

Challenging Agnostics

From the Book of Acts

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Bible Text: Acts 17:22-34

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Our Text begins with Acts 17 and verse 22, a familiar passage to many of us. Acts 17 and verse 22 and following,

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.”¹

We end our reading here. And I ask you to pray with me. Let’s pray together.

Father, we again thank you for your Word. We pray, that as we just have a very short time to look into it, that you might be pleased to give us your blessing and grace and help us in our understanding of you and of that which you would have us do in our lives, that is, seek your face, we pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

¹ Acts 17:22-31.

This morning I am responding to a question that I have received from more than one of you. The question has to do with responding to the Agnostic.

Thomas Henry Huxley coined the word “Agnostic.” He did so in response to the Gnostics of early Christianity, those individuals who thought that they had a special knowledge of God. They thought they could gain a special and immediate knowledge of God.

And Huxley said something like this: “I don’t know if you can know God and I am puzzled about these people who say that they have such an immediate knowledge of God, these Gnostics.”

Gnostic is spelled G-N-O-S-T-I-C, Gnostic. And so he coined the word with the alpha privative, the alpha prefix attached to the word “Gnostic.” He coined the word “Agnostic.” That is, “I don’t know if God exists.” This was his rationale.

It was in the 1860s that Huxley coined this word. And as he talked about this, others followed suit. And so we have this terminology today. And there are individuals today who say, “I don’t know if I can know God.” And others go so far as to say, “You really can’t know God.” Well, these people would be considered hard Agnostics. They border on Atheism. But I think most people are in the soft Agnostic camp.

The apostle Paul is responding to this whole idea of Agnosticism. And I think the way you have to respond to Agnosticism, following Paul, is this. You must show the Agnostic that he or she is inconsistent. This is one side of the coin. And then you must also give the Agnostic the truth of God. This is what Paul does, in essence, as we look at this particular text which is before us in Acts 17. And so when you challenge agnostics you show them they are inconsistent and you give them the truth of God.

If you look at verse 23, it is rather startling, actually, that the apostle Paul says, “While I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, ‘TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.’”² That is, here we have an altar dedicated to a God people think they may not be able to know. Literally you might translate this, “The Agnostic’s God.” This is very interesting and significant. Paul speaks of this altar to the Agnostic’s God.

Well this points out the first inconsistency, doesn’t it? You engage in all this God talk and at the same time you say, I don’t know if I can know God. Well, if you can’t know God, why do you talk about him? That’s one of my responses. It seems to me this is a very basic inconsistency.

And in addition, I would say, if you are an Agnostic, you are seeking proof. Huxley was of this mind. He said, “If you could give me just one iota of proof, of evidence, then I would come over to your side.”

² Acts 17:23.

Well, the problem is that Huxley and others are looking for what we call scientific proof. This kind of proof involves going into the laboratory. You weigh and measure. You perform experiments and collect data.

Along this line, I say to you, Think about evolution. In actuality you cannot take evolution into the laboratory and prove the theory scientifically—and this is what it is—a *theory* of evolution. You believe in evolution because the textbooks tell you that you ought to believe in evolution. You believe in evolution because a lot of people believe in evolution and there is kind of a consensus with regard to evolution. But there isn't scientific proof. You can't recreate the scene in the beginning or go back to the beginning and perform experiments to validate evolution. You can't do that. Evolution remains a theory. From this perspective, the Evolutionist is in the same predicament as the Agnostic.

What we are talking about, therefore, is not scientific proof, but psychological proof. This is really what we are after. We operate on this basis all the time. We operate on the basis of psychological proof, on the basis of consensus. You see this is the whole area of global warming. We do not have scientific proof for global warming, I think. But there are many who tell us there is a consensus with regard to global warming. So there is. But just because there is a consensus with regards to global warming doesn't mean that it is correct, you see.

What we are after, really, is psychological proof. Convince me; talk to me; show me. Show me with arguments like the arguments of a lawyer in a courtroom. This is what the courtroom boils down to, psychological proof. You press the evidence on the jury. And the Agnostic is saying the jury is still out with regard to the existence of God.

I therefore remind you that there is a little inconsistency here. We are not dealing on the level of scientific proof. We are actually dealing on the level of psychological proof. And how could this be? Well, let's look at another piece of our text, verse 29 in Acts 17. "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."³

I think many Agnostics would agree with this statement that God ought not to be thought of as an image of gold or silver or stone. But there is another little word in verse 29 that is striking. "Being then the children of God, we *ought* not to think..."⁴ That is, we owe it to ourselves and we owe it to others not to think in a particular way because if you think in this particular way you are wrong.

But wait a minute. This brings up another issue, doesn't it? This brings up the issue of morality, the issue of morals, and the issue of moral argument. You *ought* not to do things and you *ought* to do other things. You *ought* to get up in the morning when the alarm rings rather than smashing the snooze button 10 or 12 times. You *ought* to get up. You know that it is not right for you to keep pushing the snooze button because you are

³ Acts 17:29, italics added.

⁴ Ibid.

going to be late for work or you are going to be late for school. It is not good for you to be late for work or to be late for school. You *ought* not to do that.

This *oughtness* pushes you in the direction of doing or not doing certain things. What's up with this idea, this sense of oughtness? Let me refer you to the book of Romans along this line. We look at Romans chapter two and verses 14 and 15. Paul says:

For when Gentiles 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.⁵

If you are an Agnostic, I submit to you that you have this sense of oughtness within you, this sense of right and wrong that we have been talking about. In your own being you have this sense of right and wrong. Would you deny this? Then why do you get angry when the referee at a basketball game misses a call? Why do you get angry? Well, it is wrong, you say. I respond, There you go. You see, there is a sense of right and wrong in your heart. And why is it in your heart? Because you have the remnants of the law of God in your heart, this is why. This is what Paul is telling us. "For when Gentiles 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."⁶

So why do you have this sense of right and wrong in you? This sense of right and wrong is present within you because God placed this sense of right and wrong in you. It involves God's Ten Commandments.

And how do we validate this? Well, it is simple, actually. Look at verse 15 again. "In that you show the work of the Law written in your hearts, your conscience bearing witness and your thoughts alternately accusing or else defending you."⁷

It is like this. You get angry and you slap your wife. What happens? Well, all of a sudden you feel bad. Why do you feel bad? You know it is wrong to treat your wife like this. You ought not to be engaging in this kind of behavior. Your conscience, your conscience smites you. You begin to feel bad in your heart. And then what happens? Interestingly enough a little argument begins to crop up in your head and in your heart. I did have good reason for this seemingly bad conduct, you protest. Look at the way she fixed those eggs for me this morning. I've told her a hundred times not to fix the eggs this way. Then you argue the other side of the case. It is still not the appropriate thing to be doing, slapping my own wife. And this little argument ensues in your head.

But why does this little argument crop up in your head? It stems from the presence of God's law in your heart and the fact you do have a conscience. You feel bad when you

⁵ Romans 2:14-15.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ See Romans 2:15.

violate God's law. Your conscience hurts. And so you can't escape the fact that God exists because *his* law in your heart spurs these reactions.

And there is something else. If you are an Agnostic, if you really are an Agnostic and you are saying, I don't know whether God exists, again, you do have a conscience responding to God's law that is in your heart. And so, to deny God, you must deny your moral-self. This is one point.

But in addition, I would submit to you, if you are an Agnostic and you deny God, you also must deny your own being. You have to deny your own existence if you deny the existence of God. How can this be, pastor?

Well, look at Romans one with me, verse 20. "For 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."⁸

God is revealing himself in and through all parts of creation. And guess what? You are part of creation. God is therefore revealing himself in and through you. God is revealing himself in your own heart. We have already talked a little bit about this in the idea of conscience and God's law.

Yes, God is revealing himself in you. Dr. John Gerstner was fond of saying, "The best argument for the existence of God is..." listen to this, "The best argument for the existence of God is: You cannot not think about God." Yes, you cannot not think about God. You see, this is the contradiction, the difficulty, in which the Agnostic finds himself or herself, always thinking about God.

And why is this the case? Well, look at Romans one, verses 18 and 19.

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them.⁹

Why do you think about God? God has placed the knowledge of himself in you as his creature. It is unavoidable that you think about God. This is God's work. Yes, God has put the knowledge of himself in you. And this knowledge is like a little spring that keeps bubbling up. It keeps bubbling up within. It keeps bubbling up within.

And verse 18 adds, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness,"¹⁰ That is, men and women try to push down the truth coming up from this spring. They throw rocks into this spring. They try to throw rocks over the spring to cover it up. They do this in an

⁸ Romans 1:20.

⁹ Romans 1:18-19.

¹⁰ Romans 1:18.

effort to stifle thoughts about God. This is what happens. But, again, it is unavoidable that you think about God. God has put this knowledge of himself in each one of us. And this is why these arguments about God keep cropping up.

And so for the Agnostic, to talk about God and to think about God acknowledges God's existence. This is one difficulty for the Agnostic. This is one contradiction. And then there is this whole matter of scientific proof versus psychological proof. This is another little difficulty into which the Agnostic runs. Then there is also the whole matter of conscience and the law of God in the heart. This too is unavoidable. You can't get away from it. You live with it. And again, there is this whole idea of the knowledge of God bubbling up from within. These are very personal realities that none of us, none of you, can escape. It is therefore quite inconsistent to say knowledge of God's existence is unlikely.

And so you have to realize, and I have to realize, that one of the things you have to do, going back to Acts 17, is to lay out the fact that there are inconsistencies in the thinking of the Agnostic.

And then, on the other hand, you must lay out the truth of God. Look at verse 23 once again. "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."¹¹

You see, I would say to the Agnostic, You don't know if God exists. OK. Then do a little research. There is some ignorance here. In fact, there is willful ignorance if you are unwilling to do a little study and investigation. I might put it this way, Are you good at math? No, I am not good at math, responds the Agnostic. I ask, Why not? The answer is simple. I don't know anything about it.

Well, do a little study. Do a little study about math. Maybe you will learn how to do some mathematics, you see. Remedy the ignorance with regard to this area in your life.

And I think it is the same thing with regard to God. Do a little work. Do a little homework. Do a little study. Understand what people who believe in God are all about. Don't just blow them off. Remedy the ignorance with regard to this area in your life. Failure here is not only ignorance but *willful* ignorance.

And so what does Paul proceed to do, significantly enough, in Acts 17? Look at verses 26 and following. He lays out some things about this God. "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"¹²

Why are you here? Have you ever asked this question: Why are you here? Well, God put you here. This is why you are here. Do you have a home in which you live? God

¹¹ Acts 17:23, italics added.

¹² Acts 17:26-27.

put you in your home. Do you have a piece of property? God circumscribed that piece of property in which you live. And you have responsibilities. You are to live in this world and take care of your family and take care of the property in which God has placed you. You have responsibilities. Paul lays this out.

And since this is the case, since you do have responsibilities, Paul says in verse 30, “Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent.”¹³

Paul is saying to those philosophers who have this altar to an unknown God, It is time for you to repent. God has overlooked the time of your ignorance. You have been ignorant of this God. Now you need to repent of this ignorance. You need to turn around. You need to inform yourself with regard to this God. It is your responsibility to do so. You need to seek him. This is one of the purposes for which God has placed you in this world. You need to seek the Lord.

And how is it that you ought to seek the Lord? Well, the first thing you ought to do is read the Bible. This is the first thing you ought to do. You need to read the Bible. You say, Well, I don’t agree with what those Christians believe. How do you know what the Christians believe? Read the Bible. Find out. God has overlooked the time of your ignorance. It is time now for you to turn around and educate yourself a little bit and seek the Lord.

And here is another thing you need to do. It would be good for you to attend church a little bit, more than a little bit. It would be good for you to attend church. Where are you going to find out about the Lord? You need to go to a church where the Bible is taught. You need to read the Bible and go to a church where the Bible is taught. This is not rocket science. You need to repent and you need to seek the Lord.

And there is a very important reason why this is quite necessary. It is not just because you say, I don’t know if there is a God. We have tried to talk about your inconsistencies a little bit. But there is another very important reason.

Look at verse 31. “Because He,” that is God, “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.”¹⁴

There is a judgment day coming. This is the great reason why you need to resolve these issues. There is a judgment day coming. We have already talked about the fact that you don’t like it when injustices are done, even on the basketball court. You think this is wrong. And you long—I would submit to you—you long in your own heart for there to be a day of real reckoning, a day of real justice. You long for justice.

¹³ Acts 17:30.

¹⁴ Acts 17:31.

Now, justice is going to come. Jesus Christ the second person of the Trinity is going to come a second time in glory to judge the earth, to judge every individual in the earth. And God has proved that Jesus Christ is going to come a second time in glory by raising him from the dead. You say, I don't believe in the resurrection. Well, that's another issue we can talk about. But the warning is fair. A judgment is coming and you know in your own heart that you are looking for real justice. You may get it.

You see how Paul deals with—quote—these Agnostics? And is he always successful? Well, let's read the next couple of verses.

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.¹⁵

Some believed; some didn't. Some bought what Paul had to say; others didn't. And this is where we are left. In the end it is God's Word and he is the one who makes it effectual. And when you deal with people you need to realize that this is the case.

In this season of the year when there is much said about Jesus Christ and the coming of Jesus Christ, the specter of Agnosticism raises its head. And, significantly enough, during this season of the year there are more people who are depressed and blue than in other seasons of the year. What's the remedy? Abandon Agnosticism; in the end, it is inconsistent. It is inconsistent because you have a conscience. You also have the remnants of God's law in your heart. When you violate God's commandments, your conscience hurts. You cannot avoid this. In addition, the knowledge of God keeps bubbling up from within and you must stop throwing rocks and bricks and mud and all sorts of things into that spring to stop it up. You need to repent. You need to seek the Lord. You need to read the Bible. You need to come to church. And the big reason is: There is a day of judgment that is coming. Christ will come a second time in glory to judge the earth.

And so this morning if you are sitting here and you are an Agnostic, I say to you, for the reasons just given, You are inconsistent in your thinking and you need to hear the truth of God.

Let's pray together.

Father, thank you. Just very brief and very short talking about these important matters. Forgive me for my inability to articulate these things well. Cause us all to ponder that which we have been discussing. And I pray, oh God, that you would be pleased to take away the mist and the smoke in the hearts of those who are agnostic who say they don't think they can know you and utilize us to show them their inconsistencies and to present to them your truth. Grant that this would be the case we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.

¹⁵ Acts 17:32-34.