

Paul in Athens, Acts 17

July 28, 2024

Overview

Hi, so this Sunday we're continuing the series on "SPEAKING JESUS" studying through Acts. This Sunday is focused on Paul's ministry in Athens, Acts 17:24-34. Here we see Paul become so troubled by the idolatry he observed, that he began to meet the people both in the Synagogue & in the market place to intentionally Speak Jesus with them. He gained enough trust, respect & intrigue that he was invited to speak publicly in a large meeting. He is very strategic & honoring in the talk he shares: coming with respect, quoting from their writers, while still sharing the full resurrection gospel. The core of his message is to introduce them to the God who is beyond human hands/altars, and who has designed our time & location so that we can all reach around and find He is not far from each one of us. Some hearers believe, some want to continue the conversation, and others sneer at this message.

Major takeaways would be:

- That our heart would be so in-sync with Jesus', that it mobilizes us to action - even in seasons of "waiting" or "off the clock". God's invitation is, "Wherever there are people, there is an opportunity to join Me"
- That approach others with honor & respect - seeking to build trust so that we have genuine opportunity to SPEAK JESUS
- That we recognize that God's purpose for our existing in this specific time & place... is so that we can all reach out and find Him - especially as He is not too far for any of us

Reflective Questions to consider

- What are some steps I can take to help me better align my heart with Jesus's heart for people?
- Similarly to Paul's heart being stirred in Athens, are there any specific people coming to mind that I might reach out to?
- Self-assessing
 - How often does Jesus come up in my conversations? Does that match with how important He is to me?
 - Looking back on my past week, did Jesus come to my mind during a conversation, but I did not voice it out? Any missed opportunities to learn from?

Our main passage is a speech given to people in 1st Century Athens, but there's some backstory & context to cover to work our way there:

Today, we're reading about a man named Paul
One who is introduced in the Bible as one who hates Christians
Terrorizing them
Present as a Christian leader was executed
Then meets Jesus in a dramatic, powerful way and **everything changes**
Passion/Energy redirected for Jesus' sake (about face)

At this point in history where we're looking today, Paul is playing an important role within a movement of local Jesus-centered faith communities sprouting up for the first time throughout the known world

Alongside Philip, Peter & other followers of Jesus at the time

Men & women whose lives were changed by Jesus, and who were propelled towards action & “SPEAKING JESUS” to others

Today we find ourselves following this man Paul as he is in the midst of what we’d call a “missions trip”
Teaching & proving that Jesus is the Savior
The One who recently suffered & died as a criminal, yet rose from the dead
Many were believing, but many hated this new Jesus movement
They’d almost **riot** to stop these different Jesus followers & any who housed them

Acts 17:6b-7 (ESV)

they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, “These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, 7 and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.”

This Christian movement was causing so much change, that there was an uproar from those who did not want the current cultural, religious power dynamics to be shook in any way.

In one of the efforts to keep Paul safe, **he was brought to Athens...** where he was meant to stay safe & wait for some other ministry partners (Silas & Timothy) as they finished work in Berea.

Acts 17:13-16 (ESV)

But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was proclaimed by Paul at Berea also, they came there too, agitating and stirring up the crowds. 14 Then the brothers immediately sent Paul off on his way to the sea, but Silas and Timothy remained there. 15 Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens, and after receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they departed.

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.

He knew what it was to religiously pursue something and realize it was the wrong path

He could not hold it in

So, **he stepped in.**

Began interacting with people in Athens just as he did in the previous cities

First to the religious Jews in the synagogues

Then conversations in the marketplace

Acts 17:16-21 (ESV)

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. **17** So he reasoned in the **synagogue** with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the **marketplace** every day with those who happened to be there. **18** Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, “**What does this babbler wish to say?**” Others said, “He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities”—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. **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.

Paul speaks to all kinds of people: religious, philosophers & otherwise.

He garnered enough intrigue & trust among the people, that he was invited to speak publicly in a large venue known as a historic location known as the **Areopagus (photo)**
(<https://www.landlifetravel.com/areopagus-hill/>)



Historically where governing councils would meet & judge
“ According to Greek mythology, Ares (the god of war, known to the Romans as Mars) was tried here by the gods for the murder of Poseidon’s son Alirrothios”

Even while in a brief moment of “waiting”... Paul was given this incredible, unique opportunity to share his beliefs among the Athenian intellectuals & otherwise.

MAIN TEACHING TEXT:

Acts 17:22-34 (ESV)

22 So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. **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.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. **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,^[c] **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. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, **28** for

“In him we live and move and have our being’;^[d]
as even some of your own poets have said,
“For we are indeed his offspring.’^[e]

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. **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.”

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.

So as we look at this passage together, there’s two perspectives:

Paul’s actions: Learning from Paul’s approach

Paul’s words: Learning from Paul’s actual message to the Athenians

First, Paul’s ACTIONS: let’s look at his thoughtful approach to the Athenians

Acts 17:16-17 (ESV)

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

Paul got into the conversation of the city.

He met them where they were

We don’t hear his conversations, but we know he gained enough trust & traction that he got the invite to speak in the large gathering

Then as we see him take the stage at the Areopagus

We’ll see here that he didn’t just wing it - he was thoughtful, strategic, prepared & bold.

He came prepared/familiar with Athenians and their culture & respectful

22 So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. **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.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.

He honored them as “very religious”

He used one of their altars as a means to introduce God

“The unknown” / unknowable higher authority

He quotes their poets

28 for “‘In him we live and move and have our being’;[d]

as even some of your own poets have said,

“‘For we are indeed his offspring.’

He quotes their poets

- Maybe Epimenides of Crete (5th-6th Century Cretan seer, reputed author of religious and poetical writings, including a Theogony, Cretica, and other mystical works.)

- From Aratus's poem “Phainomena”

Paul was prepared & able to speak to Athenians in a way Athenians would understand

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.”

He spoke of repenting - turning our ways
The reality of God as the Judge
And of Jesus being the center of it all as the Resurrected Savior.

Apostle Paul's Actions:

Got into the conversation - meeting people where they were at

Thoughtful, respectful approach

Bringing full gospel truth

SECONDLY, let's learn from Paul's Words: the Apostle's actual message to the Athenians
Starting from their 'altar to the unknown god' - He introduces God to them

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

This is Athens.

A globalized, cultured city with many "gods" being pursued.

They are familiar with beautiful altars & statues for the sake of 'gods'

Representing power

But the One True God that Paul is discussing... and the reason why we're gathered here today?
He is different.

Creator that doesn't need any "created things"

He doesn't any of this fancy stuff

He doesn't want anything FROM us. He is here FOR us.

He's the giver of life

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. 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."

He doesn't want to take FROM us. He is here FOR us.

He's the giver of life

Furthermore, the reason why we're Here & Now?

He's meticulously designed this time & place for us all to reach out and realize **He's not far from us.**

Ultimately, this is His loving purpose: that we be with Him & to follow Him

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. **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.**"

Paul shared this bold message. **And what was the reception?**

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.

Some mocked.

Some wanted to continue the conversation

Some joined & believed

Dionysius & Damaris namely

He was so aligned with God’s Missional heart:

Where there’s people, there’s opportunity to join Me in my work

...

So this was a specific moment for Paul in 1st Century Athens.

What about us today?

What does God have for us in our moment today?

Similarities between us and Athenian’s Paul ministered to:

- “Love the telling / hearing” of new things (hot takes/social media)
- Hungry for something real
- “Religious”

Quotes re: idols or “Counterfeit gods” (Keller, Timothy. Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope that Matters . Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.)

- Each culture is dominated by its own set of idols. Each has its “priesthoods,” its totems and rituals. Each one has its shrines—whether office towers, spas and gyms, studios, or stadiums—where sacrifices must be made in order to procure the blessings of the good life and ward off disaster.
- We think that idols are bad things, but that is almost never the case. The greater the good, the more likely we are to expect that it can satisfy our deepest needs and hopes. Anything can serve as a counterfeit god, especially the very best things in life. How to Make a God 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.⁹ A counterfeit god is anything so central and essential to your life that, should you lose it, your life would feel hardly worth living