

Lessons on Evangelism from Athens – Acts 17:16-34

Introduction

Dwight L. Moody was a famed 19th century American pastor, evangelist, and the founder of Moody Bible Institute

On one occasion, a lady criticized him at some length for the methods he used to win people to saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

In response Moody replied, "It's clear you don't like my way of doing evangelism and you raise some good points. Frankly, I sometimes don't like the way I do it either. Tell me, how do you do it?"

Moody's critic answered, "I don't do it."

Moody quipped, "In that case, I like my way of doing it better than your way of not doing it."

Evangelism

There is perhaps no other word in the English language that strikes more fear in the average Christian

Some of us are like the lady in the story who believe we know how one should share Christ with those they meet but never actually get around to doing so themselves

But most believers really don't know how to even begin

Last week when we looked at the first part of Acts 17 we saw how Paul approached presenting the gospel to a Jewish audience in the synagogues in the various cities in which he ministered - an audience that would have been familiar with and accepting of what the Scriptures had to say

Still, Paul met with mixed results as some believed but others actively resisted his message and he was forced out of both Thessalonica and Berea

When we left off we saw that Paul left Silas and Timothy behind in Berea while he and some of the brothers travelled on to Athens which lay some 250 miles by sea to the south

Athens

Athens was a completely different environment than either Thessalonica or Berea

Although its golden years were already past, Athens was still considered to be the philosophical capital of the world

Athens was the native city of Socrates and Plato and the adopted home of Aristotle, Epicurus, and Zeno

And the sculpture, architecture, literature, and oratory of Athens in the fifth and fourth centuries BC are still held as the standard of excellence today

In its prime Athens boasted a population somewhere between 250,000 and 300,000 but at the time of Paul's visit it had dwindled to no more than 20,000 and some experts suggest perhaps as few as 10,000 people may have called Athens home

It doesn't appear that Paul expected to spend much time in Athens and was only waiting there until Silas and Timothy could rejoin him having sent word back to Berea with the brothers to speed them on their way to him

While Paul waited

But as an educated man, Paul made the most of his time in Athens as he did what any curious tourist would do – he went sightseeing

But Paul was also a man on a mission and his mission was always in the forefront of his mind

So as he walked around Athens the evangelist within him was stirred to take action

And in Paul's actions we see how we can engage our culture today

Because of all the places where Paul has witnessed thus far, Athens is the closest to our culture today

Actually, it's a little eerie just how much the culture and attitudes of first century Athens parallel ours

Which makes today's passage particularly relevant to us as we seek to engage the folks around us with the gospel

If you are taking notes, our first Roman numeral is: **Paul exhibited an Evangelistic Attitude**

Roman numeral two is **Paul's Areopagus Sermon**

And Roman numeral three is **The Peoples' Response**

We'll fill in the sub-points as we go along

If you haven't already done so, please open your Bible to Acts 17 (page 926) and follow along as I read **verses 16-21**

***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.*

I. Paul Exhibited an Evangelistic Attitude

Like I said, Paul was a man on a mission

Having been personally commissioned by the risen Christ on the road to Damascus and given the task of being the apostle to the Gentiles, Paul's purpose was always in the forefront of his mind

So even though he was expecting to be in Athens for only a short time he couldn't help but be about the Lord's business while he was there

And **Paul exhibited an evangelistic attitude** wherever he went

A. In what he saw

First, Paul exhibited an evangelistic attitude **in what he saw** – that is to say in what he noticed

It's a fact that people tend to see what they are looking for

Have you ever noticed how, when you buy a new car, you suddenly see that exact same make, model, and color car everywhere?

That's not because they weren't there before but rather because you are now attuned to noticing them

An **artist** visiting Athens would have likely looked at the sculptures and seen them as works of art

And an **architect** would have looked at the buildings and seen them as examples of grand design and construction

But Paul was a **man of God and a Christ-follower** so when he saw the sculptures he saw that they were idols and temples that represented and honored the multitude of false gods who had a grip on the people of Athens

It has been estimated that at the time of Paul's visit there were 30,000 gods represented in Athens and the ancient historian Peterronius said that it was easier to find a god in Athens than a man

When you consider that there may have only been between 10,000 and 20,000 inhabitants of Athens at the time it's easy to see how that could be true

And whereas some might have been awed by the idols artistry and prominence

Paul exhibited an evangelistic attitude by seeing the idols for what they were

B. In how he felt

And we see that Paul didn't just see the idols and acknowledge them for what they were and then put them out of his mind

No, Paul exhibited an evangelistic attitude in **how he felt** when he saw the idols

In **verse 16** Luke writes that Paul's spirit was "provoked within him"

That's kind of a fancy way of saying that the idols got Paul upset – Paul was deeply bothered by the idols

And the Greek behind the phrase carries with it the implication of a **change of motivation** or a **stirring to action**

Paul didn't just notice the idols, shrug his shoulders, and say "Oh well, to each his own"

What he saw impacted him deeply because he understood the full implications of those hunks of marble and precious metals

Paul knew that worshipping those idols wasn't a benign activity and he was burdened by the knowledge that the people of Athens were deceived and lost even though they were trying hard to do well in their worship

Paul demonstrated that he was a true evangelist in what he saw and also what he felt

C. In what he did

Then we see that Paul exhibited an evangelistic attitude in **what he did**

Look at **verse 17** again:

So he [Paul] 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 didn't keep silent he "reasoned" with the people of Athens

This is the same word which we saw in verse 2 last week which means that Paul put forth arguments and proofs

He asked questions and dialogued with the people wherever he went

He reasoned in the synagogue with those who were following the God of the Jews

And he reasoned in the marketplace with the pagans who were worshipping the idols

Paul's reasoning

Last week we saw how Paul opened the Scriptures and explained them and how he told the people about Jesus thereby proving that Jesus was the Messiah

Luke doesn't share specifically what Paul said in the synagogue and the

After all, some of the conversations were likely less formal and with people who were not familiar with Scripture

However, what we do know is that he told them all about Jesus

Look with me at **verse 18** where we see Luke record that Paul was telling the people about Jesus and the resurrection

Paul wasn't simply out to win arguments or trying to show how stupid the people of Athens were for worshipping those manmade idols; he was presenting Jesus to them

What about us?

We also must be aware of our surroundings and what is going on in our culture

This means that we may need to break out of our "holy huddle" and get out into the world around us

We need to get our noses out of our phones and look around and engage the people we meet in conversation

When we do we will see that we are living in a culture not unlike that of first century Athens

Paul disputed with the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers and their descendants are still around today although they call themselves by different names

All around us we see those who believe that this life is all there is so one might as well seek all the pleasure and comfort possible – the go for the gusto crowd – and those who believe that nothing in this life really matters so it doesn't pay to get worked up about anything – either positively or negatively

And in our culture of tolerance and acceptance of all ideas we see signs of the pluralism of Athens and the common claim is that everyone prays to the same god by a different name and that all roads lead to heaven

What we see all around us should bother us and it should spur us to take action as we should make the every effort to reach out to those who are perishing and engage them with the truth of the gospel

But as we do, many we meet in the “marketplace” will mock us and will misrepresent what we believe and teach just as they did with Paul

They called Paul a “babbling” which means they accused him of talking without understanding - the concept in the Greek is of a bird picking up seeds and spitting them back out so they were saying that Paul was putting forth the ideas of others without knowing what he was talking about

And they said that he was presenting two new gods to be added to the multitude of gods already in Athens

See, the Athenians didn't just worship beings but also virtues and so they thought Paul was introducing them to both Jesus and the idea of “resurrection” as gods to add to the pile

Like Paul, we should expect resistance but we shouldn't let their resistance or their confusion about what we're saying deter us and we should always be on the lookout for ways to introduce those we meet to our Savior

Paul saw what was going on around him, he took it to heart, and he got busy trying to do something about it

And we see that even though the philosophers in the marketplace mocked and misunderstood Paul they were curious so they invited him to come before the Court of the Areopagus which rendered decisions about matters of religion and morals

And, seeing a prime opportunity to teach in greater detail, Paul accepted the invitation

II. Paul's Areopagus Sermon

Follow along as I read **verses 22-31** where we see **Paul's Areopagus sermon**

22So 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, **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";

as even some of your own poets have said,

"For we are indeed his offspring."

29Being 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."

What Luke records here is rather short and likely represents in a sense the outline of Paul's sermon

He undoubtedly expanded on each of the points he made so as to try to satisfy the curiosity of his audience and to fully explain this "new thing" he was presenting to them

What we have here is a model of how to engage the culture and I want to show you three very important parts of it

A. Paul met them where they were

First, **Paul met his audience where they were**

Notice how in **verse 22** Paul introduces his remarks by complimenting the people of Athens for their spirituality

Although the word translated as "religious" can also be translated as "superstitious" as it is in the KJV there is no reason to assume that Paul was being anything but sincere in commending them for being interested in religious matters

And he backs up his claim by mentioning that they even had an altar for making sacrifices to "the unknown god" showing that even with 30,000 named gods they wanted to be sure that they didn't accidentally miss any

They would have to be very religious indeed in order to seek to worship a god they didn't even know

The point, though, is that Paul wanted to approach them in a positive manner and to establish common ground with them from which to speak

B. Paul introduced them to God

Paul finds that common ground in **verse 23** by telling them that he wants to introduce them to the god they didn't yet know

And since they all spent their time in telling and hearing new things I'm sure that Paul had their complete attention with that introduction

1. Paul revealed that **God is the Creator of the universe**

The true God is the Maker of everything and was therefore not himself made by anyone – he is the originator of all things

I would expect that Paul went on to show them how there must be a Creator that has always existed - what students of logic call the "uncaused cause" and then went on to explain who this Creator is

They knew well that all of their idols had been made by human hands so Paul's God was already radically different

2. Then Paul revealed in verse 25 that God is the ultimate Giver and doesn't have any needs of his own

One of the distinguishing traits of a false god is that they are always in need of service

Worshippers of idols had to continually try to appease the gods with sacrifice and service

But Paul's God is origin of all; the giver and sustainer of life itself and he needs nothing from mankind

To be sure, God desires our friendship, our love, and our worship but he doesn't *need* them in the sense that he would be incomplete without them

3. Third, in verse 26 Paul revealed that God is the Ruler of the world

We read in Genesis how God created Adam from the dust of the ground and here Paul describes how from that one man God created all mankind and allotted periods and places to the nations

Paul could have easily turned to the Old Testament Scriptures to show them how God ruled over the rise and fall of nations throughout history

And how Paul's God is not some regional God who rules over a limited territory; he rules over every nation at every time and in every place

4. And yet, as Paul reveals next in verse 27 God is approachable and can be found

The Greek gods were anything but approachable

They are portrayed in literature as petty and vindictive larger than life versions of mankind and those who worshipped them merely tried to appease them with their worship so as to not incur their wrath

The gods were thought to live apart from mankind on Mt Olympus and it wasn't a good thing to have the attention of the gods whether that attention was positive or negative

But here Paul says that the true God is close at hand and wants to have a relationship with mankind

And then Paul quotes two ancient Greek poets in **verse 28**

He quotes Aratus and Epimenides not to endorse everything these two men ever said but to show that deep down the Greeks knew these things already

Paul obviously knew the writing of these poets and adapted the truth of what they wrote to serve his ends

We also need to be well-versed in our culture and use what is said outside Christian circles to show how and when it points to God even if it does so unknowingly

We must remember that God is truth and all truth is God's truth no matter the source

C. Paul showed them their connection to God

Then, having introduced God to his audience, **Paul showed them their connection to God**

Look with me again at **verses 29-31**:

***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."*

I found **verse 29** to be a bit confusing at first as I wondered why being God's offspring would preclude him being like precious metal or stone

Then I recognized that Paul was revealing that mankind has intrinsic worth – we are God's offspring in the sense that all people were created in the image of God

When we read about God creating the universe in Genesis 1 we repeatedly see God declare that his creation was "good" but when he created man he declared that it was "very good"

Mankind was God's crowning creation and as such man has great worth

Therefore it's not only an insult to God to attempt to make an object to represent him; it's also an insult to us as it limits our value

It also doesn't speak too highly of our intelligence to think that we would rather worship something we have made rather than the One who made us

Then Paul revealed that God has been patient with the ignorance of man but the time has come when man must decide

The day of judgment is coming and all mankind will be held accountable for what God has already revealed

Paul's contemporaries had the Old Testament with all of its prophecies about the Messiah and they had the witness of the apostles how God sent his Son to earth to walk among us as a man, to be wrongly crucified, and buried so that God could raise him again from the dead and now all excuses are void

God can judge the world through his Son in perfect righteousness having provided the means of salvation which is proven by the historical fact of the resurrection

And so Paul revealed that:

Judgment day is inescapable, the Judge is indisputable, and the proof is irrefutable

III. The Peoples' Response

That's the end of Paul's sermon as Luke records it and in **verses 32-34** he tells us the response of the people of Athens

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.

We see three reactions from the people

A. Some ridiculed

First, we see that **some ridiculed** Paul at the very idea of the resurrection of the dead

Making an *ad hominem* attack by mocking and ridiculing is often the go-to response when people are threatened and they can't come up with a logical defense or they can't refute the facts presented

And things haven't changed all that much since Paul's day as Christianity is still widely mocked by those who feel threatened by its claims and its demands

B. Some rescheduled

But not everyone reacted badly to Paul's sermon and what he revealed in it

Some rescheduled and merely deferred their decision to another time saying they wanted to hear more

They might well have been genuinely undecided or they might have been somewhat aloof and dismissive but in a polite way

And Luke records that Paul left the two groups to themselves as he "went out from their midst"

C. Some received

But then we see that **some received** what Paul taught them as **verse 34** says that some "joined him and believed"

Among those who believed Luke names two, one man named Dionysius who was a member of the Areopagus and a woman named Damaris

So these two along with the others who believed formed a church in Athens which Paul left behind to minister when he went on to Corinth as we will see in Acts 18:1

Conclusion

Just as in first century Athens we too are surrounded by idols and we need to have our eyes open to them

They may not be the kind made out of stone and precious metals but they are idols nonetheless and people are still deceived into worshipping at their altars

Because people today are still searching for God - even though they likely don't know it - and they are still replacing him with false gods

They may not look the same but they are just as prevalent as in Athens as people turn to the worship of celebrities, athletes, possessions, pastimes, food and drink, and all manner of self-indulgence and self-interest

Any normally good thing can be turned into an idol - even things like a career or family can become an idol if one isn't careful - because an idol is anything to which we turn other than to God in order to find **security, satisfaction, or significance**

The signs of idol worship are all around us and so are the means to strike up a conversation that can lead to a discussion about Jesus Christ

We just need to be observant and see with the eyes of an evangelist and then let what we see impact us and spur us to step out of our comfort zone and strike up a polite conversation

Remember, Paul didn't attack the Athenians for being idol-worshipping pagans

He sincerely complimented them on being religious and interested in doing their best to worship a god they didn't even know and then he introduced them to the true God and his Son Jesus Christ

We have been commissioned to be witnesses for Jesus - not to be theologians or masters of doctrine - and we can all tell people who Jesus is and what he has done for us even if we can't argue every esoteric point of doctrine

You know, we find it very easy to work our interests into conversations we have with others and no one seems to have much difficulty talking about the things that really and truly excite or interest them

Just try not talking about the Packers to most folks from Wisconsin or not talking about babies with a new mom

Pray and ask God to give you the eyes, the heart, and the hands of an evangelist so that you will be like Paul - unable to see people around you going astray without being burdened to at least start a conversation with them so as to have the chance to introduce them to your Savior

Perhaps you are here today and you are not yet a follower of Jesus Christ or maybe you have heard things you don't completely understand

I invite you to come and see me after the service - I would love to talk with you further

Let's pray

The worship team is here to lead us in a final hymn and then we will move directly to the dedication of three very precious young ladies