

SERMON TRANSCRIPT

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Find in the Book of Acts chapter 17. And when you've found it look up here and I want to say a word to you about something that's very meaningful to me and really very disturbing to me. And here's the thought: we are moving away from a Christian consensus in America. Now, it is true that there are many who love the Lord Jesus Christ. It is true that there are many who believe the Bible to be the Word of God and Jesus Christ the only Savior. But those who do surveys, like the Barna Institute and others, have told us something that is very alarming. The Barna Research Report said, "That nearly two out of three adults in America contend that the choice of one religious faith over another," listen, "the choice of one religious faith over another is irrelevant." And why do they say this? "Because they say all religions teach the same basic lessons about life." And increasingly, Americans are believing that Jesus Christ is fine, wonderful indeed, but He is only one option among many options. And what we're calling that today is pluralism, and that we're called upon to accept all religions as equal, and somehow we're un-American if we don't put our arms around others and other faiths and say, "Your religion is just as good as mine."

As a matter of fact, they tell us that tolerance is wrong. We're not supposed to tolerate them, for that assumes that we don't agree with them but that's okay. No, now they want to go beyond tolerance to acceptance and approval, and it is an insinuation that we think something is wrong with their faith if we even tolerate it.

Now, ladies and gentlemen, what are we to do? Are we to wring our hands, are we to give up in despair, or are we to give a credible response to these challenges to the cross of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ? In this message I want to tell you that what we are to do is to raise the flag of our faith and expect others to salute it, others to believe in the Lord that we believe in.

Now, the episode that I'm going to talk to you about today is taken here from the seventeenth chapter of the Book of Acts. It's an episode in the life of the apostle Paul. The apostle Paul is in the great city of Athens, the intellectual, the cultural center of the ancient world. He's waiting for his comrades to join him. So, Timothy and Silas are on their way, and Paul is alone in this big city. Have you ever been alone in a big city? May I tell you this; the test of your character is what you do when you're alone in a big city! Paul is alone in this big city. He's waiting for his friends. And so, while he's in the city of Athens, he's walking the streets of Athens. And as he's walking the streets of Athens, his spirit is stirred within him. He finds something moving because he sees the depth of depravity and the wickedness of that city. Paul saw false teachers who were peddling soul dope, a narcotic for the soul. He saw pagan temples that were filled with empty people. Now, I want to remind you that ancient Athens was the cultural center of that ancient world. The glory of Athens was overwhelming.

I've visited modern Athens many times and I always want to go to see the ruins of the Acropolis, to see there the Parthenon and all of the other things that were left over there from the city that was there in Paul's time, and even before Paul's time.

Paul had come to the city after what was called the Golden Age of Pericles, and this city was absolutely overwhelming to see. Paul looked up at a mountain called the Acropolis and there sitting on the Acropolis was the most architecturally-perfect building, perhaps, that man has ever created, the Parthenon, dedicated to the sex goddess, Athene. And Paul saw the Parthenon that was there.

And then, not only was it the cultural center of the world, but, Athens was the intellectual center of the ancient world. It was the intellectual capital of mankind. Art, literature, philosophy; this was the stuff that ancient Athens was made of. It was the native home of Socrates and Plato, names that are spoken with reverence in the realm of philosophy. Not only was it the native home of Socrates and Plato, but it became the adopted home of Aristotle and Epicurus and Zeno. And these philosophers were there. As a result of this cultural superiority, as a result of this intellectualism, it was a city that was filled with cynicism. It was a city that was filled with snobbery. It was a city that was filled with debate. And Paul is there, and Paul is going to share Jesus Christ and he's going to meet strong resistance. And we're going to learn some lessons, because what happened so long ago, friend, is happening today in our society. This Scripture that we're going to study is not just what has happened; it is what is happening. It is not just what God has said to others so long ago; it is what God is saying to our society today, because history is like a broken phonograph record; it just keeps repeating itself.

There are three things that Paul met in ancient Athens, and those are the three things that you will meet, whether you live in Chicago, New York, Cincinnati, Dallas or Memphis or Miami. What three things did Paul meet there in Athens so long ago?

First of all, he met superstitious idolatry. Secondly, he met sterile orthodoxy. Thirdly, he met sophisticated philosophy. And God gave him an answer for these. Now, let me tell you what you're going to experience today as you stand for your faith in a pagan society. And get ready; and get your children ready because, friend, it's all around us. Here's what will happen as you go out to live for Christ.

Point number one, **you will experience challenges to your faith**. You will experience challenges to your faith. Don't get the idea that you're just going to sally forth and not be challenged. Today, if you are a Bible-believing Christian, you will experience challenges to your faith. What did Paul experience as a challenge? I've already told you, number one, **superstitious idolatry**. Now look, if you will, in Acts chapter 17 and verse 16, "*Now while Paul waited for them at Athens.*" That's Silas and Timothy. He's waiting. "*Now, while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given over to idolatry.*" And then go down and look in verse 22, "*Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars' hill, and said, 'Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious.'*"

There were idols everywhere; pagan images everywhere. Someone said, "It was easier to find a false god in Athens than it was to find a human being." They had some 30,000 different gods that they worshipped in ancient Athens. Well, you say,

“Pastor, I thought you said that day would be like our day? We don’t have 30,000 different gods.” No, we have more! We have more! This city, and every major city in America, is filled with idolatry. The difference is we give our idols different names.

What is an idol? Get it down big, plain, and straight. Here is an idol. Now, listen. An idol is anything that you love more, fear more, serve more, or trust more than Almighty God. May I tell you that again? Listen to me. An idol is anything that you love more, fear more, serve more, or trust more than Almighty God. An idol is whatever is in first place in your life. That is an idol, whatever your heart clings to. Whatever your heart trusts in, that is your idol. Now, may I tell you this, that idolatry is the greatest sin that a man, a woman, a boy or a girl can commit. Why? Because it transgresses the greatest commandment. What is the greatest commandment? Matthew chapter 22 verse 37, *“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, all thy soul, all thy strength, all thy mind.”* That’s the first and great commandment. Idolatry, therefore, has to be the greatest sin because it breaks the greatest commandment.

Now, I said that we have, perhaps, more gods than they did in that day. And we’ll face those gods. You’ll face them tomorrow as you go out into this great city. We’ve just changed the names. The names have been changed to protect the guilty. Let me give you some of the modern gods that have old names.

For example, **the god of materialism**. They had a god of materialism. They didn’t call it materialism; they called this god **Mammon**, Mammon. Now, there are many in this city who worship the god of Mammon. Their lives are devoted to wealth. Their lives are devoted to business. Their lives are devoted to success and achievement. And there are some in this audience. If you were to be absolutely honest, if I were to ask you, “What is the major thing in your life?” It would be your possessions. Now, you may be in church this morning, you may tip your hat to God, but God’s not going to take second place. God is not some sort of a moonlighting god with a duplex for a throne. Many of you worship this matter of Mammon. And it’s all over.

Think of how the god of Mammon has influenced our lives. The drug dealers. What motivates them? The god of Mammon. They’re willing to destroy our youth for the love of money.

The pornographers; what motivates them? With their filth they are willing to destroy the nation’s morals for money.

The liquor industry; what motivates the liquor industry? Stealing away America’s brains; the god of Mammon.

Public officials who betray America’s integrity for money are worshipping the god of Mammon.

The gambling industry worships the god Mammon. I saw this casino down here, that advertised on a billboard, “We make winners.” Friend, if you believe that, you ought to will your brain to the Smithsonian. If they make winners, they’re out of business. They have to make losers. How foolish can people be? What motivates the gambling industry? The god of Mammon. That’s only one god.

There’s another god, **the god of alcohol**. Well, you say, “Is that a God?” Yes. The ancient people gave this god a name. His name was **Bacchus**, the god of liquor, the god of alcohol, the god of drunkenness, drugs, and debauchery.

We worship in America **the god of sex**. They gave this god a name. Her name was **Venus, Aphrodite, Athene**. This was the sex goddess, the god of sexual lust and promiscuity. In America, is not sex a god? We live in a sex-saturated society. And now it seems like the sluice gates of hell have been broken on us today and around we are immersed in a swamp of adultery and fornication and homosexuality, pornography, which they call a victimless crime. There’s no such thing as a victimless crime.

What about **the god of violence**? Do we worship the god of violence? Look at some of the video games your kids are playing. They worship the god of violence. They just gave him the name **Mars**, which was the god of power and strength and revenge.

Well, you say, “I’m more intellectual than that.” Well, perhaps you worship **the god of wisdom and knowledge**. They named this god **Sophia**, the goddess of wisdom, and they worshipped it. And, today, we worship at the shrine of our computers and our cyclotrons and our universities.

Idolatry. Paul faced idolatry. Americans face idolatry. Anything you love more, fear more, trust more, serve more than God is an idol. Jesus said in Matthew 6:33, “*Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.*” We have no right to worship anything other than Almighty God.

What is an idol? An idol is just a magnified sinner. A man takes his worst vices and lusts and he worships them, and nothing is too good for a man’s god. The apostle Paul tells us about it in Romans chapter 1 verses 24 and 25, “*Wherefore God also gave them up uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonor their own bodies between themselves. Who changed,*” and that word literally means exchange, “*the truth of God a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed forever.*”

I want to ask you a question. Which would be easier for a person to do on television or radio, in the newspaper today? Say something disparaging about somebody’s race, ethnicity or to blaspheme God? Now, don’t misunderstand the illustration. I’m not saying that we ought to say something derogatory about somebody’s race or ethnicity. I’m not, I’m not talking in favor of racism. But I want to ask you a question. Which would be easier? It would be far easier, far easier to blaspheme God than to say something derogatory about some human being, is that

not right? Why? Because we worship the Creator less than we worship the creature. Now Paul, first of all, he faced superstitious idolatry. And when you leave this building, friend, you're going to face it head on.

The second thing Paul faced this day in Athens was **self-righteous orthodoxy**, self-righteous orthodoxy. Look in Acts 17 and verse 17, "*Therefore disputed he in the synagogue with the Jews, and with the,*" underscore this, "*the devout persons, and in the market daily with them that met him.*" Now, Paul is not facing idolatry; he's facing those who believe in the one true God. But they are self-satisfied. They do not know the Lord Jesus Christ as their personal Savior and Lord. These are the, quote, respectable sinners. There're many in this building like that today and listening to me. You look down upon others with their superstition, but you've never seen yourself in need of a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul had been this same kind of a self-righteous bigot till he met the Lord Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus and had his life transformed. But you're going to meet many in this city who may not be open, devout idolaters, but they're going to be self-righteous and they're not going to see their need of the Savior.

There's a third category that the apostle Paul met this day in Athens, and this was **sophisticated philosophy**, sophisticated philosophy. These are not superstitious idolaters, these are not the self-righteous orthodox, but these are they who see themselves as intellectual giants. We're going to face those. Look in Acts chapter 17 verse 18, "*Then certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the Stoics, encountered him. Some said, 'What will this babblers say?' Others, some, 'He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods' because he preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection.*"

Now, I've already told you that Athens was not only the cultural, but the intellectual center of the world at that time, and philosophers clustered to the city. Philosophy abounded. Now, what is philosophy? The word literally means a love of knowledge. Somebody said, "Philosophy is that system that tells us what we already know in words we can't understand." Has philosophy met the need of a man's heart? Let me read to you what some noted philosopher said about philosophy. Schopenhauer, world famous philosopher, got to the bottom line and he said this, "Life is a curse of endless cravings and endless unhappiness." Well, for him, philosophy was a dead-end road. Huxley, brilliant man, Julian Huxley wrote this, "It seems to me," he's looking at, at the human race, and he says, "It seems to me that we are a cancer on the globe." That's philosophy. Bertram Russell, arrogant, conceited, but honest enough to say, "Philosophy proved a washout to me." H. G. Wells, have you heard that name? The noted historian and philosopher said this, and I quote, "Unless there is a more abundant scheme before mankind, this scheme of space and time is a bad joke, an empty laugh braying across the mysteries." Our own Dr. Robert G. Lee, former pastor of this church, said, "Philosophy is a chunk of cloudbank buttered with the night wind." He knew that philosophy, the love of knowledge, can never satisfy the deepest longing of the human heart. And here's the

apostle Paul, there in the great city of Athens, and he sees this idolatry, he sees this orthodoxy, he sees this philosophy. What kind of philosophy was it?

Well, there was, first of all, **the philosophy of pleasure**. Look in Acts 17:18, “*Then certain philosophers of the **Epicureans**.*” Who were the Epicureans? Epicurus lived about 300 years before Christ and he had a philosophy that said this, simply, that, “You really can’t make sense out of life. The search for reason or for pure truth by reason is impossible. You’re never going to find absolute truth.” And so, what Epicurus said is this, “Enjoy yourself. This is all you have. This is all you can be sure of.” And so he says, “The wisest thing is pleasure based on your own personal experience.” And we talked today about Epicureans, lovers of pleasure. And we see this all around.

What are people in our city living for? What is their philosophy? It’s just a philosophy of pleasure. As a matter of fact, one said, “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you die.” That’s the Epicurean. Some years ago, a beer company put it in a slogan. You will remember the slogan, “You only go through life once,” so what? That’s right, “Grab all the gusto you can get.” “You only go through life once, grab all the gusto you can get.” That’s the Epicureans. Now, folks, this stuff is not new to us; it’s one of the moldiest, dustiest things around. There was the philosophy of pleasure taught by the Epicureans.

Go back to verse 18 again. And there was also **the philosophy of pride**. Acts 17 verse 18, “*Then certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the **Stoics** encountered him.*” Now, who were the Stoics? They were led by a philosopher named Zeno. And what, what did the Stoicism believe? Well, it’s sort of a form of fatalism, that everything is just happening to us, that we really don’t have any real choice. They were really pantheists; that is, believing that, “Everything is God and God is everything, and, therefore, we’re just caught up and swept up in it, and life has no real, vital meaning.” And so, you just sit back and endure it. It was really a form of intellectual pride. And they just smirked at those who thought that they had some answer. It was self-sufficiency built on nihilism. Stoicism; just sitting around.

Now, the Stoics and the Epicureans are with us today. The twin philosophies of pleasure and pride, they’re with us today. I mean, these ancient gods are with us today. These philosophies are with us today. This sterile orthodoxy that feels no need of God is with us today.

Now, here’s the second thing I want to lay on your heart. Not only are you going to confront these things, number two, **you can express confidence in your faith**. I want you to believe this. I don’t want you to throw up your hands and say, “Well, what is the use then? We’re up against odds too great for us.” Oh, no, you’re not. You can express confidence in your faith. Look, if you will, now in Acts chapter 17 verses 19 through 21, “*And they took him,*” that is, Paul, “*and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, ‘May we know what new doctrine whereof thou speakest?’*” They always wanted their ears tickled. They said, “Let’s let this stranger talk.” “*For thou*

bringest certain strange things to our ears, for we would know therefore what these things mean.' For all the Athenians and strangers which were there spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing." They said, "Let's hear what this babbler will say." They had a place there called Mars' Hill; I've been up on Mars' Hill many times, where they would come and make their discourses. Paul has an opportunity now. Remember, he's in the city of Athens. He's seen all of this. And they say, "Hey, bud, let's hear from you." If that had been you, what would you say? Would you be ready to give an answer? Now, Paul is given a great opportunity to speak. Remember now that he's looking around at the accoutrements of the Golden Age of Pericles. Remember now he's in the shadow of the philosophers, Plato and Socrates and Zeno and Epicurus. Remember now that all of this, this beauty indescribable beauty is all around him. But the apostle Paul knew that this human wisdom and beauty were magnificent foolishness without the Lord Jesus Christ. Religion was a mockery and beauty was vain without the Lord Jesus Christ. And so, Paul looks at them. He all, he almost says something humorous. He realizes they had covered all of the bases. Look, if you will, down in Acts 17 verses 22 and 23, "Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars' Hill, and said, 'Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are too superstitious. For I passed by and beheld your devotions, and I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, Him declare I unto you.'" Paul, walking down the streets, here's a god here, here's a god here, here's a god here, here's a god here, a god here. And then in case they missed it, they put a god on the shelf and said, "THE UNKNOWN GOD. We don't want to offend him, whoever he is. We're going to worship him." You see, what they were doing was covering all the bases, like the woman who married four men in succession. She married a banker. And then she married an actor. Then she married a minister, and then she married an undertaker. One for the money, two for the show, three to get ready, four to go. She's covering all the bases. That's what they were doing.

Now, Paul begins to speak, and I want you to see what Paul says about God. What would you have said? Paul begins to mention the one true God. He begins to stand for the faith in a pagan society. Number one, he says this, that **God is the God of creative power**. Look in Acts 17 verses 24 and 25. He says, "God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that He is the Lord of Heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands; Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though He needed any thing, seeing He giveth to all life, and breath, and all things." What Paul said about this God is He made everything. He's the God of creative power. Therefore, He stands above and distinct from creation.

Now, what has happened in America today is this, we've gone from Father God to Mother Earth. Have you noticed how much religion there is based on the earth today? In our public schools today we cannot celebrate Easter, but we can celebrate Earth Day so we can go out and worship dirt. Think about it.

Paul, with this one statement, he banishes all the gods, all of the gods of Athens, and he says, “You can’t put this God in a corner in your temple. You can’t put this God on a shelf. He is the God of creation.”

But, also, number two; **He’s the God of personal love**. Look in Acts 17 verses 26 through 28, “*And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on the earth, for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitations.*” Now, notice this. Why did He create them? “*That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after Him, and find Him, though He be not far from every one of us. For in Him we live, and move, and have our being.*” He is a God of infinite love who loves us. Why is idolatry the greatest sin? Because it is a repudiation of the very purpose of life. Why do you exist? Why this planet? Why this creation? God made you and God created you to know Him and to love Him. And down in your heart you have a desire to know Him and love Him.

I have a pastor friend, Nelson Price. Nelson Price pastored in Marietta, Georgia. He had a friend named Claude Brown. Claude Brown had a trucking firm. Before he employs anybody, he gives them a polygraph test. One of the questions on the polygraph is, “Do you believe in God?” It’s a lie detector test. He has a sworn affidavit from the man who gave the polygraph test. He said in every instance when a person professes to be an atheist and he comes to that question, the polygraph says, and he says, “No, I don’t believe in God,” the polygraph says he’s lying. Every one! Every one! He’s lying. Why? Because down in the human heart, crushed by the tempter, feelings lie buried that grace can restore.

What is Paul saying? He is the God of creation. He is the God of infinite love who made us to know Him and worship Him. And **He is the God of supernatural salvation**. Look in Acts 17 verse 31, “*Because God hath appointed a day, in which He will judge the world in righteousness by that man who He hath ordained; whereof He hath given assurance unto all men, in that He raised Him from the dead.*” Now, Paul is talking about the resurrection of the dead. He’s talking about a Savior, therefore, who suffered, bled, and died on a cross, was buried, walked out of the grave, and shown to be the Son of God with power by the resurrection of the dead. He’s not ashamed to preach the resurrection of Christ there on Mars’ Hill. Some thought he was insane, but he did it. I have more that I want to say on that, but I want to rush on to the third point.

You should expect converts to your faith. You should expect converts to your faith. Listen, there’s going to be challenges to your faith. But expect converts to your faith. When you share the Lord Jesus Christ, I can tell you after many years of ministry and preaching, there are people who will believe. Notice in Acts chapter 17 verses 32 and 34, “*And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, and others said, ‘We will hear thee again of this matter.’ So Paul departed from among them. Howbeit certain men clave unto him, and believed.*” And let me just stop right there. The Gospel has power to change lives. Every time when I preach, any time you

witness, there will be one of three responses. First of all, **there will be derision**. Some mocked. Some laughed. Are you willing to be laughed at for your faith? Did you know that some people would rather face a lion than face ridicule? What a fearful weapon that derision is. They laughed at the apostle Paul. Now, Paul was brilliant. He had the equivalency of a triple Ph.D., but he was willing to be thought a fool for Christ's sake. Some of you ladies are being laughed at by your unsaved husbands. Some of you kids at school may be laughed at, especially in the universities, by your sophisticated professor because you're an old-fashioned Bible believer. Some of you businessmen may be laughed at because you keep a Bible on your desk and bow your head in prayer in the cafeteria and thank God for your food. You will be laughed at. Harry Ironside, former pastor of Moody Church in Chicago, was on a ferryboat and they were going from Oakland to San Francisco, and they were singing and fellowshiping and having love of God. And a man challenged them, and said, "What are you doing?" He said, "We're worshipping God." He said, "You're a bunch of fools." He said, "That's true." He said, "We're a bunch of fools, but we're fools for Christ's sake. Whose fool are you?" Whose fool are you? Some laughed.

And then others said, "*We will hear you again.*" Acts 17:32. Not only derision, but **delay**. They just put it off. But the Bible says in Proverbs chapter 27 verse 1, "*Boast not thyself of tomorrow, for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth.*" And there are some of you who are not going to laugh, but you'll just simply say, "Well, not today. Perhaps tomorrow. Some other time I'll give my heart to Jesus Christ." One of the devil's favorite ways to send a soul to hell. Someone has wisely said, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions." If you ever intend to give your heart to Jesus, do it now. There was derision. There was delay.

But there was **decision**. And the Bible says in Acts 17:34, "*And others believed.*" And I've been preaching this Book long enough to know, ladies and gentlemen, there is power in the Gospel. And I know that not every seed will sprout, but I know when you preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ, when you show this God to be the God of creation, the God of personal love, the God of salvation, the God who made it all, there's something in the human heart that will say, "Yes, that is the truth, and I will accept that as my truth."

Years ago, after the Civil War, there was a steamboat in the Mississippi River that made a trip from Vicksburg down to New Orleans, and that boat left every Wednesday. It was the plushiest riverboat on the old Mississippi. One night a fire broke out in this, that steamboat, and the captain said to the first mate, "Go down the halls, the corridors, waken the people, tell them the ship is on fire. Do it as quickly as you can." They had no alarm system. This first mate got up and began to run down the hall of that ship, knocking on the door, say, "Get up! Get up! Get up! The ship is on fire!" Do you know what happened? There were some who thought it was a joke and they just laughed and went back to sleep. They thought perhaps it was a prank. There were others who got angry. They thought perhaps some drunk didn't know what he was talking about. They rolled over and went back to sleep. There were

others who were sleeping so soundly they never, ever even heard the knock. And there were others who awakened, gathered their things, got out before the fire closed the corridors and saved their lives.

Derision; don't laugh your way into hell. Delay; don't turn over and go back to sleep. Decision; give your heart to Jesus. Friend, listen to me. I didn't come here to make a talk. I came here to tell you about Jesus, to tell you that God loves you and He wants to save you, and He will save you if you'll trust Him. If I could do it for you, I would, but I want you to come to Jesus and do it today.

Bow your heads in prayer. Heads are bowed; eyes are closed. If you want to be saved, Christ stands at the door. If you will hear His voice and open the door, He will come in. Would you pray a prayer like this, "Dear God, I need You. I want You. Jesus, You died to save me. You promised to save me. You shed Your blood to save me if I would trust You. I do trust You. I believe You're the Son of God. I receive You into my heart today, now, this moment, now, as my Lord and Savior. I give You my life and I receive Your life into me. Save me, Lord Jesus. And begin now to make me the person You want me to be. And give me the courage to make it public. In Your name I pray. Amen.