

Sunday, May 31, 2026 am

PAUL PREACHING IN ATHENS

Acts 17:22-34

A few weeks ago, I presented a lesson based upon the lesson of Peter to Cornelius. The premise of that lesson was an understanding of some things we ought to emphasize to one who believes in God, Jesus and the Bible, but still needs the whole truth. In this lesson, we note another sermon presented in Acts, but this time to those who even question foundations of our faith.

I. Paul in Athens

- a. This is part of his 2nd preaching journey. He has left Berea and comes to Athens. Timothy and Silas are not with him as they stayed in Berea. After they were told to come, Paul is waiting for them.
- b. Observing the city, he sees it is given over to idols and he is provoked by this. ARE we bothered by the godlessness and false gods around us today?
- c. He preaches and teaches wherever he can – including the synagogue and marketplaces.
- d. His message comes to the attention of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers who were constantly looking to learn something new.
 - i. **Epicureans** were a group of philosophers who followed Epicurus (342-270 BC). They believed that experience is the greatest source of knowledge. Thus they appealed to senses with the goal of pursuing pleasures over pain. (“If it feels good do it, but in moderation, simplicity and friendship.” Basically, it is the philosophy that if something does not harm others you can do, but with some restraint). As to deity, they believed at best the gods were hands off with nothing beyond this life. The gods were not to be feared because there is no immortality.
 - ii. **Stoics** were a group of philosophers who beliefs were traced back to Zeno (a philosopher from ~300 BC). Instead of calling themselves after him, their name comes from the fact that they taught in public (stoa was the Greek word for a porch), especially in Athens. Their emphasis was seeking to understand how the world & universe worked naturally. They emphasized that logic, ethics and nature worked together. It held primarily to a pantheistic (God is in everything) view of God. They viewed the universe itself as divine. Thus man was to seek to align himself with nature. (This would be equivalent to many extreme environmentalists and naturists today)
- e. The message of Paul on this occasion is descriptive of many we encounter today.
 - i. While the majority in our communities do believe in God, Jesus and the Bible, increasingly we are finding those who question these things. We are an increasingly pluralistic (religiously diverse) society. Everyone has a belief system, even if they deny it. Whether atheist/agnostic, naturalist or adherent to a specific worldview or religion, we believe something and it governs our thoughts, words and actions.
 - ii. If you are interested in sharing your faith, this matters as it will determine WHERE you begin. This is what will make Paul’s message to the Athenians different than that of Peter to Cornelius or speaking in a synagogue.
 - iii. Paul’s sermon addresses several key principles we ought to familiarize ourselves with as we seek to teach. Primarily, there is ONE God and we need to know who He is.

II. Paul’s sermon

- a. **I perceive that you are religious** – Paul begins with common ground – where they are at. He notes they do believe in something.

- i. The word **religious** is a generic and ambiguous term. It is defined as¹, “1. Having or showing belief in or reverence for God or a deity. 2. Of, concerned with, or teaching religion. 3. Extremely scrupulous or conscientious. 4. Of or pertaining to religion; concerned with religion...”.
 - ii. In this case, it could be said that they were thoughtful about their beliefs and at least wanted to hear what others had to say. Often Paul was grateful for opportunities to speak truth regardless of the outcome. Acts 26:2 – Paul is happy to speak before Agrippa and Festus.
 - iii. Sadly, a barrier to sharing the gospel with many today is the closed mind that refuses to even engage in rational discussion (cf. Luke 8:12 – the wayside soil). SOME will declare they are religious or spiritual but deny the need to fully surrender to Jesus. BUT, if someone is willing to discuss differing points of view, that is an opportunity.
 - iv. ***I was...considering the objects of your worship.*** They were doing things the way they believed they ought to live.
 - 1. We are living in a culture filled with manmade religions – everyone does what is right in his own eyes (cf. Judges 21:25). Recall the condemnation of Jesus in Matthew 15:9. Colossians 2:23 speaks of the appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion.
 - 2. Familiarity with what one believes can be helpful in the direction you will go with your studies.
 - 3. It will also help you to anticipate how to conduct yourself within the environment you are in (cf. 1 Corinthians 9:19-23) and what types of questions or objections you will be dealing with.
- b. ***The unknown God.***
- i. In Athens, a city filled with temples, altars, gardens devoted to gods and other objects of worship, they even had an altar TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. This implied that they understood there might be some deity they were not aware of. Just in case, they wanted to honor him too.
 - ii. The one true God is unknown to many today.
 - iii. But God desires that we DO know Him – John 17:3, Philippians 3:10 – “That I may know Him...”
 - iv. How well do we know Him? Are we prepared to share our knowledge of Him to others?
 - v. Paul was prepared to introduce them to *the unknown God*.
- c. ***The one true God***
- i. *He created the world and everything in it* – Genesis 1:1.
 - 1. Acts 14:14-15 – Paul and Barnabas in Lystra after attempts to worship them as gods, declared something similar. Hebrews 3:4, *For every house is built by someone, but He who built all things is God.*
 - 2. While God (plural) consists of 3 beings, He is ONE (all 3 possessing the qualities of deity). 1 Corinthians 8:5-6 – for us there is one God and one Lord Jesus. John 10:30, Jesus would declare, “I and My Father are one”.
 - 3. Paul contrasts this with the polytheism of Athens where there were multiple gods that often competed or fought with each other. And many of them had flaws.
 - ii. *He is Lord* (not a Lord) - a declaration of His sovereignty. The idea of Lordship is authority. God is to be worshipped and served. There is to be no other.
 - iii. *He does not dwell in temples made with hands* –

¹ The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, 5th Edition. May 28, 2026.

1. HOW we worship (and serve – NASB, LSB) Him matters and always has. John 4:24.
 2. He does not need to be portrayed as an image. Scripture is clear in emphasizing this – 1 Kings 8:26-27 even as the temple was built and dedicated Solomon understood its inadequacies; Exodus 20:3-4 – to Israel, YHWH was clear – 1) No other gods; 2) no graven images, etc.
 3. When man starts to build something to honor God, typically he is honoring himself. He is trying to envision what God wants materially. That is the problem with ornate buildings, icons (including jewelry), statues and portraits in church buildings, shrines, etc. It is man, however well intentioned, seeking to make God in his own image. But God is clear – what He wants is our heart! Matthew 22:37.
- iv. *He gives life and breath to all (living things)* – Genesis 2:7. As already noted, ALL things belong to Him. Psalm 50:7-15. As Christians, we are reminded of our stewardship.
- v. *All mankind is of one blood* – we all came from Adam.
1. Genesis 9:18-19 – sons of Noah identified, then *from these the whole earth was populated*.
 2. Note: The word “blood” is not found in earlier mss, but it is implied.
 3. It is worthwhile to note that when blood is needed, one’s ethnicity is not a factor (even though typing is important). But humanity is!
- vi. *He has determined appointed times and boundaries of nations* – this demonstrates that He rules over all the world. He is sovereign, omnipotent and omnipresent.
1. While pagans typically thought of many gods, often they limited their power to a certain region or nation, or they assigned them to certain aspects of the world.
 2. Paul’s point is that God is in control, not only of His people, but all the world. At will He can accomplish His purpose. This is why we are called to pray for rulers – 1 Timothy 2:1-2 – that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life.
 3. While God does not micromanage nations, He has the power to do what He will. He is in control. Note that in many of the prophets, not only were Israel and Judah to be judged, but their neighbors and captors as well. In fact, 3 of the written prophets were directed to foreign nations – Obadiah – to Edom, Jonah and Nahum to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria. Both Jeremiah and Daniel record interactions with foreign kings.
- vii. *He wants us to seek Him* –
1. Unlike the philosophies Paul was addressing, the Bible speaks of God as personal and caring. We are not left to guess who He is (as the pagans with their mythologies often did).
 2. He has revealed Himself to us – 1 Corinthians 2:10-13. Romans 1:16-17 – through the gospel, His righteousness is revealed to us.
 3. One of the purposes for sending Jesus was to reveal Himself to us – John 1:18, *No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him*; John 14:9, Jesus answered Philip that if you had seen him, you had seen the Father.
- viii. *He is not far from us* –
1. Many faiths declare God to be distant and impersonal.
 2. God is not! He cares and wants relationship.
 3. James 4:8, Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.
- ix. *In Him we live and move and have our being* – This elaborates on the previous point.
1. He has designed us with purpose. This gives our life REAL meaning.

2. We are His offspring – Genesis 1:26. Ecclesiastes 3:11 – He has put eternity in our hearts.
3. NOTE: Paul even quotes one of their own poets – most attribute this to a 3rd century BC poet named Artus.
4. This again describes familiarity as we engage in discussion.
- x. *Do not think of “the divine nature” (Godhead) in material terms.* God is NOT impressed with idols, ornate temples and icons (as previously noted). EVEN if it is sincere, is it the way He desires that we worship Him? NOTE: A study of worship in scripture from the beginning emphasizes that He cares HOW we worship Him – cf. Genesis 4:1-5 – Abel and Cain.
- xi. *We will be held accountable.*
 1. *Ignorance of God is not an excuse* – how often does man today reason, “as long as I am sincere, God understands”? Ignorance does not make one right.
 - a. Did God overlook ignorance in times past? In some sense He did, because that is what the text says.
 - b. However, understand that the LOM was exclusive to a nation. Gentile nations could learn a general idea of how to worship and serve God (cf. Romans 2:13-14), but as Paul writes, ALL nations and people are subject to the same laws. Yes it matters now.
 - c. NOTE: Paul in essence taught the same thing at Lystra – Acts 14:15-16.
 2. *We must repent – submit to Him.* Repentance is crucial to being saved and staying saved – Luke 13:3, Acts 2:38, 8:22, 1 John 1:9, etc. Paul is declaring what you believe now matters! If you have not submitted to God’s will, you are not saved.
 3. *There is a day of judgment coming* – regularly the gospel preached included warnings of judgment. Acts 10:42 – Peter declared Jesus was appointed as judge; Acts 24:25 – before Felix. Be reminded again of 2 Corinthians 5:10, etc.

d. Through the Man whom He ordained.

- i. Paul concludes this lesson (at least what is taught) by appealing to our need for Jesus.
- ii. Obviously, Jesus is the foundation of our salvation. WHEN there is a clear understanding of who God is, THEN we are ready to introduce Jesus and everything about Him.
- iii. ***He IS the one who will judge us in the last day*** – John 5:28-29, 12:48 - *He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him—the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day.* God has assured us this by raising Him from the dead – the resurrection is crucial to our faith.
- iv. ***He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead*** – it is in the resurrection of Jesus that we have our hope.
 1. As Paul noted in 1 Corinthians 15:17-19 if Christ was not raised, we are still sinners and without hope.
 2. The resurrection is the lynchpin doctrine that is exclusively Christian. Every other worldview and world religion rejects the resurrection of Jesus.
 3. It is also the doctrine that provokes a response. We see that throughout the book of Acts and the letters.

III. The response – Some mocked at the mention of the resurrection. Some wanted to hear more. Some believed and followed.

Today, while the majority within the world are living their lives with little to no thought of God, righteousness, self-control and judgment to come (e.g., Felix – Acts 24:25), there is SOMEONE looking. Are you ready to give a defense for the hope that is in you with meekness and fear? (1 Peter 3:15) How will you respond to His invitation? Think about it!