



## BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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### The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Acts 17:16-34

Acts

"Paul Among the Philosophers"

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] We began chapter 17 last week and we're going to finish it this week with verses 16 through 34, Paul's ministry in the great city of Athens.

Luke writes in verse 16, "Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him as he was observing this city full of idols. So he was reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing gens, and in the market place with those who happen to be present. And also some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him. Some were saying, 'What would this idle babbler wish to say?' Others, 'He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities,' - because he website preaching Jesus and the resurrection. And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, 'May we know what this new teaching is which you proclaiming? For you are bringing some strange things to our ears; so we want to know what these things mean.' (Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new.)

"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 the inscription, "To an unknown God." Therefore where you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you. The 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 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 from their midst. But some joined him and believed, among whom were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them."

May the Lord bless this reading of His word. Let's bow in a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we do thank You for the opportunity that we have to be together. We thank You for the privilege of reading the scriptures together as we have done. It is Your word. It is perfect and we have now a great privilege of spending some time considering the meaning of this text and how it applies to each of us. We pray that as we do that, Lord, You'd guide us in our thinking. We pray that the Spirit of God whom You have placed in the hearts of every believer in Jesus Christ, with whom we have been sealed, who is our protector, who is our guide, who is our teacher, that He would open our hearts to

receive the truth, that He would guide us in an understanding of it and we would be instructed and built up in the faith.

Well, we come to a very interesting and appropriate passage this morning, Father, in Acts 17, a picture of the ancient world of Athens, and yet a very good picture of modern times as well. But thinking, Father, has not changed a great deal over 2,000 years and we live in a world very much like the world and the culture that Paul stood in there in that great city.

And so we pray that You explain to us the things of this text, as You teach them to us, You might make to us a proper application and we might go forth into this world that is very much like that world and do what Paul did, the men and women who witnessed for Jesus Christ in an effective way. To be effective, we need to know Your truth. And to be men and women who know Your truth, we must be taught it, so that's what we look for this morning. Open our hearts, teach us, build us up in the faith. We are a needy people spiritually and only You can meet that need, and You do that through Your word.

But we are also a people with material needs. In fact, we're reminded in our text, Father, that it's in You that we live and move and exist. Every physical blessing we have, every physical thing that is ours is ours by a gift from you. You have given it to us and You sustain it. So our heartbeats, our breaths, everything that we do as living creatures are constant gifts from You. We praise You for that. We thank You for the life You've given. We thank You for the way You supply us daily, faithfully, more faithfully than we realize, Father. Every breath we take is a gift from You.

But there are times in our lives when we experience privation, when we experience hardship and difficulty. Some of Your people have experienced great difficulty - sickness, surgery. We pray for them. We pray that You'd bless. We pray that You'd give health. We pray that You'd give recovery. We know that's not always Your will. In fact, it is Your will that ultimately we not recover, that we all pass away. It is appointed unto man once to die, and if that be Your will

for those who are in difficulty, then we must praise You for it, Lord, because it's wise and it's good and it's proper.

But we pray that if that not be Your will, we pray that You would give healing and certainly pray, Lord, that in the midst of affliction You would give wisdom, You would give encouragement, You would enable those who are experiencing hardship to look to You and to draw comfort from Your promises and the assurance that for Your people all things work together for good. What a blessing that is, and that is true. You are sovereign. You control everything. May we rest in that and be greatly encouraged by it.

Father, we pray that You would bless us this evening as we return to this place and pray that You would give us a good time of worship and that those who participate would be blessed of You to bless those of us who are in attendance.

We pray for our meetings that follow this meeting. We pray for the Sunday school classes. Bless them. Thank You for the teachers You've given us. Bless them as they speak. Open hearts to receive their ministry and bless us now as we sing our final hymn. May it prepare our hearts well for the time of study that we spend together. We pray these things in Christ name. Amen.

[Message] In one of the early plays of Aesculus, the Greek playwright, the god Apollo stands in the court of Athens, the Areopagus and declares, "Once a man dies and the earth drinks up his blood, there is no resurrection." That was the belief of the Greeks. Some believed in an afterlife, but none of them believed in the resurrection of the dead. It was a dismal outlook on life and one that the apostle Paul challenged when 400 years later he stood in the same court of Athens, the Areopagus, and he declared a very different view on the resurrection.

It was an usual gathering, Paul among the philosophers, a Christian Jew preaching to cultured pagans. But from that meeting we get some insight on how we as Christians should deal with people who

are completely with Christian truth, people like atheists or Hindus who have beliefs that are very different, very contrary from our own.

What Paul did very simply was proclaim the truth. Now, he took account of the nature of his audience and he used terms that they could understand. But the bottom line is he gave them the true knowledge of God who raises the dead and will judge the world.

It was all new to them. What they head didn't fit their philosophy, which in many ways is very modern, very much like our own. And it was a new experience for Paul. He was used to debating rabbis in synagogues, not Greek intellectuals in their courts and schools. But what more appropriate place for Paul the apostle to the Gentiles to be than in Athens, the capital of Gentile wisdom? It was the place where God had led him in order to preach to its philosophers, to confound their wisdom with His truth, and by God's grace, to save some.

The wisdom of God is greater than the wisdom of man, and God's word, as He has promised, will never return to Him empty. So we are to proclaim God's truth as the apostle Paul did and we are to do it with confidence, knowing that it will be effective.

Well, Paul came to Athens from the town of Berea. He had arrived in Athens alone. He did not have his companions Silas and Timothy. They had remained behind and would join him later. Athens, in Paul's day, was past its prime. It had long since lost its political significance, but it was still the center of culture in the ancient world, the city of Socrates and Plato, the adopted city of Aristotle, the birthplace of democracy. Athens was a very prestigious city. Someone called it the Paris of its day.

And Paul was there alone, and so he did what anyone of us would have done. He walked through the city to get a feel for it. But Paul was very much a Jewish man with the commandments of God in his heart, and so as he took in the sights, he was appalled at what he saw. Luke says "his spirit was being provoked within him as he was observing the city full of idols."

Athens was notorious for its idols. One Roman said it is easier to find a God than a man in Athens. The sight of pagan altars provoked Paul within his spirit in the sense of that is it provoked him to anger. And it confirmed what he would write to the Corinthians, that the world through his wisdom did not come to know God. In fact, the wisdom of the Gentiles had led them further away from God.

Well, Paul had not come to Athens on holiday and he quickly saw his work before him. The men of this city needed the gospel, and so Paul quickly got down to the business of his life, that of being a witness for Jesus Christ. He went to the synagogue first of all, which was his pattern, and we read that he began reasoning with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles.

And when he was not in the synagogue, he was out in the street. He was out in the market place, which was the very center of Greek activity, the center of Athenian life, and there he would speak with whomever he could. He reasoned with those who passed by. He asked questions, he engaged them in discussions, probably engaged in something like the Socratic method, there in the city of Socrates, asking them questions and giving them answers and reasoning with them. And he did every day, Luke tells us. He did the work of an evangelist.

And when we do what we are supposed to do, doors open up. Unexpected opportunities occur when we are obedient, when we are simply in the place where we are supposed to be when we are supposed to be there. Well, that happened to Paul, because he was doing his work as an apostle, he found himself among the philosophers. Some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were in the market place and they began talking with him.

These were rival philosophies. These were the two great philosophies of the Roman world. The Epicureans didn't deny the existence of the gods, but they believed that if there were any gods, they were attached from the world and they took no interest in the affairs of men, so they were what we might call practical atheists. The

world was due to chance. Everything ended with death. There was no life to come. We're made up of atoms, and they believed very much in atoms. And when those atoms dissolved in death, that was it. That was the end. This life, this world, is all we get. They were naturalists, like many today.

And so they taught that man should pursue pleasure. And the highest pleasure for the Epicurean was a life of tranquility, a life that's free of pain and passion and fear - a peaceful life.

The Stoics were basically Pantheistic. God is everything. They would speak of God as the world's soul. They believed in fate. They taught that man was to pursue his duty, be resigned to whatever happened, and develop individual self-sufficiency, very much like people today, the independent kind of person.

John Stodd gave this simple contrast: The Epicureans emphasized chance, escape, and the enjoyment of pleasure. The Stoics emphasized fatalism, submission, and the endurance of pain. These were the Gentiles' attempts to deal with life, to deal with life in its uncertainties and its hardships. And F.F. Bruce that post-Christian paganism has never been able to devise anything appreciably better. And so the natural man with the wisdom of the natural man has basically come up with nothing better than that. That's about as good as man can do, one of these two systems. And if you think about it, most people today live as either Stoics or Epicureans, or maybe a combination of both. Some people devote themselves to duty. They devote themselves to their family, so they devote themselves to their work, which is good in and of itself, until it becomes everything, and then people become workaholics. They are people driven by pride, primarily, and their job becomes their religion.

Other people live for pleasure, not necessarily debauchery, though there's a lot of that. But they live for pleasure. They live to be comfortable, which is not bad, unless that's all that matters, living for pleasure, living for ease. Well, both systems are basically selfish lives concerned with oneself in one way or another, and lives that give little

or no thought to God and eternity. What is important, what matters, is what happens now in the present.

So this scene in Acts 17 is a very contemporary scene. Modern science has progressed. Knowledge has increased, but secular wisdom about time and eternity, about God and man's relationship to all of that really has not advanced from that of the ancients. We're very like the people in the market place of Athens.

And so what Paul had to say is just as relevant today as it was then. But the philosophers that had gathered around him, they weren't sure what he had to say. He was speaking about Christ. He was speaking about His crucifixion and His resurrection. He was speaking about sin and salvation, about life to come. They never heard anything like it and they didn't know what to make of it. Some dismissed him as an idle babbler. In verse 18, that word, babbler, means "seed picker" and it was used of bird picking up little pieces of grain. So a seed picker was slang for a person who picked up random thoughts like a bird picked up grain, an idea here, an idea there, but nothing that was really coherent, nothing that really held together as a system of thought or philosophy, and so they were dismissing him as an amateur, a dabbler, a dilatant without really much to say and not making any sense.

But others thought they knew what Paul was talking about. Luke writes, "He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities." And they said that, because, as Luke explains, he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. The Greek word for resurrection is anastasis. And so they thought that Paul was speaking of two new gods, Jesus and then a female deity named Anastasis. And since, as Luke explains in verse 21, these Athenians were men of leisure, who "used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new," they were curious about this new teaching that was entering their ears from the apostle Paul. They wanted to know what it was he was saying. They were curious.



And so they took Paul to the Areopagus, which means "the hill of Ares, who is the Greek god of war. We know it from the Latin Mars Hill. It stands beneath the Acropolis. Steps cut into the hill, lead to the top where benches were hewn out of the rock. This is the original meeting place for the court of Athens. Later the council itself, the court, this meeting of the distinguished men of the city became known as the Areopagus, so there are some question as to where exactly Paul spoke. In verse 22, the authorized version reads, "Paul stood in the midst of Mars Hill." So it may have been that he was on that hill exactly.

Or it may mean that he was in the midst of the council, which often met in one of the porches, the colonnades down in the market place. If he did stand on that hill, then it was an impressive place, and intimidating place, directly below the Acropolis in the shadow of Greek glory. But regardless of where he was, it was intimidating. He was among the intellectuals of Greece. He was among the intellectuals of the Gentile world. It was something like having the audience with the dons of Oxford and Cambridge. They were an impressive bunch. They were a condescending group. And he was all alone.

But Paul had courage and Paul had the word of God. He began by acknowledging that the Athenians were a religious people. That can be understood as a superstitious people. In fact, if you have the King James version, that is how it was originally translated. I think the newer versions have switched that, but you'll see that in your marginal note. And the reason for that is the word that's used here is rather vague. It's a broad word in its meaning and it can mean superstitious, but it's doubtful that that's the meaning. It's doubtful that Paul would begin in that way.

What he was doing was acknowledging that they were religious people, that they had raised altars and statues to every god worshipped by men, the gods of the east, the gods of the west, the gods of Egypt, every god that they could think of. And this was an important city, a very cosmopolitan city. There were people from all over the world,

Jew and Gentile alike, and so they raised an altar to every god they could think of.

But the one altar that really got Paul's attention, the one that he mentions to them, the one that he builds his sermon on is the one that had inscribed on it "To the unknown God." So he said, "Since you've acknowledged your ignorance of Him, I want to tell you who this God is. And then he reveals to Him God in five points.

First in verse 24, He is the creator of all things. Paul knew how to adapt his message to his audience and he didn't begin with these Greeks the way he would have begun with the Jews in the synagogue. In the synagogue, he would have taken the Scriptures, he would have opened it to Isaiah or to the Psalms, and he would have cited a Messianic prophecy. He doesn't do that with these Greeks. They wouldn't have understood any of that. They wouldn't have understood the scriptures or the concepts that he was speaking of, so he begins in a different way. He doesn't avoid the Bible. In fact, his argument is completely Biblical. He begins the way the Bible begins. He begins with God. He doesn't try to prove the existence of God. He simply begins with God the creator, with the very basic truth that men have a sense of by virtue of being created in the image of God. They didn't know inherently that there is a God and so he begins that way.

He begins as Moses began in Genesis 1:1. He says, "The God who made the world." Didn't try to prove that there is a world who made the world. Doesn't try to prove that the world isn't eternal. He just assumes the truth of this statement "that 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." Now that was a bold statement to make. Paul was surrounded by temples. Above him was the Acropolis, and on the Acropolis was the Parthenon, the temple to Athena. The temple of Hephaestus was down below him, the god of fire. There was the temple of Zeus nearby, and many, many other temples.

These structures, these magnificent structures, were the pride of Athens. And in one sent Paul sweeps them all away as absolutely

foolish. God is too great to dwell in a little house made of stone. God is a spirit. God is omnipresent. God is omnipotent. God doesn't need those things. God can't be contained in something like that. Even Solomon, who built the temple begins in his great prayer of dedication by saying he can't contain God in a house like this. The whole world is God's footstool. That's really what Paul is saying. And in saying what he says here about God being the creator, he was ruling out all of the other gods that were honored by the Greeks. They're false. There's only one God. He's the one who created everything.

And then he sustains everything, Paul says. He explains that in verse 25. This is his second point. He's not "served by human hands, as though He needed anything," Paul says, "since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things." So God is self-existent. That's a very significant idea. That's a very significant fact of theology. God's self-existent. We aren't. You think about your own existence. You depend on everything around you. You depend on the air. You depend on the ground beneath your feet. You depend on the laws of nature. You depend on everything. You depend on each other. We are completely dependent on one another, and that's not the way God is at all. God is absolutely independent of the universe. He created the universe. Before the universe was, God was. He's always been. He needs nothing. He doesn't need the world around us. He doesn't need us. We add nothing to God. If God had never created man, God would not have missed a thing.

He does not need man. He needs nothing. Man needs Him. We are completely, totally dependent on Him, whether we realize that or not. These Athenians were completely ignorant of God, but they were completely and totally dependent upon Him. He gives life and breath and all things. Think about that. Are you breathing? I hope so. If you are, it's because God is giving you every breath you take. That's what Paul says. He gives life and breath and all things. He is the creator of all things. He is the sustainer of all things.

He is also the ordainer, the ruler of all things. That's Paul's third point, in verse 26, "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 affirms the oneness of mankind. All the nations have a common origin. God created them from one man, which completely contradicted the Greeks' idea of themselves.

They believed that they were a unique people. In fact, all other nations were barbarians. That was their word for everyone else that didn't speak Greek wasn't a Greek. They were barbarians and the Greeks were the cultured people, just as the Jews considered all other peoples to be heathens.

But Paul says we are all alike. We have a common ancestor. That would mean, by implication, that we have a common condition, that of sin, and that we have a common need, that of the Savior. So in a moment Paul, who here begins with the one man, will come back to the one man who is the solution and who is the judge.

But all that he says here doesn't leave much room for racial superiority, which is so common among men. It certainly didn't leave any room among the Greeks. This challenged their pride, particularly Athenian pride, because the Greeks saw themselves as unique, but of the Greeks, the Athenians saw themselves as the best of all. And so Paul here challenged their pride, but also challenged the fundamental beliefs of the philosophers that were gathered around him there.

God is not detached from the world, as the Epicureans believed. The world is not run by chance. Things don't just happen, and nor is it controlled by fate, as the Stoics believed. God is in control. A personal God is directing all of the affairs, all of the events of this world. The nations have been established by Him. He appointed their times and He set their boundaries, which means He determined their place in history and their place on the globe. He is sovereign over all things and all times. He make history. history is truly His story. He has written; He's carrying it out.

If Paul had been in the synagogue, he might have quoted Daniel 2:21, where Daniel, in his prayer to the Lord, says, "It is He who changes the times and the epochs/He removes kings and he establishes kings." Where do empires come from? God establishes them, their duration. Greece had enjoyed its golden age about 400, 500 years earlier, that they had the Age of Pericles when they built the magnificent buildings, when the Parthenon was constructed, the Acropolis was finished. It was a time of great oratory that lasted about 40 years. Came and it went like that.

God ordained that, and that's what he's saying to these people. He might have developed it in something like that. I suspect that the sermon we have here in Acts 17 is a very abbreviated version of it. Luke hits the high points of what Paul said, but he could have said all of that. God is sovereign over all things. He is the one who makes history. So he could have quoted that if he'd been in the synagogue. But certainly the point that he's making, God is running the universe His way. Things aren't in the grips of chance. They are not some mechanized kind of determinism. God is the one in control and he determines whatsoever comes to pass. He has determined that the Greeks would be Greeks, that Englishmen would be Englishmen, that Americans would be Americans. All of that is his doing. He determined that each would have their moment of history and when it would occur and when it would end.

Even modern historian give some ascent to this idea of the province of God. The German historian Leopold von Ranke, considered one of the greatest analysts of the historical process, said that it felt sometimes as though an occult force were at work in the midst of the apparent confusion. In other words, as he studied history he saw that as though things seemed confused, chaotic. Nevertheless, there was something hidden in all of it that was directing it, something like an invisible hand that was guiding and directing the events of history, and other historians have made the same point. Herbert Butterfield has made that very point, that God - you see in the study

of history, a providential outworking of things. God is in control. He has ordained the nations. He has set their epics in history. He has limited their times, their locations, and God had a purpose in doing this. God does not do anything without purpose, and His purpose in blessing people from the beginning to the end with a time and a place in this world, blessing you, with your time and your place in this world is so that, Paul says, they would seek God if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him.

All people have an opportunity to consider God's general revelation, and all people have that. Not everyone has special revelation. Not everyone has the word of God in his or her hands, but everyone in this world has general revelation. They have the revelation of God in nature and in providence, and, Paul is saying, are obligated to find Him by groping. Now that picture that he gives here is that of a person in a dark room, pitch dark, feeling his way along the walls of that room, trying to make out where he is and find his way to a location, a door. And that's the natural man. That's the heathen. That's the person that Paul was address. They're on Mars Hill, a man who is in his natural state. His mind is darkened. He is ignorant of God. Still, he has creation all around him and he is obligated to feel after God and find Him. And if people search for Him, they will find Him. God has promised that. Hebrews 11:6, "He is a rewarder of those who seek Him."

In Jeremiah 29:13, God said, "You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart." Now that statement in Jeremiah is a promise given to the Jewish people, but in promise, in principle, it applies to all men. Men don't find God, because they don't search for God. They don't want God. Not because God is obscure, not because God is distant. He is not. Paul says here in verse 27, "He is not far from each one of us." In fact, in verse 28, he elaborates. He says, "We live and exist in Him." He's close to you than you are to yourself. You exist within Him and He exists within you. God is spirit. He is everywhere present. He is our creator. He is our sustainer.

Were God to withdraw His power from us, we would dissolve in an instant. We would become nothing. We'd cease to be. We do not exist independently of Him. We have our origin and our existence from Him and in Him, and that idea was not alien to the Greeks. In verse 28, Paul quotes their poets, two of them, who said, "For we are His children."

Now that's Paul's fourth point. God is now parent in the sense that He created man in His own image. There's a big difference between a child of God through faith in Christ and being a child of God by creation. They're not the same thing. Not everyone is a child of God in the sense that he or she is a member of the family of God. That happens by grace through faith. But in the sense that God is the creator of all, that all men are created in His image, is true of everyone and that's Paul's point here, that God is the one who gives us life. Your life originated in Him. He is your parent in that sense, and that indicates something fundamental about God, about His nature.

Because life is intangible. Life is immaterial. It's non-physical. And since life originates from Him and depends on Him - and even their poets had testified to that - well, it follows then that life could not have come from something that men had made out of gold or silver or stone. Life doesn't spring from non-life, from inanimate things. That is irrational.

So their ignorance was inexcusable and Paul told them that they should not think of God like those lifeless, dumb things. It's not only irrational, that is an affront to the God who created them and sustained them, which if they were to think about it, is a frightening thing. If they are abusing, that they are blaspheming the very God who gives them their life, their breath at every moment.

Paul then gives them some good news in verse 30. The living God is also a patient God. The Gentiles have lived in ignorance and God has overlooked that in the past, but now they need to repent, Paul says. The Savior has come and the gospel is going out to all the nations, and because of that, because the spread of the light of God's

truth in salvation is going out to places where it had not been heard before, God is calling men everywhere to repent. They were to turn from false gods. They were to turn from wrong ideas about God, and the reason is because the day of judgment is coming.

That is Paul's fifth point in verse 31. God, who is the creator, the sustainer, the ordainer, the parent of us all, is also our judge. And He has already fixed the day in which He will judge the world in righteousness, Paul said.

Now, the Greeks didn't have any such event as a day of judgment in their philosophy or religion, but that didn't prevent Paul from declaring this day of judgment to them. The day of judgment has been fixed, he said. And he says God has appointed a man through whom He will judge the world. He has given firm proof that this man who will judge the world is going to be the judge of the world, because He raised Him from the dead.

So now's the time to repent. Now is the time to turn from the foolishness of idols, the empty ideas of these philosophical speculations that they enjoyed engaging in, to turn from all of that and to turn to the true and living God. Now is the time, Paul was saying, while there is opportunity. But at this point the Greeks started laughing and the meeting broke up. Now they realized what Paul meant by anastasis, but resurrection. It wasn't some new deity, but an act of God in raising a man from the dead.

That is when they quickly lost interest in anything that Paul had to say. The idea of a resurrection of the dead was the height of folly to the Greeks. Both the Stoics and the Epicureans could agree on that point. They may disagree on a lot, but they didn't disagree on that point. They all believed that the idea of a resurrection was foolish, because to the mind of the Greek, the body was evil. Material world was evil. Spirit was pure. And they thought of the body as a prison of the soul and they wanted to be rid of that prison. They didn't want to drag that body around with them for all eternity.



Those who believed in an eternity, the Epicureans, certainly didn't believe in a resurrection, because they didn't believe in any kind of life after death, but these Stoics would have said, "That's foolish. I don't want that. I want to be rid of the body." They believe in the resurrection, they didn't want a resurrection, and so when they heard Paul say that God had raised a man from the dead, they began to sneer, began to scoff. They didn't become angry, like the Jews did. They didn't tear their robes. They didn't tear stones. They just scoffed at him. How unsophisticated, they said. And they kind of walked away and laughed.

Now that's a very modern response. Paul today don't get mad about the cross and the resurrection, not generally. Some do, of course. It offends all, but generally the response is people just scoff or people just turn a deaf ear. It's something they dismissed as completely irrelevant, out of touch. That was the response in Athens.

Now, some were polite. They didn't sneer. They said, "We shall hear you again concerning this," but they didn't mean it and they didn't hear him again. They had no intention of listening to Paul on this subject. Paul left the meeting at the court and not long afterward he left Athens. But before he left, some did believe. Dionysius, who was one of the leading intellectuals - he was a member of the Areopagus - also a woman named Damaris, and others with them - all influential people. All people gathered there with the Areopagus listening to what Paul had to say. But not many of them. Not many people in Athens believed the gospel that Paul preached, which has led some to conclude that Paul left Athens discouraged and even disillusioned, feeling that his preaching had failed.

William Ramsay argued that about 100 years ago in his book *St. Paul the Travel and the Roman Citizen*. He said that Paul had abandoned preaching for philosophy, and as a result, had few converts. And so when Paul went on from Athens to Corinth, he no longer in a philosophical style. He changed his approach. That's why he wrote to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 2:2 that when he came to

Corinth he determined to know nothing except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. So he abandoned all quotations of Greek poets or philosophers and all philosophical style and he just stuck to the cross.

Well, that idea has become popular with some preachers, but it's not very convincing. I'm sure Paul was disappointed by the response to his sermon. Men mocked the truth. They rejected the message of salvation. That has to be disappointing. But problem was not that the sermon was too philosophical. It wasn't. It wasn't philosophical at all. It was a Biblical sermon, Biblical in its content and Greek in its presentation. Paul was speaking to philosophers. He spoke to them in a way that they could understand what they said. Now, they wouldn't have been more convinced if his sermon had been Hebraic. They would have been more confused.

Now the problem was not Paul's sermon. It wasn't the style of his preaching. The problem was the Athenians and their refusal to take him seriously. The problem was their heart, and that's always where the problem lies. When the truth of God is given, when the gospel is given and people don't receive it, it's because their hearts are unbelieving and their hearts are hard. Now, when I say heart, I mean the thinking part of man. That's what the heart is in the Bible. We think of the heart as emotion - heart and head. There's this separation. There's no separation in the Bible. The heart is the head. The heart is the mind. The heart is the thinking, reasoning, rational part of man. It is the part where he exercises his will. All of that is connected with the heart, and the heart by nature is in rebellion against God. It is a hard heart.

Jeremiah said it well. "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. Who can know it?" It is so deceitful, it is so cunning, we can't comprehend it, and so people are deceived by themselves into rejecting and scoffing at the Bible, at the word of God. That's where the problem in Athens lay, not in Paul's sermon, but in the hearts of those Athenians who rejected it. And if there is anyone in this audience this morning who rejects the word of God, who rejects

the words that Paul preached, it's not because Paul is obscure or God is far away, or these things are difficult to understand or comprehend. It's because the heart is hard. Paul don't want to receive it.

Fact is, you just don't take these things seriously, anymore than those Athenians did and you don't want to believe. And there's nothing more sad than that, so I'm sure Paul was disappointed, because those he had sought to win went away lost. But Paul wasn't disillusioned. Why should he have been disillusioned? Four souls, maybe more, were saved, and saved through his preaching. God blessed what he said.

It's always dangerous to measure the correctness of a message or the value of a ministry by the number of converts. Now, there may be some validity in that to an extent if someone teaches and nobody responds and nobody's interested and it's not connecting and there's no fruit that comes from it, perhaps one can evaluate it then, but if that is the final evaluation, what do we say about an Isaiah or a Jeremiah who had very converts? That's the measure of the value and the truth of a message.

Ultimately making converts is not our business. That's not our work. As Paul told the Corinthians, we water, but God gives the growth, and the growth He gave was at least four converts. How many others did those four or five or six people lead to the Lord? We don't know, but maybe they went out and evangelized and many came to faith through them. We can't evaluate Paul's ministry on comparing how many came to faith or were brought to faith there in Athens compared to how many believed in Thessalonica.

Paul's ministry in Athens was a success and it was a model to us in a couple of ways. First, it gives us an example of how to deal with people who are unfamiliar with Christian truth. He reasoned with them; he asked them questions; he answered their question; but basically he dealt with them with proclamation, telling them who God is, what God has done, and what we are to do. And we are to believe. We are to believe in Jesus Christ as God's judge and our Savior.

That's the watering that God blesses with growth - speaking His truth. The word of God that we speak, as I have stressed before, is powerful. It's unique. This is what God blesses, this word, and it may come to ears that have never heard anything like it before and God will open them to receive this truth, because it speaks to the very heart of man which is basically in the image of God and it will speak to it as God opens that heart. We preach the word. That is how we are to deal with people.

Secondly, Paul's example challenges us. He was motivated to speak, because the idols of the city provoked him. They filled him with righteous anger. And we live in a city every bit as idolatrous as old Athens. Do the idols of our age provoke us? Do we even notice them? Do we maybe even bow down to them a little bit?

John Stodd lists a number of modern idols, beginning with covetness. That's an old idol, because Paul mentions that as idolatry in Ephesians 5:5, and we certainly live in a covetess age an a quisitive age, an age of things and the desire for more things - faith, wealth, and power, sex, food, alcohol, and other drugs - parents, spouse, children, friends, work, recreation, television, and he lists others as well.

Some of those are good things. They're not bad in and of themselves, but idolatry doesn't necessarily deal with something that's bad. Gold, silver, stone, those things are bad in it of themselves. What idolatry is taking anything and putting it before God, even a good thing. Then it becomes a bad thing. Then it becomes an idol. It's when a person devotes his or her life to, and our city, our nation, is filled idols.

Does the fact that good is being honored provoke you to tell others about the true God, to correct that, to urge them to turn from the idols of this age and turn to Him? If it does not do that to us, then we need to be doing that. And so I will conclude as Paul would have concluded. If you are here without Christ, then you are not different from those philosophers of Athens. They were lost and you are lost as

well. Don't scoff at the truth that Paul preached. God has fixed a day of judgment and Christ is his judge, and the day will come when men will stand before Him. That is a fact. But Christ is also the Savior of the world and God sent Him to die for sinners so that all who looked to Him, all who trust in Him, would escape the judgment to come, because He bore that judgment in our place at Calvary. So look to Him. Trust in Him. And the moment you do, you will receive the forgiveness of your sins, all of them, forever, and be received into God's family. may God help you to do that and help us all to rejoice in the life we have in church. Let's bow in a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we do thank You for the good news of the gospel, thank You for the fact that the world itself is not governed by chance and we're not caught in some deterministic, fatalistic system that is really going nowhere. Life is designed and governed by a personal God who is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-wise, gracious and merciful. And while You have set a day of judgment, as You must because You are a holy God, You have also sent Your Son to be our Savior and You have set a day of salvation. May this be teach day of salvation for those who have not trusted in You. Open their hearts to receive Your truth, we pray, and bless all of us who have the joy of salvation. We pray these things in Christ name. Amen.