

**The Communication of the Gospel in Athens
Acts 17:22-34**

Our message this morning is in Acts chapter 17, so I encourage you to grab your Bibles, and turn there to Acts chapter 17. We'll be looking at the end of the chapter from verse 22 to verse 34, and this will be dealing with Paul and his address to the people of Athens who were the city leaders there.

And just to orientate you that the book of Acts is the study of the history of the early church, the birth of the church and the establishment of it as it spreads - started in Jerusalem, the first seven chapters - went to Samaria and the greater regions surrounding Judea. In Acts 8 to 12 and beginning in Acts chapter 13, we began the missionary journeys where Paul comes on the scene, as the primary focal character. He and Barnabas go to the area of Crete and then modern day Turkey - return back.

And now, we're in the second missionary journey. Acts chapter 15:36 to 18:23 records Paul's second missionary journey to Greece. He starts out with Silas and picks up Timothy in Lystra and then Luke in Troas and moves along to Greece. Initially, they were in the northern region of Macedonia, and now, in Acts chapter 17, they've gone south to Athens. Athens is the cultural capital of the Roman Empire. It is, as I mentioned last time, sort of the hall of fame of idolatry where so many idols, statues, temples, various things, had proliferated in the city of Athens; there was said to be more idols than there were men in Athens.

So, that's where we are. Paul is addressing these people, and he does that in the midst of the Areopagus which is an elevated area - which is both a location and a group, a group of people who are about thirty, give or take, city administrators who were leading the town. And those people were significant because of what had happened leading up to his meeting with them. Because he arrived in Athens - he basically fled down to Athens from people that were opposed to the gospel - and heading south at Athens, he encountered idols, so many idols that he was provoked by these idols. And his response to his provocation was to then to engage people - the synagogues, and then, in the market place, he encountered the philosophers, the epicurean philosophers, and the stoic philosophers who we saw from last time. And they responded by some disdain, thinking he's an idle babblers which was really a put down. Others considered him proclaiming strange

deities, which some of their philosophers had even been put to death for proclaiming strange deities, so this is kind of a serious thing.

So, what they did in response to his ministry in Athens was they took him before the Areopagus - and so they may know of the teaching that he's saying for you are bringing strange deities. So the people of Athens, as we saw in verse 21 of Acts chapter 17, had this different approach to ideas than what we'd found in earlier towns that Paul had been at where when he teaches or preaches and there's opposition, these people are more tending to run them out of town. So, we constantly are seeing the gospel being proclaimed, some people believing, other people upset and him needing to flee. In Athens, there's this more of a willingness to just exchange an idea it was said in verse 21 by Luke they "...used to spend their time in doing nothing other than telling or hearing something new." There was a willingness to not just be intolerant of this but to engage in this, which gives Paul this opportunity, then, to address them, and that's what he does in verse 21 to verse 34.

We'll look at this passage together. I'll be reading out of the New American Standard. I encourage you to follow along in your Bible - which Luke writes, "So Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects. For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, 'TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.' Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things; and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His children.' Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man. Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed,

having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.” Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some began to sneer, but others said, “We shall hear you again concerning this.” So Paul went out of their midst. But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.” So, this was his ministry in Athens.

This - if you might remember from other places where he got a chance to communicate to people the gospel, and we see this recorded - this we find, in Acts 17, is very different than what we’ve seen in other places. It really is unique. You go back to Acts chapter 13 where Paul was in Pisidian Antioch in his first missionary journey, and his address to those people was very detailed regarding the history of God’s faithfulness to Israel, regarding John the Baptist coming, regarding Jesus’ ministry and His death and His resurrection, and finally, about the prophecies that spoke of all this. We find none of that in Acts chapter 17 or practically none of that in Acts chapter 17 - a wholly different approach toward the same end but with different content - and the reason for this (just to finish your notes here), this group was designed to meet to decide whether he could continue his ministry there. And as he spoke to them, the difference we find, from say when he was in Acts chapter 13 in Pisidian Antioch, was because of the audience. The audience was so different. This was a group of Gentile people that he was addressing. This is the one place in Acts where we find Paul, the apostle of the Gentiles, addressing in a large amount of material the Gentiles themselves, so this gives kind of a very great example of what Paul’s ministry to Gentile people looked like. His audience was different, so he made adjustments according to who he was talking to, not his end to communicate about Jesus, but the starting place was different. He could talk to them about the Old Testament, but they had no familiarity with the Old Testament, so he had to start at a more basic place.

Many of you have, I’m sure, done standardized testing in your life. Right? You’ve taken these tests where you fill up these bubbles; maybe you’ve taken the SAT test or the ACT test. Well, these things sort of got created back in World War I where we were at war, and we needed to give tests to people to figure out what to do with them. Some people were literate but not everybody was, back a hundred years ago. So, there was tests for people that couldn’t read or write. So, here’s this - one of these - you’re to find out what’s missing, so, like a mouth would be missing, or an eye would be

missing, or a fork would be missing from you're eating, or you see a house there. So, what's missing from the house? A chimney - some of you are familiar with places where you might actually need a chimney to be warmed, but here in southern California, we don't need chimneys. They're decorative items. So, we look and we see a house. If you were familiar with bowling, you'd realize the bowling ball was missing. Or, if you're familiar with tennis, you'd see a tennis net was missing. But, if you were a hundred years ago, like before the days of television, even radio, and you would see a tennis court, you might be one of the few, not the many. If you were growing up on a farm someplace, you probably had never seen a tennis court in your life, much less known that the net was missing. This is sort of an example of the ways that the people forming tests can presuppose their understanding upon everyone else and thinking that everybody ought to know that a tennis net is missing from a tennis court that you'd never even heard of tennis before in 1917 - kind of funny.

Well, if you were to go to people who knew nothing of the Old Testament and began to talk to them, you might realize that they are starting from a different place, and we shouldn't assume people have an understanding of what they know. That's what's going on here with Paul. He is not coming to them with the same information, in the same way that he would have to the synagogues. So we start with verse 22 and 23, where he goes to them with their inscription of an altar, the unknown god, and he talks to them about the God who was unknown. They did not know that one true God, and Paul address them; "Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects. For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, 'TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.'" Notice how respectful he kind of is here. You know, 1 Peter 2:17 says honor all men. It would serve him no good to insult them, to say you're a bunch of idolaters, foolish. What he did was he strategically used the inscription on the altar in Athens to a god not known as a means to speak to them about the God, the one true God, who they did not know. They were the folks that had many gods, and just in case they missed one, they have an altar to an unknown god so they've got all their bases covered; and he uses this to communicate about the God they're missing, the one true God, the true God whom he will describe to them. So, this is a strategic comparison, so he finds something that he can connect to them with and uses that to communicate the gospel to them. (13:40)

And the truth is that everyone knows of the Creator. Paul taught us that in Romans 1:18-20. Everyone has within themselves a knowledge of the Creator. In fact, the Old Testament just assumes this. It says in Psalms 14:1; “The fool has said in his heart, “There is no God.” Romans 1:20, Paul writes, “...since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.” So people can see God just in the creation surrounding them. No one is clueless about the fact that there’s a God that’s created this. There’s no proof that the Bible gives you in terms of all these steps in order to reason you to God. It just assumes there’s a God, because this is undeniable. We know this within ourselves, and the only people who cannot acknowledge this are the people that have suppressed this truth in unrighteousness; likewise, we also recognize we’re all sinful. Paul wrote that, too, in Romans 2:1-15. The Gentiles, he said, “...who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them...” They have a consciousness within them. They know a sense of right and wrong. It might not be dialed in perfectly, but there’s a general sense of a moral will of God here, that they know themselves that they have fallen short. They are not fine. They are not perfect. They are not holy. They have this sense within themselves. That is the truth. That’s also self-evident. The only people that say, no, I’m perfect, are the people that have suppressed the truth in righteousness. So there’s a general sense of what these people already know, and Paul uses that to build upon.

So, his next thing is - he talks about the God who should be known. He’s telling them this God, this unknown God, this one true God - I’m going to tell you about Him, and you need to know Him. And how he goes about this is very interesting and important. Paul describes God in verses 24-29 in ways that come directly from the Old Testament teaching on the attributes of God. He describes for them who God is, the character of God. He tells them who God is, about the character and the attributes of God, from the Old Testament. He doesn’t tell them this is from the Old Testament, but the knowledge of all this is from the Old Testament. All of what he is going to explain to them has been revealed to them, to mankind, already, by God.

This is important, and to try to help you to see why this is so important, I have a quote I'd like to read you from a fella named A.W. Tozer in his book, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, written a long time ago now, but I think it's helpful. "Among the sins to which the human heart is prone, hardly any other is more hateful to God than idolatry, for idolatry is at the bottom a libel on His character. The idolatrous heart assumes God is other than He is - in itself a monstrous sin - and substitutes for the one true God, for the true God one made after its own likeness. Always this god will conform to the image of the one who created it and will be base or pure, cruel or kind, according to the moral state of the mind from which it emerges." He's in a city that is filled with idolatry, and this idolatry is a problem with understanding God. And, if they understood God and God's character, they would see the sin of idolatry. I'm going to read this to you again because I think this explains so well why Paul starts with God's character when he addresses them. "Among the sins to which the human heart is prone, hardly any other is more hateful to God than idolatry, for idolatry is at the bottom a libel on His character. The idolatrous heart assumes God is other than He is - in itself a monstrous sin - and substitutes for the one true God, for the true God one made after its own likeness. Always this god will conform to the image of the one who created it and will be base or pure, cruel or kind, according to the moral state of the mind from which it emerges." If we are not worshipping the true God as He is, the knowledge of who He is, the character of who He is, we will create our own god. We will have our own idolatry. It may not be a statue in our living room, but it will be of our own making, our understanding of who God is, and we will conform it to our own image because, fundamentally, we are worshipping ourselves. This is all about us, not about God. So, this explains why he starts at ground zero with who God is and His character.

God is the Creator, verse 24. So, we're going to run through these characteristics of God. "...God who made the world..." "The God who made the world and the things in it, since He is Lord over heaven and earth..." Paul got that from the Old Testament. There's many places. That's why the Old Testament starts with the creation of the world by God, the creation of man by God. Isaiah 42:5 says, "Thus says God the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread the earth and its offspring, who gives breath to the people in it and spirit to those who walk in it..." He's the Creator. As the Creator, we have to worship Him. We have to start with an understanding that God is the Creator. People know this, that they might suppress that truth in unrighteousness. That's the first phase.

Next, God is omnipresent, verse 24. Since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands...” God doesn’t dwell in their temples. In fact, not only doesn’t God dwell in their temples, God doesn’t even dwell in His temple in the way that He’s limited into that. And to help you to understand that, I will just reference to you 1 Kings 8:27 where Solomon dedicated the temple. So, when the temple was constructed and finally established, this is what Solomon said about that temple, “But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain You, how much less this house which I have built!” Solomon knew the temple wasn’t going to be the container of God, that God is far beyond the temple, in any temple, in any place. So, if you want to encounter God, He’s everywhere, not in one place, not in the Greek temples, not in the temples of Israel, not in the stained glass churches of today; He’s everywhere. You don’t have to go to a special place to worship God. God is everywhere. He “...does not dwell in temples with hands,” and even Solomon recognized that.

Verse 25, God is all sufficient, “...nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things...” He doesn’t need anything. Psalm 50:10-15 says of it, of all God owns. He owns “...the cattle on a thousand hills. “I know every bird of the mountains, and everything that moves in the field is Mine. “If I were hungry I wouldn’t tell you, for the world is Mine, and all it contains. “Shall I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of male goats? Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving and pay your vows to most high; call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will rescue you...” He doesn’t need people to do what He wants to do. He doesn’t need anything. He owns it all. He is completely all-sufficient. He is not “...served by human hands, as though He needed anything...” We can sometimes think we’re serving the Lord, that we are so important, and we’re doing Him a favor, helping Him out. He doesn’t need us. He doesn’t need me. I can disappear today, no problem. His work would go on without me; life moves on. He uses us, and we are just so thankful to be used in a little way according to His will, to accomplish His work. We are not necessary. He’s not dependent on us. He can do it without us. That’s fundamental, not thinking of ourselves more highly than we ought because He gives us breath. We don’t give breath to Him; He gives us breath.

Verse 26; God is sovereign. "...He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation..." Deuteronomy 32:8 says, "When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, He separated the sons of man, He set the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the sons of Israel." Now, full disclosure here; "...I'm proud to be an American where at least I know I'm free." I have been rooting for the United States in the Olympics and will do it again this summer - every Olympics since 1968; however, I don't think that we're here because of our greatness, our wisdom, our power, our might - we are smarter than everybody else, and we're just better than everybody else. We are here because God determined our appointed time and the boundaries of the habitations. God set all this up. We think we did. The Greeks think they did. The Greeks thought that they conquered the civilized world, and then the Romans behind them thought they conquered the civilized world and were very proud of what they'd established. Well, the reality is the Lord determined these things, and we're enjoying the fruit of what He has determined. And we actually are no better than anybody else because, as we'll learn, we're all the offspring of God. And every people, no matter who they are, think they're the best. That's why when you look at their map, just like you look at our map, their country is right smack dab in the middle. That's how we are. Well, the truth of the matter is that the Lord has established every nation. The Lord has determined their appointed times, and the Lord has determined the boundaries of their inhabitation.

God is Savior, verse 27; "...that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him..." Or as Psalm 145:18 puts it, "The Lord is near to all who call upon Him, to all who call Him in truth." Or Isaiah 55:6; "Seek the Lord while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near." These people that he's talking to are not knowing much about God. They didn't have the Old Testament. They didn't have the evidence of God's faithfulness to His people. They didn't have any of that, but Paul could still say to them, He is not far from each one of us. In spite of their lack of knowledge, in spite of the fact that Paul has to move back to ground zero, step one of the knowledge of God, and build upon that, they are not in the lurch. God is not far from them. I know in our day and age, there's more and more people who have no religious background whatsoever. They couldn't find one book of the Bible on their own. You hand them a Bible - they don't know anything about it. Right? They are not stuck. God is not far from them.

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All that is necessary is for them to have a desire to learn, and they will pick it up. That was me growing up. I didn't know anything about this, but God put in my heart a desire when I was nineteen years old, and I began to learn; and God was not far from me. God is not far from anybody here. We can have a Savior, Jesus Christ, who promised, "If anyone is willing to do His will, he will know of the teaching..." John 7:17.

So, God is also Father, verse 28 and 29; "...for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His children.' Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone..." We're the offspring of God. Everybody is from the same stock. Psalm 115:2-8; "Why should the nations say, where, now, is their God? But our God is in the heavens; He does whatsoever He pleases. Their idols are silver and gold, the work of man's hands. They have mouths, but they cannot speak; they have eyes, but they cannot see; they have ears, but they cannot hear; they have noses but they cannot smell; they have hands, but they cannot feel; they have feet, but they cannot walk; they cannot make a sound with their throat. Those who make them will become like them, everyone who trusts in them." These idols, these things that are made of gold and silver or stone or whatever images or designs or ideas that we have, they're creating of the thought of man. They are all opposed to the idea that we are the offspring of God. We are people that have been created by God, and God is the Father. What we learn here is Paul is interestingly using poets, Greek poets, Epimenides from sixth centuries earlier, Herodas from three centuries earlier, in order to build on their existing understanding. These guys (in case you run into them, Epimenides and Herodas) are examples of what the Greeks had already acknowledged. They are willing to acknowledge that they are the offspring of God; Paul uses their words to move them toward the understanding of what these words mean. Because, if they are the offspring of God, that means that God created them, and, if God created them, He can't be an idol because idols don't create anything, Idols are just stone, gold, silver. They don't move. They have no mouth. They have no hands. They have no feet. God - being the Creator of all, the divine nature giving life to man, the offspring of God - has a plan for them, and it wasn't to create an image to worship themselves; it was to worship Him.

Which leads us to this conclusion he brings them to, verse 30 and 31, and that is this - God will be known. He will be known. There's coming a time,

they might not know Him now, and they might not pay attention, but He will be known; “Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day which He will judge the world in righteousness...” That’s coming. He calls on these Athenians to repent, and he’s doing that based on the character of God. What he has taught them about God, he is saying, “Therefore having overlooked ignorance the time of ignorance, God is now declaring to men... everywhere... repent...” based on God’s character, based on the knowledge of God. Now, this stuff about the times of ignorance can get a little confusing, so I’ll try to address this. Well, before I get there, it is foolish to not to expect people to repent and believe in a God who they don’t understand. Repentance, or the turning from sin and self and the living for self, to God and living for Him who died and rose again on our behalf, that turning cannot happen apart from an understanding of who we’re turning to. So, one of the reasons we find people sitting at home having no interest in coming to church, reading the Bible, following God in any fashion, but say they are Christian, who said they prayed some prayer years ago, is because they really had no knowledge. This was just kind of just going along with it, but if they truly have the knowledge of God, they will repent. It’s foolish to expect people who don’t understand to be able to repent. So, he talks to them about “...the times of ignorance...” which is kind of a bold statement, if you think about it. These are the people, the Greeks, they weren’t considering themselves to be ignorant, but he’s telling them there’s been times of ignorance, and, now, based on the revelation of the one true God, He’s fixed a day. They should repent. This “...times of ignorance...” is God overlooking the time of disobedience - that He judges people according to their limited knowledge.

There are people that don’t know very much about God. Everybody knows something. We kind of got that, that God is known to all people in the sense of the creation. They’re without excuse. (We read Romans 1:20.) And also, people have a sense that they’ve fallen short; they have a conscience. But some people know far more about God than others. You who are sitting here know far more about God than others. The people of Israel knew far more about God than the people of Greece. God in His judgement takes this into account. Romans 3:25 mentions this. Jesus mentioned this in His teaching in Luke 12. Luke 12:48 - Jesus said, though they did “...deeds worthy of a flogging...” because they “...did not know...” “...will receive but few...” So, there is a sense that people that are living in ignorance are not judged as

strictly as those who knew; but we have to recognize that the reason we must repent is because of the coming judgement, because there is coming Him, Jesus, who will judge the world in righteousness. And when we communicate with people about Jesus, it maybe isn't what people want to hear about the coming judgment, or it might not be that comfortable to say there's a coming judgment, but that is the truth. They should repent because, verse 31; "...He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed..." That is the truth, and that is a motivation because people, who have a sense of God, understand that they've fallen short, and their sense of God is that they have not met up.

And what happens? What does the future hold? Where is this going? Well, this future is remedied by the knowledge of Jesus and the repentance and belief in Him - then there's forgiveness of sins - then there's eternal life - then there's no longer a fear and concern about what lies ahead and the unknown - that through belief in Christ we can know Him. We can have a relationship with God. We can have a forgiveness of sins that brings true peace, true peace with God, and an ability to go through this life with the expectation that better times lie ahead. So, don't neglect that because all men everywhere including here should repent; "...because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead." The resurrection of Christ proved to everyone that God appointed Jesus to be the judge. Paul referenced that, and Peter referenced that back in Acts chapter 10. We see this again; the resurrection of Christ shows that Jesus is God, that Jesus is judge, that Jesus is the ruler of heaven and earth. He's conquered death for us because God has raised Him from the dead; and that's significant. So that's the message that we have.

What happened? What happened in Athens after Paul does this to the city officials? Well, what they do is some people believe; one of them that was one of these men, the city officials, is even mentioned as believing. Verse 32; "Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some began to sneer, but others said, "We shall hear you again concerning this." So Paul went out of their midst. But some men joined him and believed, among whom was also Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them." So God became known to some of them. The response of the Athenians was really common, if you think about it. It's what we

experience. Some responded by sneering, looking down at him - we can experience that - some by polite consideration. Remember this is the people of Athens. This is how they roll. Verse 21; "(Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new.)" So, when we read them say, "We shall hear you again concerning this." ...this isn't we're hanging on every word you're saying. This is what they do; yeah, let's talk some more. We like this. That doesn't mean anything. That doesn't mean anybody's going to believe after this, and the proof of this is where he goes after this. He basically leaves Athens and goes to Corinth because those people are like many people today. They're happy to talk to you; they'll even engage in concepts back and forth. They might even enjoy it a bit, but they're really not interested in believing; they just like to talk. They're like the people of Athens; hey, it's better than them chasing us out of town, trying to kill us. But fundamentally, the knowledge of Jesus is not so much about just exchanging ideas, it's about worshipping the one true God who died and rose again on our behalf, the Lord of heaven and earth, Jesus Christ.

So, to reflect upon this, when Paul arrived in Athens, he was provoked by idolatry back in verse 16. What did he do when he was provoked by idolatry? This led him to proclaim the resurrection of Christ in the marketplace and among the city leaders, and it resulted in people believing - some of these people believed. What he didn't do was be provoked by idolatry, seeing these people as being woeful sinners, and saying I don't want to have anything to do with them; their idolatry might mess me up. I'm staying away. That's not what he did. He engaged in that. He communicated with them. Most of them weren't that interested, but some were. And some people today are actually... God is working at their heart to respond to Him, so we can have hope that somewhere out there are people that are looking to know God, and that God is drawing them to Himself. They may be idolaters right now. We don't know who those people are, but we can engage them. And, if perhaps, God may grant them grace, they could come to know Him, too. So may we respond to the sinfulness of this world with the message of the good news of Jesus Christ so that people may be delivered from death and have eternal life.