

Paul in Athens, Part I

Acts 17:16-21

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We turn this morning to a text drawn from a much warmer part of the world – Athens, Greece, not Georgia. And we turn to perhaps one of the most famous speeches in the New Testament, certainly by Paul. It's his speech given in Athens at what is called the Areopagus. It stretches from verse sixteen to verse thirty-four, but I wanted to split it in two because I do not have the master craft to do it all in one sermon and hold your interest. So we're going to deal this morning with the first part, verses sixteen through twenty-one of Acts chapter sixteen, as Paul is both confronted with what he is teaching and how he responds. If you have Bibles, please turn there to Acts 17:16-21. If not, the Scripture is provided for you in front.

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. 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. 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. And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean." Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.

This is the Word of God. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me?

Lord, may we be a people that have ears to hear, minds to understand, but hearts to receive the beauty and truth of Jesus Christ and his gospel and the power of his resurrection as the source of life, as the satisfaction of our deepest longings and the thing to which we are drawn as human beings – to worship the exalted Christ in whose mighty and matchless name we pray. Amen.

So we turn this morning, as I said, to this famous speech. Here we find Paul in Athens. He was waiting for Timothy. And he was wanting to be rejoined by Timothy as well as his other folks who have been traveling with him – Luke included – who had been traveling with him on his missionary journeys. Silas and Timothy had been close confidants. Luke was his personal physician. But here as we heard last time, Paul had to leave Berea and Thessalonica. And he went on to travel to Athens. And he is coming into this city – and you'll see in the outline what takes place. He recognizes the idolatry of Athens; the misunderstanding that erupts from his teaching; but then finally the idols of knowledge and information.

And through all of this, as we work through this passage together and next week, I want to encourage you to be able to think if you will not only of what the passage is demonstrating about the city of Athens and of the Roman Empire at this time – I want you also in parallel to see just how much in common we in 2015 have in common with the first hearers of this sermon from Paul, and how very much like the Roman Empire we in the west actually live, and how the gospel seeks to answer their issues as it simultaneously answers ours. But at the very same time, it confronts us as it confronted them.

So let's look at the idolatry of Athens. The passage tells us here – it says in verse sixteen that Paul was waiting for them in Athens and his spirit was provoked within him as he saw the city was full of idols. Now the word there translated as “full” has been thought and looked at a number of different ways. And one of the ways is this image of – there were so many idols in Athens, it was like being in a veritable forest of idols. Others have chosen to use it in this phrase, and that is: Athens was awash. It was submerged in the worship of idols. I like this image of a city submerged in the worship of idols.

How were they submerged? You know that Athens was submerged in idolatrous worship because you could see it from miles away. One god is Athena, with a sword that could be seen from miles away. You could walk through the city and see many statues and many places and temples of worship to these gods, including Apollo who was the patron city god of Athens. Diana, Jupiter, Venus – it was, to use a common phrase, a pantheon of gods. It was a city awash in idolatry.

Now, the key is this: one way to discern what idols a culture or a city worship is to look first not at what they mourn or what they complain about, but what the city or culture celebrates. Said another way: what do they make a big deal of? Just a few weeks ago, during the Superbowl, many Twitter feeds were full of critiques of commercials. Now not just enjoyment of commercials, but critiques of them. That's when you know what our culture celebrates. Passive taking in of commercialized products, commercializing love, relationships, parenthood, singledom, men and women, children, metal, clothe, and we can just take it in. And we can critique and vote on which one is our favorite. But we're nothing like the Athenians, are we? They were awash in idolatrous worship because of what they celebrated. So are we.

The question is: what do we celebrate? So as you leave today, you drive around – don't think about advertisements, but just look around you. Look at the things that are prominent, things that are central, things that are written about a lot, things that are reflected on – and yes, what is celebrated. And there you'll begin to see the key to unlocking perhaps what is hidden in plain sight. We are awash in idolatrous worship.

When Paul saw this, the passage tells us he was provoked. And that's my second sub-point. It's easy: Paul provoked. What does it mean? He was angered. But not in a condescending way. He was distressed. He was broken – in a compassionate way. Why? Twofold. One, as we will get into next week, he saw that the very thing that they promoted and centralized – the knowing of things – was the worship of things that they actually didn't know. I mean, really know. It was also the fact that they were so lost, they were so awash in different ideas, they could not discern the truth. It was crowded out by so many rival truths.

But he also is one who worshipped the Lord God – who worshipped the Lord Jesus Christ. And as a Jew who went to the synagogues first to teach, he knew – as those who heard him in the synagogues knew – that to speak of the God of the Old Testament is to speak of a God who is a jealous God. A God who is provoked in jealousy for the hearts of his people. But isn't jealous, you might ask, a sin? How can God be both God and righteous yet be jealous? How can Paul be angry and jealous for the honor of God? John Stott wrote these words as he explained the nature of Paul's anger and jealousy for the character and honor of God. He writes these words – he says:

Jealousy is the resentment of idols, and whether it is good or evil depends on whether the rival has any business to be there. To be jealous of someone who threatens to outshine us in beauty, in brains, or in sport is sinful because we cannot claim a monopoly of talent in any of those areas. If, on the other hand, a third party enters a marriage, the jealousy of the

injured person who is being displaced is righteous because the intruder has no right to be there.

It is the same with God, who says, "I am the Lord, and the Lord is my Name. I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols." Isaiah 40. You see, God can declare himself as a jealous God because all idolatry is an intruder into the intimate covenant relationship that God desires for himself with his people. And whether the intruder comes by force or is invited by his own people – that is those who He has created in his image, human beings – the result is the same. There is the brokenness of intimacy. There is the brokenness of relationship. And the rebel heart of the human being desires to find fulfillment in something other than the Creator God. This incites Paul's anger, because it incites God's jealous wrath. Because He loves us. He has created all he has made and called it good. Therefore, we have been created to worship – but to worship him.

You see, idolatry takes two forms. It can be the form of material worship, as in the case of physical idols. It can also take the form of spiritual idolatry, where we worship an idea without which we are afraid or anxious. And this is a constant theme throughout the Scriptures – spiritual idolatry and material idolatry. And this is why Paul was angry – because whether it is spiritual idolatry or material idolatry, idols are never original. Idols always seek to take something from the character of God and of his beauty, of his provision, of his power, of his glory – and takes that attribute and tries to mimic it to draw us away from the worship of the true God. Or we ourselves desire not to be loved or provided for by God. Rather, we would find it much easier and a much shorter path to getting what we want either through spiritual or material idolatry.

This is at the heart of human beings – every single one of us. This was at the heart of Adam and Eve – the desire to not be ruled over by God, but to be like God. Satan understood the temptation, but Satan didn't need all that much help because the human heart longs and desires. As you've heard me say before and as many writers have written – we are not thinkers first, we are lovers first. We were created to love and to desire God and only God. But as sin entered in, we replaced God with something else.

Ed Pallesen, a wonderful teacher and preacher, has written this. He works with Christian Counseling Educational Foundation, as he's talked about the problem of idolatry. And quickly, he says this: There are couple forms of idolatry. One is spiritual, one is material. So let me put some flesh on that bone. One form of spiritual idolatry among the many – one is the need for security. When a need for security propels my life or a segment of my life, I am again engaging in religious behavior. Rather than serving the true God, the god I serve is the approval and respect of people, either myself or others. I become an idolater. I am an idolater, because I am not motivated by a need for security; I am motivated by a lust for security rather than to be ruled by God. Or since my desire and fear are complementary perspectives on human motivation, I fear man instead of I fear and trust God. And so, therefore, our lust and desire for security – which is an idea – is often tutored and at times spontaneous. It operates in us like a hunger. We desire to be persuaded and wooed by others. We are also easily intimidated by others, and we fear that we might lose their respect or their trust. And we will do whatever we can to get it back, because when we don't have the respect of others we feel out of control. The pursuit of that makes me a spiritual idolater.

A form of material idolatry, Pallesen rightly points out, is alcohol. I pick this because of a dear friend of mine who, after knowing him for close to twelve years, I can count on my hand literally the number of times I even saw him take one solitary drink. A week and a half ago, he called me and said, "There's something I need to tell you that I've hidden from you, that I've struggled with since before I

turned twenty-one. I am an alcoholic. It wasn't that I drank everyday, but I recognized that I was turning to it when I felt the most out of control." Pallesen writes to this when he says, "When a desire to drink alcohol propels my life or a segment of my life" – and that was my friend; it was a segment of his life – "I am actually engaging in religious behavior. I, the flesh, have become my own god. And alcohol has become the object of my will, desires, and fears."

You see, the Bible's conceptualization of idolatry differs radically from the world's understanding of these things. You see, the world says, "I'm just alcohol driven." But the Bible demonstrates to me that I'm not just alcohol driven. Rather, I am God driven. I want something to solve my deepest longings. Pallesen continues. He says, "We are meant to relate to wine" – as an example – "to be thankfully enjoying that which we have received and sharing it generously. But I become an active idolater when a normal desire to drink becomes the wellspring of problem behavior and attitudes." Normal desires tend to become inordinate and enslaving. The various visible sins which attend such an idolatry is gluttony, anxiety, thanklessness, entitlement. I deserve this drink. It's been a long day. Irritability when drink is delayed. Angling to get another glass. Needing to drink to feel good and the like. These are the outworkings of the idolatry and the constraints that it puts on my heart. This problem behavior is rooted in the heart and has everything to do – not first with alcohol, not first with the desire for security – it has everything to do with my relationship with God.

This, if you will, I go to such lengths to demonstrate why Paul would walk through the city of Athens and he would see these things. And we look so easily and judgmentally and say, "Well that city's full of statues. I'm not getting on my knees to worship anything." Oh, that is so not true. We are not advanced. We are like them – easily given to worship of various forms. And Paul was provoked, because it's stealing the character, the glory, the honor, and the exalting nature of our God and our King. This was the idolatry of Athens.

But secondly, there was a misunderstanding. Paul responds. And when he responds, there is clear misunderstanding. Why? Because, well, these philosophers. The text tells us that there were both Stoics and Epicureans. Again, if you will, just allow me to define quickly. Here I want to borrow again from John Stott when he says these words. He says, "To oversimplify, it was characteristic of Epicureans to emphasize chance, escape, and enjoyment of pleasure, and Stoics to emphasize fatalism, submission, and the endurance of pain." The one sought to deal with the problem of life through the pursuit of pleasure. The other sought to deal with the problems and pain of life by just gritting their teeth and accepting it.

And so Paul in this context preached the gospel, the passage tells us. And so it says, "Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, 'What does this babbling wish to say?' " So now they're looking at Paul, and they're saying, "This babbling." The word "babbling" literally translated into English would be "seed picker." It's reserved for birds, because birds take seeds of various kinds to cobble together a meal. What they're saying is Paul must be taking the ideas of many different philosophers, cobbling them together into this new set of ideas. And so they call him something very base and derogatory. He's just a babbling – a seed picker.

And so in that context, it says, "Others said, 'He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities'— because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection." Now Jesus and his gospel was clearly on the tongue of Paul. And two things that he clearly focused on: the person of Jesus Christ and his resurrection. That's interesting, because when they heard the word "resurrection" – the word "resurrection" in Greek sounds a lot like a Greek goddess, Anastasia. And so what they believed Paul was doing is preaching

about this person Jesus and a woman who's clearly close to him, Anastasia. They were clearly confused. There was an absolute misunderstanding.

But what was Paul doing in the face of these Epicurean and Stoic philosophers by preaching the gospel? What was he suggesting? He's suggesting how Jesus and the resurrection deals both at the core of the idolatry of both. For the Epicurean, it is the desire to seek escape in pleasure and the pursuit of beauty. However, when that becomes a pursuit in and of itself, it becomes elusive. One drink must lead to another, and another, and another. One meal must be replaced by yet many more. And the hope that you can recreate moments that enable you to withstand the pain and difficulty of this life – and so we bury ourselves in pleasures. Paul would say that Jesus comes and says, "These things you will never be satisfied with. You will always be drinking, but never satisfied. You will always be thirsty. You will always be hungry but never filled." Would he not have announced Jesus as the one who comes to satisfy our deepest hunger and our most radical of thirsts through his death on a cross, by his body and blood, which are symbolized in the supper we are getting ready to participate in?

What about the Stoics, who refuse to say well – there's just pain and fatality – there's nothing I can do. This is the life that has been dealt to me. I must try to make lemonade out of lemons. But Paul would say that's the beauty of the resurrection. This life isn't the end of the story. Death and pain are not just the end of the sentence. They are a part of the sentence, the drama of life, inescapably. But rather, the resurrection tells us that Jesus will come again in glory and restore all things new. So the end of the story is not death and pain and difficulty, but new life.

This caused much misunderstanding. And so they called Paul before the Areopagus, which literally means "mars hill." Because there would have been the philosophers and their rulers, and literally you needed to go before them to give your own ideas and your own teachings, as it were, to receive almost like a license to teach in Athens. Now we'll get to next week the full aspect of what Paul would teach before them. But it is enough to say this: Paul brought the contrast of the gospel to their deepest longings, as it does to us.

As my friend shared with me a week and a half ago – he had done so well, he thought, at managing his desires. But what no one else could see was something he deeply knew. He was afraid to express to those closest to him that he didn't have the strength to keep all the balls up in the air. He felt all the responsibility of his family and extended family. He felt the pressure of exerting an outward life that seemed to display success, while inwardly he was brittle. He was insecure. And so in private or on a plane, traveling from California to New York or New York to California – or at an after-dinner party or whatever the case may be – he felt the desire to quiet the anxiety with just a few more sips. And so he and I began to talk. And I asked him – if where you stock is trying to manage your behavior, it will come back with a vengeance. But it may not be alcohol. It may be something else. Unless you deal with the idol of your heart. What are you wanting? What are you afraid of? And until you uncover that and allow the gospel to intersect with that, this battle will not be won. But like a bad case of the flu, it will come back a few days later and be worse than its first appearing. What, for you?

The final thing here is the idols of knowledge and information. Thank you to a friend in this congregation who came up to me last week – I believe it was Mike Milligan who said, "Hey, look at this sentence. 'Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling and hearing something new.' " He said, "Isn't that the twenty-four hour news cycle?" Let me, as I get close to finishing, quote this couple of things for you I want you to consider this morning:

Americans no longer talk to each other; they entertain each other. They do not exchange ideas; they exchange images. They do not argue with propositions; they argue with good looks, celebrities, and commercials. Everything in our background has prepared us to know and resist a prison when the gates begin to close around us, but what if there are no cries of anguish to be heard? Who is prepared to take arms against the sea of amusements? To whom do we complain, when, and in what tone of voice, when serious discourse dissolves into giggles? What is the antidote to a culture's being drained by laughter?

Maybe Orwell was not right. Maybe it was Huxley who was right. Orwell feared there would come a day where there would be a banning of books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who would want to read one. Orwell feared there would be those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared that the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance. Orwell feared that we would become a captive culture. Huxley feared that we would become a trivial culture, preoccupied with some equivalent of the feelies, the orgy-porgy, and the centrifugal bumpy-puppy.

It's meant to sound absurd. This book was written in 1987 by Neal Postman. The book was entitled *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. If you haven't read that book in a long time, go read it. Because that was before the internet. My friends, we are so awash in viral videos, viral news, viral ideas. And what we don't realize is all of that noise drowns out the serious thought about the truth. All of those videos, all of the heightened emotions and the goosebumps and the heart-fluttering when we see breaking news – all of that stuff seems so important, but what it's doing is it's drowning out the oldest and the best news we could ever hear.

The truth is: we are absolutely no different than the Athenians. We love ideas. We love to traffic in the new ones. We repost and like and comment away. What is it that we're longing for? Well I will tell you the downside of this. As more and more young people that I work with and get to know – what I find is they are afraid of making decisions. Do you know why? Because when you're awash in information and ideas, to say yes to something means I have to say no to a whole host of other things. To say yes to one man or one woman means I have to say no to the possibility of so many more. To commit to a monogamous, intimate sexual relationship with one person for the rest of my life means that I'm going to mess up on the possibility of being tantalized by a multitude without number. How can I believe that this is the truth when everything else comes to me in such Technicolor beauty with photoshopped images and vignettes that make everything look so distinguishing? And yet this feels just like ink on a page.

The problem isn't this. The problem isn't what is out there. The problem is we have stopped imagining that the greatest problem is our own hearts which lust for more, because we are hungry to know and to be known. We are hungry for healing, for brokenness we can barely mention. We are thirsty beyond imagination. We are hungry for something that will finally satisfy our taste buds. And so Paul comes in, and the Word comes to you this morning, and leads us to a table that says – when the lights go out, and the internet connection isn't fast yet again, and the ideas are fading, what we find was there always in the beginning and will always be there in the end and will always be the truth which is traced through all of human history: I am the Lord God. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever will believe in him shall have eternal life. Come unto me all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. For this is my body. This is my blood. And you shall eat and drink of it, and you will be filled.

And if I may say it as a Presbyterian – because I am, and I do pay attention to this – lent is coming. And perhaps if you're from a Catholic background, that is offensive. But even if you are, I would have you consider the idea of lent. Is there something that you need to stop doing or start doing? Is there something that is laying claim to your heart that is so powerful and so palpable, but you haven't said it to others? Use the season leading up to Easter as that season to begin looking inwardly with the light of God's Word, and asking – what are the idols set up on the throne room of my heart? And what is my deepest love really being invested into? And may God in the Lord Jesus Christ enter with you to give you grace and mercy – to give you what you greatly want and what can never be taken from you. Let's pray.

Now, Lord, enable us to worship you aright, to love you at the deepest crevices of our hearts, to confess the idols of our hearts as it has intersected with the idols of our age. How we've robbed you of your honor and your glory and your beauty, and sought it in another. But Lord, we hear your invitation – come unto Me – and so we say receive us, O Lord, as idolaters. Forgive us our sin, and fill us with your grace. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.