll was released just before Easter this year that showed a significant decline in religious affiliation in America. 47% of Americans now claim membership in a church, synagogue or mosque, down from 70% at the turn of the century. Further, membership rates are highest with older generations and lowest among younger ones, which doesn’t bode well for the future. Paul’s sermon in Athens is helpful in instructing us in reaching an increasingly secular world. I note three elements of his efforts.

I. Love

All effective outreach begins with a heart attitude, and we see Paul’s heart of love here for people who are very different from him. We sometimes forget that Paul was a deeply Jewish man. His entire life had been devoted to the study of the Jewish Scriptures, and the values and outlook of first century Judaism ran deep within him. As such a devout Jew, Paul would have had a visceral reaction against idolatry. We can see that in the first verse of our text, where we read that Paul’s **“spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols”** (v. 16). When you encounter someone whose religious outlook is not only different from yours, but hostile as well, what is your tendency? Either anger or withdrawal are common responses. Paul responded in neither of those ways. We read that he kept his normal pattern of engagement in the synagogue, but also that he reasoned in the marketplace with Athenian philosophers, with Epicureans and Stoics. He turned toward them, not away from them.

Paul’s willingness to engage them with the gospel is all the more remarkable when we consider the attitude of condescension the Athenians had toward Paul. Some of them asked, **“What does this babbler wish to say?”** (v. 18). That term is a negative one, referring to someone who doesn’t have any original thoughts

himself, but just picks up little bits of knowledge here and there, perhaps plagiarizing others instead of thinking for himself. The Athenians had an attitude of superiority. Their city was the intellectual and cultural capital of the Roman Empire and had been for centuries. It was the home of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. The city was also noted for its architectural wonders, some of which still stand today. So when they saw Paul, they insulted him and put him in a category well beneath themselves.

The Athenian philosophers Paul was engaging here are not unlike the secularized intelligentsia of our age. Think of non-Christian university professors in elite educational institutions. Think of people whose politics are perhaps very different from your own, whose moral values are far from those of the Bible, and who think that all Christians are intellectually inferior. What is your attitude toward such people? Is it to withdraw? To attack? Paul's was to love them and engage with them. He did so because he knew that God desired these people. They may have been desiring idols, but God desired them. So Paul did as well. He knew that with the coming of Jesus, all the nations of Gentiles were now objects of God's mercy and love.

What is your heart toward those who are the most powerful enemies of the gospel today? How about those who are on the radical left politically? They have no use for Christianity or Christians, believing that the world would be better off without us. Their proposed solutions for the world are deeply secular and opposed to biblical values. Would the word "love" or the word "anger" more accurately describe your attitude toward this group? It is tempting to weaponize the gospel toward this group. What I mean by that is that we conclude that this group is destined for God's judgment, and we're rather pleased about that. We may never use the words, "Go to hell," but those words would accurately express our attitude of anger. We have weaponized the gospel. Paul, on the other hand, loved those who were despising him and looking down on them.

Paul's heart of love is seen not just in his seeking them while they looked down upon him, but also in his circumstances of suffering upon arriving in Athens. He had just been chased out of two cities. He was chased from Thessalonica by some of the Jewish leaders, and the same group then followed him to Berea and chased him from there as well. He was escorted to Athens and then left there by himself. He was without his two co-workers, Silas and Timothy, who were left in Berea. If I were Paul, I think I would have concluded that it was time for a little R and R. He was in this world-famous city with plenty of sights to see. Maybe it was time to rest up after the trials of the past weeks and months. Who could fault Paul for taking a vacation while he awaited his co-workers?

There is nothing at all wrong with taking time off, and there are times when that is the most spiritual thing to do. But there are also times when love calls us to suffer, and Paul concluded that this was one of those times. So he plunged

right back into the fight and lovingly and patiently engaged with these secular, idolatrous Athenians.

II. Bridge-Building

Once we conclude that God wants us to engage with secular people instead of withdrawing from them or being angry at them, how do we go about doing so? Paul's sermon here shows us that it will have to be done differently than outreach to Jewish people. When Paul preached at the synagogue in Acts 13, he had a starting place with which to begin because they shared a common conviction that the Scriptures were God's sacred, inspired writings. But the Athenians didn't believe that, so Paul needed a different starting place. He found it in one of the many idols he had observed in the city. He begins his sermon, **"Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. 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"** (v. 22-23).

We need to notice that Paul took the time to study the Athenians, to figure out what they believed. He then made a connection through something he noticed. They acknowledged that there was a God whose name they didn't know. The rest of Paul's sermon tells them about this God, a God whom Paul names at the end as Jesus. The principle we see in this is that of bridge-building. To build a bridge means to start where you agree with someone rather than where you disagree. Further, it means that the place of agreement that is chosen is one that points to the redemptive truth of the gospel. Paul does this by helping them come to know this God, declaring him to be the Creator and Sustainer of the world. He is not the God of only one nation, but of all nations, determining the boundaries of each one. Then Paul quotes from their own poets to affirm that this God is near them and can be found by them.

Paul's sermon is very helpful in instructing us on how to reach secular people, teaching us to look for a point of agreement that will take them to Jesus. A missionary named Don Richardson is famous for this in his story of the Peace Child. In 1962, Richardson and his family went to bring the gospel to the Sawi tribe of Indonesia. The Sawi were cannibalistic headhunters who valued treachery and violence. When Richardson shared the story of Jesus with them, they regarded Judas as the hero and Jesus as a foolish dupe. After much fruitless work, Richardson was on the verge of giving up when he saw the opportunity to build a bridge to Jesus. There were three warring factions among the Sawi, and during a time when they wanted to establish peace between these factions they did so in a unique way. They would give a child to a rival village and refer to the child as a "Peace Child." Richardson observed one man running toward a rival camp and literally giving his child to that village. He then proceeded to tell them about God's "Peace Child," with the result that many came to faith in Jesus.

How might we follow this principle in reaching secular people today? We ask God to show us points of agreement that can become open doors to the gospel. For example, secular people in America today value freedom, seen by them as the freedom to do whatever they want, particularly in areas of sexuality. As Christians, we too value freedom, but would define it differently. So we might say to our secular friend, “I can identify with your desire for freedom because I want the same thing. I have found in my life, though, that I often want things that turn out to be harmful to me. My “wanter” is not what it should be and I find in Jesus the one who is able to give me true freedom by altering my will to give me what leads to true freedom.”

III. Challenge

The gospel always involves a challenge for the simple reason that apart from God’s intervention we are all headed down the broad road that leads to destruction. The word used in the Bible for this challenge is the word “repentance.” We repent when we realize that both our thinking and our behavior are completely misguided and need to be reversed. In Paul’s sermon, this repentance is from two things, superiority and idolatry.

Part of our fallenness is in boasting in areas where we feel ourselves superior. Such pride must be humbled for the simple reason that that such areas reveal self-trust instead of trust in Jesus. Jerram Barrs speaks of this humbling of the Athenians superiority.

The wise men of Athens and their schools of philosophy were famed all over the ancient world. And yet not these great men but Jesus, a Jew they had never heard of, was the One through whom God had decided to make Himself known to the human race...True wisdom comes not from Greece but from Israel, and it is not an Athenian but a despised Hebrew who is the One sent by God to be the Judge of the human race. Nobody likes to have their sense of superiority called into question, but this was exactly what Paul did.

A second area where Paul challenges the Athenians is their idolatry. The phrase in verse 16 that says that the city was “full of idols” could be translated “under” idols in the sense that Athens was swimming in idols. Their idols are the ones we have all heard of: Athena, Apollo, Jupiter, Venus, Mercury, Bacchus, Neptune, Diana. Paul says that these idols are a product of man’s imagination. God formerly overlooked such ignorance but does so no longer. He commands repentance now, in preparation for Judgment Day, where Jesus will be the Judge of all mankind.

An idol is something in creation that we choose to worship. So idols always start with something good, because it is part of God’s good creation. But then the

good thing becomes idolatrous when it is put in the position of an ultimate good, giving meaning and fulfillment to life. In ancient times, idols were usually images made of gold, silver and stone. We look at that and think to ourselves, “Why would anyone think that such an image could bring good to them?” But then we have our own idols that look just as ridiculous to those who don’t look to these things. Idols look ridiculous and inept to those who have not been duped into worshipping them, but credible to those who do worship them.

What are the most common idols of secular Americans today? In his book, *The Heart of Evangelism*, Jerram Barrs lists four modern idols: wealth, freedom, individualism and tolerance. Money has been a longstanding idol, not only in America but throughout human history. It is often depended on to do for us what only God can do: to bring security and satisfaction. Its impotence to do so can be seen in the truth of the writer of Ecclesiastes: **“He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income”** (5:10). In other words, no matter how much one has, it’s never enough. The reason is its innate inadequacy to do for us what we want it to do. Only the true God can bring ultimate security and satisfaction. Money is his gift to us, to be received with gratitude and used for good, both our own and that of others.

Tolerance is another idol of modern secular Americans. It starts with a good thing—diversity. But when made ultimate, diversity leads to a denial of absolute truth. This idol says that diversity is the highest good, and that all other values must take a back seat to this highest good. So we must allow such diversity by saying that no one is allowed to claim their truth as absolute. Every religion is legitimate, no matter how ridiculous it might be, except the one that says it is the only truth. Ironically, such tolerance for diversity ends up leading to intolerance. D. A. Carson makes this point in his aptly titled book, *The Intolerance of Tolerance*. We see this in the legislation currently before the U.S. Senate called “The Equality Act.” For the sake of anti-discrimination, it would end up discriminating against all who hold to a biblical view of morality.

CONCLUSION:

How should we view those who worship these idols of our culture? We should view them as Paul did, not with anger or withdrawal but with love. We should see idolaters as both victims and villains and as both sufferers and sinners. Like us, they are trying to cope with life in a fallen world by trusting in something. They are just trusting in the wrong thing, and it will both disappoint and lead to their judgment on Judgment Day. So we point them to the only solution, the one found in Jesus. As we conclude our series on the mission of the church, this is the church’s mission. We cannot fix all the world’s problems. But we can point people to the one who can. Our mission is to lift up the Lord Jesus, who alone can bring about the world we were created for.

Small Group Discussion Questions
Acts 17:16-31

1. America's growing secularization is evident in numerous ways. What are some of the indications of such increasing secularization that are apparent to you?
2. How does your heart respond to this?
3. How did Paul respond to those in Athens who, as idolaters, were very different from him, and very secular? How is your response different from Paul's?
4. Not only were the Athenians idolaters, but some of them ridiculed Paul as a "babbler" (v. 18). They looked down on him and regarded themselves as superior to him. What is your instinct when you are the object of such ridicule? Are Christians viewed similarly today?
5. Paul's noticing of the idol to the unknown god became a bridge for him to speak of the true God. This principle of bridge-building is an important one for reaching a secular unbeliever. It teaches us to start with where we might agree with someone rather than where we might disagree. In addition, it uses that area of agreement as a bridge to redemptive truth. The example of Peace Child from Don Richardson was given as an example. What are some bridge-building opportunities God might provide for you with your secular friends?
6. Jerram Barrs names four idols as ones that we in America today tend to worship: wealth, freedom, self-affirmation and tolerance of our diversity that leads to a denial of absolute truth. Where do you see evidence of one of these idols in our contemporary American life? Do you battle any of these idols in your own life?
7. Reaching the secular is often a process rather than an instant occurrence. Where do you see such evidence of patience with this process on the part of Paul? (Note verses 17, 32-34). What implications of this fact occur to you?