

## Sermons in Acts: The Unknown God

Paul and Silas, accompanied by their young intern Timothy, have been making their way through Macedonia, or what would be northern Greece today. They have been asked to leave Philippi and been run out of Thessalonika and Berea and decide it's time for Paul to cool his heels way down south in Athens while Silas and Timothy wrap things up back in Berea. While Paul waits for his colleagues to join him, he wanders through the city and engages some of its local citizens in what they seem to enjoy the most: debates.

*While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply troubled by all the idols he saw everywhere in the city. He went to the synagogue to debate with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and he spoke daily in the public square to all who happened to be there.*

*He also had a debate with some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. When he told them about Jesus and His resurrection, they said, "This babbler has picked up some strange ideas." Others said, "He's pushing some foreign religion." Then they took him to the Council of Philosophers.*

*"Come and tell us more about this new religion," they said. "You are saying some rather startling things, and we want to know what it's all about." (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.) (Acts 17:16-21)*

So this is the set-up for this week's sermon from Acts. Paul is on his own, waiting for his team-mates to join him in a new city, but he's not sitting idle. He's learning what makes Athens tick, what people like to do, where their interests lie. In the process of mixing with people in the synagogue and in the public square, he finds a number of things: that there are lots of idols in the city, that there are lots of debaters and that there is a genuine interest there in new ideas - he'll need to take advantage of that.

His interactions in the public square, the debating center of Athens, gain some notice and he is invited to speak to the Council of Philosophers. What was that? It seems to have been a sort of court of philosophy, a place where new ideas were examined and either approved or disapproved. Scholars have observed that the questions Paul was asked were similar to the questions asked of Socrates at his trial, but that was over 400 years earlier and it's probably not wise to make that comparison too strongly. At this stage it might have been nothing more than a place of debate and philosophical discussion, as Luke notes at the end, "all the Athenians ... seemed to spend all their time discussing the latest ideas." Paul was talking about a "new idea", that Jesus had died for our sins and that God had raised Him from the dead. Let's talk.

So, that's the background to the message Paul brings to the Areopagus, or Council of Philosophers.

*Men of Athens, I notice that you are very religious, for as I was walking along I saw your many altars. And one of them had this inscription on it -- 'To an Unknown God.' You have been worshiping Him without knowing who He is, and now I wish to tell you about Him. He is the God who made the world and every-*

*thing in it. Since He is Lord of heaven and earth, He doesn't live in man-made temples 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 there is. From one man He created all the nations throughout the whole earth. He decided beforehand which should rise and fall, and He determined their boundaries. His purpose in all of this was that the nations should seek after God and perhaps feel their way toward Him and find Him, though He is not far from any one of us. For in Him we live and move and exist. As one of your own poets says, "We are His offspring." And since this is true, we shouldn't think of God as an idol designed by craftsmen from gold or silver or stone. God overlooked people's former ignorance about these things, but now He commands everyone everywhere to turn away from idols and turn to Him. For He has set a day for judging the world with justice by the man He has appointed, and He proved to everyone who this is by raising Him from the dead. (17:22-31)*

This is a very different sermon in a very different setting. Paul has become distressed as he walked through the city by the number of idols he saw there. These people are supposed to be intelligent, the ideas people, the philosophers or leading thinkers of the day. And yet they offer sacrifices and bow themselves down to little objects of stone or metal that they've made themselves! What kind of people give up their mental abilities to do such a foolish thing.

And that becomes the basis for this message. Paul tells these philosophers, "I notice that you are very religious." Being *very* religious, these people have even made an altar, a place of worship, for "an Unknown God". That's what you call 'covering your bases'. But it is also a signal that their religion is basically superstition - there's not a lot of conviction about it. They might say, "We make offerings to these idols as a kind of insurance policy, without much certainty that it does any good. And if our idols represent things that aren't even real, we'll make one for the 'Unknown God', just in case there is a real God out there." And Paul seizes on their pluralistic, wishy-washy religion and this one altar that they've made to a being they don't know and says, "Let me introduce you to Him!"

Throughout the speech that follows, Paul paints a stark contrast between the idols they worship and the God He is proclaiming. His talk contains some of the classic arguments for faith.

1. He presents God as the Creator: "He is the God who made the world and everything in it." And in little phrases he inserts later, Paul tells them, "He is Lord of heaven and earth", "He gives life and breath to everything" and "from one man He created all the nations throughout the whole earth." As a result of these things, God doesn't need our worship, our temples, our religion. He is self-sufficient: "human hands can't serve His needs, for He has no needs."
2. The second thing Paul tells them about God is that He is sovereign and that He is purposeful. He is able to raise up nations and cause them to fall again. He has determined their borders, their present and their future. And He has done all this in such a way that it will cause people to seek after Him.

3. The third thing Paul tells them about God is that He is relational; that, even though He doesn't need us to do anything for Him, He still wants us in relationship with Him. Look at all the little bits of text that speak to us of this desire of God to have relationship with human beings: "His purpose was that the nations should ... find Him," "He is not far from any of us", "In Him we live and move and exist", "we are His offspring". All of these parts of Paul's speech suggest a longing that should look to be fulfilled, a longing for the connection of parent and child, a longing for the closeness of physical proximity, a longing for that teamwork of living and moving and having our being together, a longing for being found and known and loved. Paul is opening the window on a far different understanding of God than was common in the Greek thought of first-century Athens. Their gods were aloof and unpredictable, throwing tantrums and indulging themselves in all kinds of activities we know as sin. Their gods were something to fear, but not in the sense of reverent fear; more in the sense of you're scared of what petty issue they might attack you for next. The sacrifices that were made were usually made in an attempt to turn away their petulant anger, their tirades against mortals. It's against this backdrop that we read Paul's words here -- words that describe a God who wants to be close to people, to be lovingly involved in our lives, to be known, to be loved.
4. The fourth thing Paul says about God is that He has waited a long time for people to turn from the kind of worship they have invented and begin to worship Him for who He is. "God overlooked people's former ignorance ... but now He commands everyone everywhere to turn away from idols and turn to Him." The time has come. God has allowed people to live in fear of the gods they have invented, but now He is calling them into truth and justice. The age of permissible ignorance is over and the age of truth and justice has begun. So Paul is saying that it's not okay anymore for human beings to make up a religious faith for themselves, to determine what God is like by themselves and to establish their own rituals and practices around that religion - he's telling the philosophers of Athens that they are no longer in control - God is - and He is now commanding every-one everywhere to turn away from idols and turn to Him.
5. The fifth thing Paul says about God is that He has set a day for judging the world with justice. This has to have some connection with His call to reject idols and worship the Creator and Lord. There has to be a judgment of bad ideas, of evil practices, of false worship, and that judgment is being announced to the Areopagus. God has set the day, and He will carry out His judgment.
6. And the sixth thing Paul says to end his speech is that God has introduced His Judge to the world by raising Him from the dead. He doesn't name Jesus or talk about Jesus' life and ministry in Galilee and Judea. He simply says that God has appointed His chosen Judge and, here's the phrase, "He proved to everyone who this is by raising Him from the dead." The resurrection, once more, is the turning point in a conversation between a believer and someone who comes with a different world view.

So let's take a look at Paul's speech from the point of view of people who want to know how to share our faith. What does Paul do here that is different than what he does in other places, or when he's dealing with a Jewish population?

1. Notice that he doesn't talk about any of the teachings of the Old Testament. He doesn't mention the prophets or Moses or Abraham or David. These are important names for a person of the Jewish faith, but are not so important to a philosopher from Athens.
2. He doesn't even start with Jesus, because that would involve explaining Jesus' Jewish background and His role in fulfilling Old Testament prophecy. He doesn't say anything that would point directly to Jesus until He says that God has demonstrated who His appointed Judge is by raising Him from death.
3. He starts with God as Creator and Sovereign Lord of that creation.
4. Then he contrasts this Creator God with the idols that are the objects of worship for both Greek and Roman religions. The Creator is portrayed as personal, as involved in human lives, as being close to us and as wanting relationships with us.

Those are the steps in Paul's argument. He bypasses the Jewishness of the founder of his faith and focuses instead on the universal nature of God's reach into human lives. This is what God is like, first, and here are some reasons you might want to get to know about Him ... and then know Him ... second.

What does that tell us about our witness to the world? How can we become more effective by following the example of Paul here in Acts 17? Let's look at some key takeaways:

1. Paul starts by building on common ground. "I notice that you are very religious", "You have been worshiping at an altar to an Unknown God". These are potential bridges, on which Paul can walk over from where he sees the world and present his views from their side, from the position of something they believe in and practice. By starting within their belief system, Paul is helping their thought processes. If he started with something completely Jewish, he most likely would have lost them, or at least most of them. By noticing some characteristics of their religion, he was able to talk about a misunderstanding of God's nature that was made obvious by their way of worship. How would we make that same kind of connection with people today? We know from a variety of surveys that a majority of people pray. We can ask them what they pray about, who they pray to and if they've had answers to prayer that they want to talk about. We can talk about the things Jesus taught His disciples about prayer, what He prayed for and what His relationship with the Father was like, as revealed in His prayers. That's just one example of a kind of bridge that can be built over a simple thing that most people have experienced and probably have some thoughts about. There are lots of potential bridges, and I'd like you to discover more of them in our discussion time after the sermon.
2. When you see an opportunity, take it. Paul was talking with people in the synagogue and then on the streets, in the public square - he just opened up conversations with people wherever he went. It was this boldness in starting conversations that led to him being asked to share his teaching in the Areopagus. There are lots of conversations that are possible if we have the willingness to interject and ask a simple question like, "Are you sure that's really true?", or "What if miracles do happen?" What strikes me about Paul's approach was that he was willing to question the prevailing views of the day, the myths that controlled human actions to the extent

that they made offerings to gods they believed in and feared. He made them think about different possibilities, a different God, a God who desires relationship with human beings, a God who isn't like the gods they had been so afraid of. We'll never know how close people are to faith in Jesus unless we engage in the conversations that lead us to talk about Him. Paul saw the opportunities to enter those conversations and he jumped at them.

3. The third thing to notice is that Paul stays away from "insider" language, in his case, the religious language of the Jews. He speaks about God as the Creator, not a foreign concept to the Greeks. He reveals what God is really like, which was new, but he doesn't overwhelm his audience with new concepts which they would question at every level. The idea of a wise and powerful Creator who was Lord of His Creation was not a huge leap for the members of the Areopagus. I think what we're seeing is the need to start as close as you can to a person's existing world view and build bridges from that point, rather than starting from the perspective of someone who knows the Scriptures, the culture of the church, the language of faith. Notice that Paul even quotes one of their own poets and uses that quote to build his argument that God is relational: "As one of your own poets says, 'We are His offspring.'" So, start as close as you can to what people know and believe and work from there.
4. The fourth point from Paul's speech is that we will, at times, need to say something that pushes people, that might make them uncomfortable. He brings up the topic of judgment right near the end, saying that God has set a day for judging the world with justice. I think that's a relevant issue today. I think we can ask people if they think that there is a God and, if they do, what they think He will do about the problem of evil in the world. Will there ever be true justice? If so, who do they think is qualified to bring justice about? Can a God who never deals with injustice or evil be considered a good or a loving God? Judgment is a big issue, it's a necessary step towards the rewards of heaven and our promised liberation from the evil that's in this world. Maybe that won't be the area where you need to push the conversation into a more challenging direction, but there will be opportunities in any serious discussion of faith and Jesus and hope, for you to push. Don't be condescending or arrogant about it - just challenge the basis of their world view or the content of a statement they have made. Paul directly challenges the world view that says that we can pacify or even manipulate God, or the gods, by offering sacrifices to idols that we've made ourselves. He pushed harder when he stated that God had set a day in which He would judge such ignorance. No, it's not Canadian and no, it's not an easy thing to do, but watch for opportunities to lovingly press people towards the truth.

Okay, I think we have enough ammunition for some good discussion. Let's push each other a little bit here...