

In this political season that we find ourselves in... I would in no way like to endorse... OR point away from any candidate. (It would be illegal for me to do so from this podium.) ... Furthermore... I believe that it would be a step down from the higher calling God gives to this pulpit... if I were to do so ... So please understand that what I am about to say... is only to make a point about our culture... that is evidenced by some actions and statements that have been made this week – because they tie-in so clearly to our passage of study today... in the Book of Acts.

This week a flamboyant presidential front-runner... in his campaign... has mocked and ridiculed his closest challenger... calling him a liar... because his challenger claims that Jesus Christ is able to redeem a pathological sinner. ... His soft-spoken competitor testifies that Christ did so in his life... and the front-runner has taken a large amount of campaign time... in mocking the very idea of it... saying that it is impossible.

So here is my point. (I'll phrase it as a question.) ... What does it say about our culture... if a presidential candidate front-runner... thinks a winning strategy (could even possibly be)... to mock the essential core of the Gospel of Jesus Christ...? ... [LONG PAUSE]

... ..

We live in a culture that prides itself on its detached approach to the central issues of life... and regards those who approach them otherwise... as insane... or under a delusion. Here is what I think this week's events demonstrates: "Enough of our current culture... thinks that it is delusional to believe Christ transforms people... so a viable campaign strategy... is to treat it as true... indisputable... common knowledge..."

Today it is commonly held that it is fine to be a Christian - as long as one does not take it too seriously. ... The common attitude today is:

"Christianity has produced some of the world's greatest minds. Some of her doctrines are fascinating for intellectual exercise. But to take them seriously—to base one's life on them? Surely you cannot be serious!"

That not only describes the attitudes we commonly face... but it is what the church has historically encountered. We will see it this morning... in what Paul encountered in his visit to Athens. ... Paul... one of the most passionate and fiery Christians who ever lived... collided head-on with the dispassionate intellectualism of Athens.

The world loves to act as though they are above our truth... and even mock it... but we must never join them... by becoming calloused to... or treating the sacred truths of God's Word in an aloof... indifferent... uninvolved... detached manner!

Sometimes we Christians are so angry at the state of our society... that all that comes through... is the anger... and not the love we are to have for those who need Christ. ...And then there are those who see such anger from their fellow believers... and they want to represent the Christian faith differently. So they overact in the other direction... almost pretending... as if there is no idolatry... no need for the truth of the Gospel... as long as their unsaved friends have a sincere religious search.

Paul avoids both of these extremes. ... He shows us... today... how to confront dispassionate intellectuals - honestly and graciously. ... Both message and tone are important in sharing the gospel. ... The story of

"Paul versus Athens" needs to set our hearts on fire... with a prevailing grace.

Last week... we saw how Paul left Berea and made the 200-mile trip down to Athens... leaving Silas and Timothy behind. ... Paul probably said to them... *"You go back to check on the believers in Thessalonica and see how the church is progressing there, and also check on the believers in Berea; then join me in Athens."*

So here Paul was... all alone in the glorious Athens of Socrates... Plato... Aristotle... Epicurus... and Zeno. It had been some 400 years since the golden age of its heyday. ... Athens' fame rested mainly on the glories of its past... The current world philosophical centers were now... the city of Alexandria (in North Africa)... and Tarsus (where Paul was from.) ... But Athens remained the *symbol* of the great philosophers. Now... she could only repeat the echoes of men long gone. ... Her art was no longer fresh and creative... but a reflexive repetition. ... It was to such a city that the apostle came. ... Athens was proud... and glorious to the eye... but also very dead... at the same time.

Acts 17:16

It appears that Paul's original plan was to wait for the rest of his team to arrive... before launching into ministry. But he became provoked by what he saw... and the following verses describe how he abandoned his original plan to delay the start of ministry. ... What stirred Paul into action... was that the city was (as the Greek text puts it)... "drowning in idols." ... One

contemporary historian of the day wrote that *it was easier to find a god in Athens than a human being*.

'It broke Paul's heart to see the city captive to idolatry. At once we notice how different Paul is from us. ... We are surrounded by various forms of idolatry — worship of fame... sex... money... power... and it does not bother us. ... We have lost the ability to care.

Every idol demonstrated the Athenians' hunger for God... and it also testified to their spiritual emptiness. ... Ignorant of the true God... the Athenians were lost!

Paul felt desperate concern for the spiritual need before his eyes. ... As had happened with Jeremiah (in Jeremiah 20:9)... an urge to speak came like a burning fire... and the apostle could not hold it in.

As believers... our hearts should ache and our eyes blur at what we see around us—ignorant souls denying the one God and giving allegiance to false deities. ... If we experience no inner provoking... we either have not truly been redeemed by Jesus Christ... or we have become apathetic to the things of God.

Paul could not be indifferent or detached. So he jumped right in, raging heart and all.

So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks who gathered there... as well as among the citizens in the marketplace day by day. ... A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him.

Acts 17:17-18

The gross idolatry in Athens caused Paul to engage in some spirited conversation with the people of Athens. ... The word translated "*reasoned*" in verse 17... involves questions and answers. ... Paul would quiz the people about their statues... and they would answer and then he would give them the Gospel.

But the evidence given to us by these verses... suggests that they were not engaged enough with Paul... to believe... or even to be bothered enough to reject the Gospel. ... In fact... at no point during Paul's visit to Athens do we find anyone ever angry enough to resist anything. ... As we shall see...they were disdainful... sneering... and dismissive... but nothing of the message of God's love... and of the coming of his judgment... was considered important enough to take seriously. (Boy! Doesn't that look a lot like our own culture today!)

From what we read in verse 17... we see that Paul began in the synagogue. Unlike the other cities... Paul could not even arouse opposition there. ... Paul also went to the *agora* (the marketplace)... and in verse 18 he was challenged by Epicurean and Stoic philosophers.

The Epicurean philosophy has been in the world since Adam. However, the basic principles were spelled out by the Greek philosopher Epicurus (B.C. 342-270). The basic beliefs are:

- The world happened by chance, by accident.
- If there are *gods*, they are remote and disinterested in the affairs of men.

- Man is left on his own to discover the truth and pleasure of life.
- There is nothing after death, no heaven or hell, no reward or punishment. Man simply returns to become part of the dust of the earth.

Note how this philosophy centers upon man and his pleasure. It is both humanistic and materialistic, leaving God completely out of the picture.

Note also the practical outcome of the Epicurean philosophy. Man is left on his own to discover the truth and his own pleasure. Whatever pleases him, gives him and his society pleasure and happiness, he is free to do.

The stoic philosophy was formulated by Zeno (B.C. 336-264). The basic beliefs are...

- Pantheism: god exists in everything and in everyone. The *fiery spirit*, the energy of everything and everyone, is god.
- Fatalism: whatever happened occurred because it was supposed to happen. There is no good or evil in the world. Things are the way they are and happen the way they do because they are destined. There is nothing anyone can do about anything.

The problem with both the Epicurean and Stoic schools of thought is that in the long run, you can't live believing that everything you can do or say or be or hope is valueless. Deep down, there is something in every heart that says, "That can't be true! There has to be a reason I am here. There has to be someone who loves me. I am not as insignificant as these claims make me to be." Materialists and secularists inwardly resist what they claim to believe.

That is the reason the city of Athens was awash in idols. No matter how much you say about inexorable fate or random events, you want somebody to listen when you cry. You want something to hope for. So the idols grew

more and more numerous in first-century Athens, and they grow more numerous in our time as well, don't they?

Think about the lostness, the cries for help that are on every street corner, in every work of art, every piece of literature, every movie. Consider the cries of people in this world for someone to notice or care, support them, some reason to love. We live in an age that is superstitious and addicted and desperate. People are pulling every lever, pressing every button, buying every promise that is made, trusting the next technology, adopting the latest fad, believing the last guarantee, living vicariously through today's celebrity. Idolatries bubble up all over the place in our culture.

They wrapped their response with clever ironic sarcasm. The word translated "babblers" is literally "seedpicker." Originally used to describe birds picking up seeds and grain, over the years the word came to mean one who peddled others' ideas as original without understanding them—a plagiarist, a chirping gutter sparrow who went around peeping borrowed ideas! This was undoubtedly a very "in" word with this crowd: "seedpicker... gutter sparrow... ignorant babblers."

All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas. - **They** were the babblers!

Paul's critics were very sarcastic. First... they mocked the messenger of truth. ... Second... they mocked the message of truth. ... Typical of unbelief... Our culture's elite... will accept false beliefs... but let the Gospel come on the scene... and their toleration ceases. ... As an example...

Muslim ideology can burn down the New York Trade Towers... but they are still more accepted in schools than Christianity.

Acts 17:19-21

The "*Areopagus*" was the highest court in Athens. It met at a special location on a hill to the northwest of the marketplace. The hill was called "*Mars' hill*". ... In earlier times the court had much power... but in Paul's day it was more of a forum for hearing complaints or... as in Paul's case... hearing about new philosophies. ... A sizeable crowd would be present. ... But many were not as interested in their soul... as they were curious about some new teaching.

Their leisure time was spent telling or hearing "some new thing." Eric Hoffer wrote that "*the fear of becoming a 'has been' keeps some people from becoming anything.*" The person who chases the new... and ignores the old... soon discovers that he has no deep roots to nourish his life. ...He also discovers that nothing really is new... Solomon was right when he wrote Ecclesiastes – "Vanity of vanities... there is nothing new under the sun..." (You know what?) ...It's just that our memories are poor.

Paul's address (that we are about to read)... is a good example of how to present the Gospel to a culture much like our own. But before we dive in to it... let me point out a few things to look for...

#1) Paul will not begin by reciting Jewish history (as he usually did)... for this would have been meaningless to his Greek audience. ... He began by building a case for the one true God... using examples they understood. The Athenians had built an idol to the unknown god for fear of missing

blessings or receiving punishment. Paul's opening statement to the men of Athens was about their unknown god. Paul was not endorsing this god but using the inscription as a point of entry for his witness to the one true God.

#2) Paul established common ground by emphasizing what they agreed on about God. We will see him quote from their own philosophers and move on from there.

Finally... #3)... Paul moved his message to the person of Christ... centering on the Resurrection.

When you witness to others, you can follow Paul's approach: Use examples, establish common ground, and then move people toward a decision about Jesus Christ.

What a face-off this must have been! ... On one side stood Paul — divinely empowered... a man who had staked everything he had on his message. On the other side stood the Areopagus — sophisticated but indifferent. Paul stood before this intimidating group of powerful philosophers absolutely alone! ... What would the seedpicker say?

They were about to hear the most glorious news ever proclaimed to man: God has revealed Himself and made Himself known to man. ... He has sent His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to earth to save man from sin, death, and judgment to come. God is deeply concerned with the welfare of man.

Acts 17:22-31

Paul opened his address with a compliment in verse 22: "*I perceive that in every way you are very religious*". ...They were so religious, in fact, that

they even had an altar to "the unknown god," lest some beneficent deity be neglected. ... If they did not know this god... how could they worship him? Or how could he help them? ... It was this God that Paul declared.

Paul's approach was brilliant. As courteous and conciliatory as possible, he complimented them on being "in every way... very religious." Paul was undoubtedly eager to protest their idolatry and point them to the truth, but he restrained himself and gave a genuine compliment first. He met them where they were. "In my stroll around your famous city I found an altar to an unknown god. Let me tell you about the one who you are worshiping." Paul established common ground.

Like Paul... we must be prepared. ...The more we know about the Bible... what it means... and how to apply it to life... the more convincing our words will be. ...This does not mean that we should avoid presenting the Good News until we feel adequately prepared. ... (LISTEN TO ME CAREFULLY)... We should use what we have learned... but always seek to know more in order to be an effective witness... and be able to respond to people's questions and arguments.

A pastor in the San Jose area (Steve Zeisler) writes:

If Paul had come here and was reading our newspapers, looking at our inscriptions, he might say something like this: "I've looked at the kind of country you are, and I see that you are a great military and economic power with an enormous desire to do good. But you are so morally weak that you have very little to offer, and your influence is waning. Let me tell you how you can become what you want to be, the answer to what you are missing."

Or he might have said this: *“I observe in your literature that you place a high value on equal inclusion and acceptance of everyone. But you don’t act on your values. I know that because in the most popular entertainment in your culture, “reality TV,” you humiliate people and laugh at those who get rejected. The way you entertain yourselves is destroying people. That tells me that you are missing something. Let me tell you about the God who can make you who you hope to be.”*

Paul looked at the Athenian culture... read its literature... and found a way to open the door to conversation. ... Then he said,

“The fatalism of Epicureanism and Stoicism is killing you. You long for significance, and you think that you can serve deities by making them temples or statues. But God needs none of those things. He is the giver of life. We give nothing to him by these kinds of efforts. You have gotten lost groping for a way to know God. But I will tell you about him. He has made us. He has given us our very breath. He has established from one man all of mankind. He knows the history of each place and people. He is intimately acquainted with us. He has made us long for him, and he is near enough for us to find him. The things your idol worship is saying you hope for, I am telling you how to find! There is a God who is powerful and intimate and personal, and he is reaching out to you. He can be known. You are significant. He cares for you. He knows you. He will listen to you if you call.”

Then Paul brought his teaching to a sharper point: *“This God is moral. He establishes justice. And someday he will judge each of us on our choices—the choice to receive his love, the choice to act on his justice.”*

The climax of Paul’s message came as he pointed to the confirming event of all this truth - the Person whom God had raised from the dead.

A few moments ago... I said that we have grown too used to living with idolatry, with the sorrow of our world, with its decay. We don’t care enough

any more. ... Or if we do care... we don't listen long enough to have something to say that is meaningful.

Every thinking person on this planet asks... "*Where did I come from? Why am I here? Where am I going?*" ... Science attempts to answer the first question... and philosophy wrestles with the second. ... But only the Christian faith has a satisfactory answer to all three.

Paul quoted a few Athenian poets... maintaining common ground with his audience. We see this especially in verse 28 - "*in him we live and move and have our being,*" is from the work of Epimenides. The final line of this verse - "*We are his offspring,*" is from the writings of Aratus: "*In every direction we all have to do with Zeus; for we are also his offspring.*"

The apostle's point was since we are made in the image of God... it is insulting to God and degrading to us to make an idol of Him.

#1) If man is the offspring of God... then idols are *less* than man... for idols are made by the mind of man. ... Man is superior to idols... therefore... to worship idols is to degrade the exalted position God has given man.

#2) If man is the offspring of God... then something created by man is less than God. ... God is above everything man makes. ... Therefore... to exalt the works of man's hand above God... is to degrade the exalted position of both God and man.

God is the Self-Sufficient One. He needs nothing. Men may think God needs them, their lives, worship, offerings, and service; but God does not

need men. He needs nothing that man has. Man cannot help or benefit God at all.

The point is shocking to the mind of man. It means that all man is and has, himself and his world, are *free* gifts of God. God has made man because God is loving and gracious and giving, not because He needs man. Man has nothing to offer God; man does not exist because God needs him. Man exists because God loves and wanted to demonstrate His love to man.

But man needs to repent from setting anything above God as the object of their time... thought... energy... or life. (That is what idolatry is!) Mankind needs to repent because judgment is coming! Our judge is a resurrected man!

At this – Paul’s sermon came to an abrupt halt. The Greek intellectual community considered the matter of resurrection to be too trivial for their attention. *“It would never happen!”*

Many people today are rejecting our gospel not because they perceive it to be false... but because they perceive it to be **trivial**. ... You may need the Gospel... but I certainly don’t! ...Go ahead and keep your silly little belief that Christ can transform a sinful human nature. Poor little niece Christian!”

Paul found three types of responses to his sermon on Mars Hill that day...

Acts 17:32-34

Paul's sermon had three results — mockery... delay... and belief.

The first two responses show that many did not care about truth. ...Some said, "*Seedpicker... what a waste of time!*" ... When the discussion went beyond fun and games... they cut it off.

Others said, "*Boy that was fun! We want to hear you again,*" but they cared little whether they actually did or did not... and they never did hear him again.

Acts 17:33 (ESV)

So Paul went out from their midst.

Acts 18:1 (ESV)

After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth.

(Now stop and think)... When men were angry with him... Paul argued with them. ... When he was persecuted... he returned again to the place of persecution. ... But here in our passage today... we see that when he faced intellectual flippancy and moral dishonesty... Paul had no stomach. "He went out from their midst."

But Praise God — because some truly believed and came to faith.

Despite the prevalence of mockery and rejection that day... a man and a woman gave their lives to Jesus Christ. ... The man's name was Dionysius... and he was one of the elite — a member of the Areopagus. The woman was called Damaris. ... We know nothing else about them... but we do know they listened to Paul's words with all their hearts.

NOW HERE IS THE BIG POINT THAT I WOULD LIKE TO DRAW FROM TODAY'S PASSAGE... If we are believers... if we truly know Christ... we must never hear or read God's Word in a detached manner. We must pay

attention to God with all our being. We must never give way to a cerebral detachment when it comes to divine things. We must always respond.

Jesus stated the principle beautifully in Matthew 13:12:

Matthew 13:12 (ESV)

For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.

When truth comes... we must interact with it and apply it.

Twice (this morning) I have mentioned that somehow we have lost the care that Christ wants us to have... for those who are caught up in our modern-day idolatry. ... (We just are not stirred... or troubled... like Paul was in Athens.) ... Perhaps one of the great causes of this... is the dispassionate hearing we give to God's Word. ... Only God can deliver his children from such apathy!