

**Acts 17:16-34**  
**Face the idols of our city**  
**ACTS: HTCWP**

**Introduction**

Tim. Pastor. Sup. **Acts 17.**

We have two weeks left in our series on the book of Acts. I hope this series has been convicting, helpful, inspiring for you. Honestly, I had more of an intro but we have a lot of ground to cover today so I want to get into it.

**For these last two weeks** we are going to turn our attention to perhaps the most famous character in the book of Acts and in the New Testament besides Jesus, and that is a guy named **Paul**.

**Paul** began his career as a religious zealot who hated and persecuted followers of Jesus. God gets ahold of his life in Acts 9, he has a miraculous conversion to faith in Christ, and becomes one of the greatest missionaries the world has ever seen, going on to write over 25% of the New Testament Scriptures, plant a bunch of churches, and take the gospel to places it had never been up until that point.

And one of the places Paul took the gospel, as we'll look at today is the city of **Athens**.

**So here's the situation:** Paul is in Athens, and he gets put on the spot and asked to present to a big group of people who have no background with God or with Christianity or the Bible why they should trust in Jesus.

So just so you'll feel the awkwardness of this moment - imagine this happens to you. You're somewhere public, at work or on zoom during a staff meeting, in a large college lecture, a neighborhood association meeting or a book club, the children's story time at the library. And the person in charge calls your name and says - **"you there, come forward and present a case for why someone should follow Jesus. Oh, and by the way this group knows nothing about God or the Bible."**

Alrighty then. Here we go....right?

**What I want to do today** - I want us to walk through the story of how Paul brings the gospel to this group with no Christian background, I'll highlight some things for us, and then at the end I want to pull out some key steps Paul took, and we should take, to **engage the culture around us with the gospel.**

**Walkthrough of Acts 17:16-34**

**Acts 17:16-34**

**16 Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens,**

Paul is waiting in Athens for his missionary companions - Timothy and Silas - after they were split up during a riot in a city called Berea. So he's all by himself.

**Athens** is a city with a rich history.

- One time home to the world's greatest philosophers - Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle.
- Hippocrates, the "father of Western medicine".

- It was the birthplace, many argue, of modern democracy.

It's a city of rich history and culture, but look at what Paul sees when he walks around the city:

**16 Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.**

There was an ancient saying in Athens: **"It's easier to find a god in Athens than a man."** It was a city full of idols and idolatry (or idol worship).

**Idolatry is a key idea in this passage and this sermon so let's pause here to make sure we're on the same page:** When it says the city is full of idols, it means that they are polytheistic (they worship multiple gods) and have created actual images out of wood or stone or some other material for all these gods that they worshipped and they put these carved idols into temples they made for them as well. They have a sun god, a love god, a money god, a power god, and an altar or temple or way of worshipping all of these specific gods.

Now, while in 2021 there are certainly some folks who practice idolatry in this way, especially in different parts of the world, primarily here in the United States idolatry looks a little bit different. While the vast majority of us may not have a bedroom full of wood carvings to a money god or love god or something like that, we still live in a culture full of idols.

**That's because the Biblical category of idolatry is actually much larger than just something you carve out of wood or stone.**

**Biblically, idolatry is anything or anyone we put in the position of God in our lives.**

[Jesus off the throne, this thing or this person on the throne]. And idol is what you learn to sacrifice for, what you give up your life or live your life for. It's anything that is not God that that you look to for ultimate value, meaning, identity, and purpose.

Pastor Tim Keller, in his wonderful book on idolatry called Counterfeit Gods, says it this way:

**"What is an idol? It is anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give...An idol is whatever you look at and say, in your heart of hearts, "If I have that, then I'll feel my life has meaning, then I'll know I have value, then I'll feel significant and secure." There are many ways to describe that kind of relationship to something, but perhaps the best one is worship."**

So, for example, you might live your life for **money**. You find your hope, your joy, your identity in how much or how little money you have. Your schedule and time and world revolve around obtaining more of it or keeping it or stockpiling it...**money for you has become an idol**. Now the Athenians might name their god of money - Plutus and have a temple and shrine to Plutus - but our idolatry is no different. We still give our lives away in pursuit of something or someone that is not God.

**17 So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace [Agora - city center] every day with those who happened to be there.**

**18 Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him.**

While Paul is in the Agora he starts talking with two main groups of philosophers - the Epicureans and the Stoics.

- **The Epicureans** - Either gods don't exist or they're not involved in our lives. Feel good, go with the flow. There is no afterlife so if it feels good do it because there are no consequences. They were the epitome of the "YOLO". (Do people still say that?) Highest value = pleasure.
- **The Stoics** - God is everywhere and in everything, mother earth kind of vibes. They were kind of "que sera sera" - it's gonna happen anyways so just grin and bear it. Only thing you can do is try to be the best version of yourself that you can be. Highest value = virtue.

**And some said, "What does this babbler wish to say?"**

AKA - who's this ignorant showoff and what does he know about anything?

**Others said, "He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities"—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.**

Stoics over here - Honor, Duty, Rules! Epicureans over here - Do whatever you want. Polar opposite groups Paul's like - perfect. I'll take you both on. **Let me tell you about Jesus and the resurrection.**

This was Paul's message. This was Peter's message. This was Stephen's message. This was Philip's message. This was what the early church lived and died upon - Jesus and the resurrection. So much of the mission of the early church was sustained and centered around this central message of our Christian faith - that **Christ died for our sins but did not stay dead, he rose again 3 days later defeating satan, sin, and death and is now ruling and reigning for all eternity.**

**19 And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? 20 For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean." 21 Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.**

The Areopagus was a little hill that overlooked the city and was about 50 ft high and 150 yards long. And it was this place where ideas and philosophies and belief systems were debated, and the city council would basically decide if this new belief system or god that was being presented was valid enough to be added in with all of the other gods they already believed.

So they invite Paul forward to share about his God.

**22 So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said:**

→ Not the full speech. Just an outline. He probably said much, much more. But I want you to watch how he engages this group of people that have no Biblical background, no prior knowledge of God or Christianity or anything like that.

**"Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. [Or Spiritual.] 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.'**

This was their "just in case" god. Just in case they might have missed a god and he might get angry and he might blow everybody up, they built an altar to the unknown god. That way if this god they forgot about

or didn't know about shows up one day, they could say, "No, no, no. That was you. No, this is you right there. I'm sorry! We didn't know your name. We will get that fixed asap." That's how nervous they were in their spiritual belief system.

**What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.**

Paul steps into that cultural norm, that cultural grid, and he says, "I perceive that you are very religious. In fact, I saw this altar to the unknown god. It happens that I know him! I'd love to tell you about him. Also, he's the only true God and the only one that actually exists..."

**Now**, what Paul is not saying is that they were actually worshipping the one true God they just didn't know it, he's simply starting with a place of **common ground** - these people assumed that there was such a thing as a spiritual realm. They were a religious people. And Paul wants to start on that commonality.

It's the same thing we saw with Philip and the Ethiopian a few weeks ago: **Different people require different starting places in our sharing of the gospel.**

In the presentation of the gospel of Jesus, it's important to start where the person is at in their worldview, in their life story, in their perspectives on things, all of that. As he begins to build the case for Jesus and the resurrection and the Christian faith, he doesn't first go directly to the Scriptures or to these theological nuances or arguments, he starts with their worldview. Their perspective on things.

Early in Chapter 17, **Acts 17:2**, Paul goes into the synagogue to share the gospel with Jewish religious leaders and the text says he reasons with them from the Scriptures. **Different starting places for different people.** In the south...

Paul starts where they are and this is what he says:

**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.**

Their polytheistic religious system was built on: gods over particular areas of influence that they would serve to appease them and win their favor so that these false gods would give them something.

Paul undercuts that and says - My God created everything and has jurisdiction/power of everything. He wants to be in relationship with you, so much so that He made a way for us to be right with Him - through His Son Jesus Christ, and we don't worship Him for what He gives us, rather we worship Him for Him. He is the treasure.

**27 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."**

Paul quotes first an Epicurean love song, and then a Stoic poem. He knows their culture and beliefs so well he can quote their own philosophers and show how they have glimpses of truth about the one true God.

**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.**

You think you can hold God in your hands, when really you are His offspring. He created you and everything you see.

**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."**

Jesus has come. He died and rose again. He's going to come back. There will be a judgment. Repent from worshipping false gods and idols. Turn to the one true God.

**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.**

#### Four Steps

**So that's the story of Paul in Athens.** How we feeling? Take a breath. This is one of the most studied and discussed passages in scripture on the topic of mission and engagement.

**What we are seeing here is Paul contextualizing the gospel for the City of Athens. He meets people where they are and using their own quotes and ways of thinking, he presents the good news of Jesus.**

So what can we learn and apply as we seek to be witnesses in our own culture and context here today:

#### **1. Recognize the idols of our city.**

**16 Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.**

**23 For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship....**

What are the idols of our city? What are the objects of our worship? Everyone in our city, us included, are sacrificing for someone or something.

Author David Foster Wallace, not a Christian, once said it this way - **"In the day-to day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships."**

The opposite of Christianity, the worshipping and following of the one true God, is not atheism, it's idolatry.

**I think if someone from Athens, 2000 years ago, came to Charlotte, NC today, they would feel right at home with our idol worship.** They would feel right at home with our looking to created things for our

comfort, our approval, our control, our meaning and identity, our power. We live in a culture filled with idols, we just call them different things than they called them in Athens in 51 AD.

- They could turn on our TVs and look at our new stations and see - we worship **politics**. They would call it **athena**, the goddess of wisdom and war. We would call it democrat or republican.
- They could look at our instagram feeds or our web browser history or our phone apps and see - we worship **beauty** and **sex**. They would call it **Aphrodite**, the goddess of sexuality and beauty. We would call it freedom and “doing what feels right”.
- They could look at our budgets and our weekend calendars and see - We worship **sports**. They would call it **Nike**, the goddess of victory. We would call it the Carolina Panthers, or the South Carolina Gamecocks or Tiger Woods.
- They could hang out with us on the weekends and see - We worship **alcohol**. They would call it **Dionysus**, the god of wine and partying. We would call it Friday night or Saturday afternoon and cutting loose and trying to relax after a hard week.

**It's really not all that different.**

**If you want to reach your friends/neighbors/coworkers/family members with the gospel you need to know your own beliefs and idols and you need to know their beliefs and their idols.**

Everybody worships. What are they giving their lives in service to? What are they sacrificing for?

**Here's some questions that will help you start to really recognize the idols/false gods around you:**

- What are people most afraid of?
- What do people turn to for comfort or relieve?
- What do people complain about the most?
- What makes people the happiest?
- How do people define themselves?
- **BIG ONE:** What makes people angry at God? Usually people get angry at God because He fails to provide them with their idols.

## **2. Expose the idols of our city.**

After we recognize the idols of our city - what are people grasping for, reaching after, building a life upon, as we are faithful to lovingly share the gospel with them **we must expose where those things lie and offer promises they cannot fulfill.**

This is what Paul does in **Acts 17:25:**

**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.**

In their pagan temples they would have servants whose entire job was to take care of the golden image they created. They would set out food to feed it, they would wash it. And Paul's very clever argument is basically - “Hey guys, if you have to make this god a sandwich, he's not really much of a god right? And if you have to wash him when he gets dirty, how is he supposed to help you when you're dirty?”

Like we see how this doesn't make sense right? Do we see how this doesn't add up? Do we see how we're looking to something for ultimate meaning and purpose and validation that isn't going to give us that and that ultimately we created!?

Paul's saying → These idols aren't real. They won't hold up to the false promises. **They will fail you. Here's the thing church - the idols of our city. The idols of our hearts. They will fail too.**

**DFW:**

That David Foster Wallace quote from above - where he says everyone worships. He continues:

**"Pretty much anything you worship will eat you alive:**

**If you worship money and things—if they are where you tap real meaning in life—then you will never have enough ....**

**Worship your own body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly, and when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally plant you ....** (He said it, not me)

**Worship power—you will feel weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to keep the fear at bay.**

**Worship your intellect, being seen as smart—you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. And so on."**

**I'd like to do the "and so on" for him and keep going as to mutually offend and convict all of us in the room....I need us all to see these idols we run to, and our city runs to...they will fail us:**

- If you center your life and identity on your **spouse, partner, or best friend**, you will be so worried about losing them that instead of loving them sacrificially, you will grow emotionally dependent, jealous, manipulative, and controlling.
- If you center your life and identity on your **family and children**, you will become either a tyrant with no grace or utterly dependent for your self-worth on the fickle emotions of a 5 year old, either way crushing the relationship.
- If you center your life and identity on your **work and career**, either you will succeed at the cost of any deep meaningful friendships or relationships or you will fail and experience deep depression.
- If you center your life and identity on **pleasure and comfort**, you will find yourself getting addicted to something. You will become chained to the "escape strategies" by which you avoid the hardness of life.
- If you center your life and identity on a **"noble cause,"** you will divide the world into "good" and "bad" and demonize your opponents. Ironically, you will be controlled by your enemies. Without them, you have no purpose.
- If you center your life and identity on **religion and morality**, you will, if you are living up to your moral standards, be proud, self-righteous, and cruel. If you don't live up to your moral standards, your guilt will be utterly devastating.

**Your idols, my idols, our city's idols - they will fail.**

**It is not going to work. No created thing or individual can bear the weight of providing us with identity and meaning, purpose and value, belonging and the forgiveness we long for in our souls, only God can do that.**

What do your friends and neighbors and coworkers believe? What are their idols and how can you help them see disconnects?

**3. Tell people how Jesus is better than their idols.**

I want to say 2 things really clearly here:

**First,** Jesus is specifically good news for each one of us and can actually give us what our idols promise but never deliver.

- Meaning, if **control** is what you're after, you can never have enough and the pursuit of it will ruin your life...but you are invited to rest in the arms of the one who works all things according to his good purposes.
- If **comfort** has been your god, there is a God in heaven for whom you were created and at whose right hand are pleasures forevermore in a promised future eternity with Him and offers you now a peace that defies our understanding.
- If **approval** is what you've built your life on, you have the Lord of the Universe who says in Christ, He delights in you. He welcomes you because of Jesus.
- If **performance** has dictated your life, Jesus has performed in your place. He lived the perfect life you cannot live.

Jesus is the only God who won't let you down, who laid down his life for you. And not just that, but rose from the dead to prove that every word He ever said was true and right.

And that is good news. And I need you to hear that blessed assurance → All the things you and our world are looking to in money, success, career, family, friendships → All of it is offered to us truly and fully in Christ Jesus.

**AND...and here's the second thing....**AND if we're not careful we can functionally turn Jesus into a genie who dispenses the goods we want, **instead of God who is the true and ultimate treasure in and of Himself.**

### **JESUS IS THE TREASURE.**

And He offers true peace, true comfort, true rest, true life, true belonging....Yes and amen, absolutely. But do not turn Him into another god you simply run to to get something in return. Because He's not simply another idol we turn to to give us what we think our souls want. We go to Him for Him. We worship Him for Him. He's the treasure. He's who we celebrate for all eternity.

We don't worship Jesus to get comfort. We don't worship Jesus to get peace. We don't worship Jesus to get affirmation. We don't worship Jesus to get ease.

### **We worship Jesus to get Jesus.**

And in His goodness and kindness He gives us those things - He Himself is our peace. He is gracious. He is kind. He is the God of all comfort.

### **But ultimately, He is the treasure.**

We must make sure we preach a whole gospel to our city - Not just turning Jesus into their perfect life dispensary. It's a false gospel to say things like:

- Come to Jesus, get paid.
- Come to Jesus, get the promotion.
- Come to Jesus, get the perfect family.
- Come to Jesus, all your problems will go away.



The true gospel says - **Come to Jesus, and get Jesus!** He is Savior and Lord. He is the good news. He is the treasure.

#### 4. Be provoked by the idols of our city.

And with all of this, we must be **provoked**, like Paul was in vs 16. **Provoked. Heartbroken.**

- Not proud - "I'm so glad I don't chase those idols..."
- Not indifferent - "Whatever, it doesn't matter. They're gonna do whatever anyways."
- Not a participant - "Well if they're gonna chase these things, I should too. I can go after this, no big deal."

#### **WE MUST BE PROVOKED.**

I want you to look at your friends, your neighborhood, your coworkers, our city and be broken, to **weep** and **mourn** and **lament** and be **broken hearted** over all of the ways that people in Charlotte and that you are trying to make life work apart from God.

#### **"I don't know what to say":**

We've been talking about mission and sharing the gospel with those around us so much over the past 2 months. You want to know the common feedback I've heard over the past 8 weeks? → "I don't know what to say. I don't know where to start or how to talk about all of this or how to share Jesus and speak it into someone's life."

Let me give you an example that I heard a few years ago that stuck with me and made me rethink ever saying that or thinking that ever again.

**Sign language.** I don't know sign language. I know a guy that studied it in college, uses it professionally. Honestly, it's a bit overwhelming. It's a lot to take in, a lot to memorize and to know. It would take a lot of work to learn how to use it.

You want to know the main reason why I don't know sign language? Because there is no one I am really close to who is deaf. If Lindsay and I found out that Harper, our one year old, was deaf, and the only way to communicate with her was sign language, you know what I would do? I would learn it. Doesn't matter how long it took, doesn't matter how painstaking and labor intensive it was, doesn't matter how much of an uphill climb it would be. I would learn sign language. I love my daughter so I would learn to communicate with her whatever means necessary.

If you love the people around you, and you are broken over the fact that they are stuck on an endless loop of sin and idol worship, separated from God with no hope for eternity with Him, **wouldn't you figure out every possible way to communicate the gospel to them?**

- Wouldn't you want to study the Scriptures more? To seek the Lord in prayer more? Wouldn't you want to get to know the people around you more? To figure out how they're searching and what they're longing for so that you could speak the gospel into their lives?
- And if someone asks you a question that you don't know the answer to, just say "I don't know. That's a good question. Let me see if I can find something that answers that question in a way that's helpful and I'll get it to you."

May we as a church be provoked. Be broken over those around us who do not know the saving power of Jesus.

One of the first steps we can take to being broken over the idolatry of our own hearts and the world around us is to remember the gospel...To see fresh and new what Christ has done for us.

**Communion.**

**Pray.**