

# Sermon 56, The Knowledge of God for Ignorant Pagans, Acts 17:22-34

**Proposition:** We can know God, and we must seek Him, think worthily of Him, and repent in light of His coming judgment.

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## Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, as you know, I have mostly hurried past the last few speeches and sermons in Acts. We have not looked fully at the text of a speech since Peter's Pentecost sermon in Acts 2. But I want to make an exception here. Last time we looked at the broader context of this sermon, as Paul is negotiating the fine line between proclaiming the gospel and not starting a new religion in Athens. To that end, as we saw, he focused on teaching about the nature of God and spoke of Christ only as a resurrected man — thus implying that his teaching was not dissimilar to recognized religions in Athens. This week, though, I plan to preach the sermon that Paul preached in Athens. That is, I'm going to use the same outline that he used, making the same points and applications he made. Part of the reason I'm doing that is

that we live in the midst of ignorant pagans who think themselves very smart, like the Athenians did. My other reason for it is that we need to know God, seek God, and not think that he is like man-made images. In other words, Paul's message was not only timely for the Athenians. It is timely for us too. The Kingdom spread in the cultural capital of the ancient world through the faithful preaching of Paul about God's nature as creator, provider, and judge. And it will spread here in Gillette through that same kind of faithful preaching. So know your God as creator, as provider, and as judge. Seek Him, think worthily of Him, and repent before He comes to judge the world.

### **I. Introduction: Knowledge of God as the Point of Contact, v. 22-23**

Paul introduces his sermon with a reference to the religion of his hearers. This religion could be good or bad; the meaning of the word ranges from "superstitious," as in KJV, all the way to pious and religious in the best sense. But what is he doing here? Well, he is finding a point of connection to Athenian culture in the very phenomenon of religion. By the way, this is a very poor point of connection with our culture. First-century Athens was very religious; remember the quip that it was easier to find a god than a man in Athens. But twenty-first-century America is not very religious. The point of contact that we need to seek with our culture would lie rather in morality, or perhaps in the need for hope in the face of pervasive despair. But Paul doesn't see the Athenians as very moral; he sees them as very religious. The whole city was submerged in idols. And so Paul takes that practice of idolatry and connects it to the polarity between ignorance and knowledge. He saw an actual altar that said "To an unknown god." Other ancient writers also mention that Athens contained altars to unknown gods.

Here's what Paul is not doing: he is not taking an Athenian deity and filling it with Biblical content. He isn't saying "Here's what you were trying to say." He's saying "You have no clue what you're trying to say. But I am going to tell you something I know. You are confessedly ignorant. I am going to correct that ignorance." In other words, he is proclaiming the true God in response to the Athenians' ignorance about what they worship. They may think they know Zeus, Athena, et al., but they don't have a clue.

Brothers and sisters, similarly, in our context, we encounter people with extremely strict morals every single day. Their morals don't seem strict because they are in favor of total sexual liberation — but they are very committed to what they understand to be moral ideas. Again, like Paul, we have to address and correct their ignorance by saying "You are very committed to your ignorant ideas about right and wrong. I'm going to tell you what's actually right and wrong."

### **II. God the Creator, vv. 24-25**

Well, what then does Paul proclaim? First, he proclaims God as Creator. He is the God who made the world and its contents. The universe itself, and everything inside it, is the work of His hands.

Now, the doctrine of creation is a revolutionary doctrine. Yes, rightly understood as the production of existing things out of nothing, creation is compatible with a certain kind of understanding of evolution — so long as you posit that God originally brought the world into being, and that He guided the development of the materials He made into "endless forms most

beautiful.” But the basic reality of creation is that all that exists was made by God. Nothing came into being or stays in being on its own. Once, there was nothing. Now, there is something — because God made it so. Of course, it’s much simpler to reject all forms of macroevolution. But in principle, theistic evolution is compatible with creation, so long as you understand that both being and becoming are under the control of God.

This doctrine of creation demands that the world reshape its thinking. If creation is true, then we are accountable to God.

#### **A. His Lordship**

And that, of course, is where Paul takes it. Right away, he moves to the proclamation that God is Lord of Heaven and earth. Everything in heaven is rightfully His and obedient to Him; same with everything on earth. It all answers to God and is under the direction and control of God. This is Luke’s message, of course: Jesus is Lord, and His lordship is coming to more people as they are converted and brought out of Satan’s Kingdom.

Since God is Lord of Heaven and earth, you and I need to obey Him. That’s where Paul is headed.

#### **B. His Residence**

But instead of talking about judgment right away, he goes on to describe God’s residence. He does not live in man-made temples! This was a common trope in Hellenistic thought, even though the cities of the classical world were filled with temples that contained hand-carved statues of the gods. But, as befits the one who made Heaven and earth, God doesn’t need me to build Him a house. He could make His own house if He needed one, and it would be way better than the Taj Mahal, the White House, or any other grand and glorious piece of architecture. God lives in Heaven; how could He possibly need a temple? This question, of course, is a zinger aimed at the Athenians, who were very proud of the Parthenon, one of the greatest temples ever built.

#### **C. His Lack of Needs**

God doesn’t need prime real estate or stone temples or, indeed, anything else from us. He doesn’t need food or clothing. He doesn’t need hordes of priests. He doesn’t even need worshippers. He needs nothing; He has everything already resident within Himself. He is provider, sustainer — and so why would He come to us to meet His needs when everything we have is already a gift from Him?

### **III. God the Provider, vv. 25-26**

Indeed, God the Creator is God the Provider. Both are key aspects of His being and His activity toward the human race.

#### **A. Gives Life, Breath, and Everything**

Paul summarizes the gifts of God to us with the phrase “life, breath, and everything.” We have to work for food. We have to go seek water. But air is all around. It is the environment we’re born into, and if we go out of air (say, under water) we hurry to get back to it within a minute or two. But air is a gift from God. That’s why we don’t have to buy it. Some people buy bottled water for

their daily drinking; almost no one buys bottled air for their daily breathing (unless they have a medical condition and need purified oxygen).

Do you recognize God as the giver of life, as symbolized by the gift of breath? When is the last time you gasped for breath, felt that you were starving for air? Did you thank God for His liberal, bountiful gift?

### **B. Made the Human Race from One Man**

But not only do you have air; you have existence. You have an identity — human being — and a family — the human race. That's because among all the things God gave this world, He gave Adam, one man from whom all humans are descended.

The scholars tell us that the idea of a single ancestor of the human race was utterly foreign to classical antiquity. But Paul is forthright in declaring that one of God's gifts to the human race was to make us a race, a group of people who are in a single family, with a single common ancestor. Darwin wanted to expand this and claim that every living thing is part of the family, with a "common ancestor" for all life. That's garbage. What all life has in common is its Creator, not its ancestor.

### **C. Determines Historical Periods**

God not only sustains us in being; He also determines historical periods. The question of periodization is one of the most difficult aspects of the study of history. When does a period begin and end? How does it give way to a new period? We speak confidently of "the nineteenth century," "the antebellum period," "the interwar years," "the twenty-first century," "modernity," and more. But who defines these periods? Who makes them differ from one another? Paul ascribes it directly to God. The Hellenistic Era was His idea. The Bronze Age was His idea.

Do you think of God as determining historical periods? As setting up the time and determining the context in which each person will live, move, and have his being?

### **D. Selects Home Sites**

But God also sets out the boundaries of your dwelling place. The basic idea is that the lot on which your home is built, the place where your apartment building stands, was hand-picked for you. God chose where you should live. This is not in contradiction to what I said a few weeks ago, that it's not God's job to decide where you should live. That's still true; it's not His job to tell you where to live. But all the same, He makes the final decision. You decide where to live on the human level, but God decides on the providential/divine level.

## **IV. Application I: Seek God, for He Is Not Far, v. 27**

So, what should we do in light of this? We should seek God. That is Paul's first application. God is Creator and God is Provider. Therefore, we should seek Him. He is our point of origin; we come from Him. His being gave us being; His life gave us life. Everything we have comes from Him; if you have air surrounding your face and rushing through your nostrils when you breathe in, thank God for it. How? By seeking Him out. Even those without special revelation are able to feel for Him in the dark. They are operating with limited senses. If you are going to search a cupboard for an item, what sense will you use first? Your eyes. They are far and away our primary sense. If you meet someone who says "I have no sense of smell," you say "That's too

bad” and then move on. It’s no big deal to move through modern life with no sense of smell. But to move through life, modern or otherwise, with no vision, is a curse indeed. It’s hard to be blind. But the person without special revelation, though fed by God and given a plot of land on which to live, nonetheless is only able to search for Him as it were by feel — in order words, not by sight, not by hearing, not by smell, not by taste, but only by touch. It’s our most basic sense and the hardest to lose — but it’s also the most limited in range. You can only touch what’s right next to you. Of course, that means that the Almighty is in fact right next to you! Seek Him. And when you are the recipient of special revelation, when you have the word of God as well as the gifts of God, you don’t just have to feel after Him; you can hear Him. You can even see Him at work.

How do you seek God, then? By listening to His word. By seeing Him in the faces of your brothers and sisters. By speaking to Him in prayer. That is how you ought to respond to the reality of God as Creator and Provider.

#### **V. God the Source of Humanity, v. 28**

Paul goes on, though, to speak of God as the source of humanity. He quotes from perhaps one, perhaps two pagan poets who sum up the point he is trying to make.

##### **A. In Him We Live**

In God we live. Paul does not mean that God is the world, that we are “in God” in the same sense that we are “in the world.” He means that it is through God’s power that we are not inanimate, but alive.. We live “by God,” in that God is the efficient cause of our living.

##### **B. In Him We Move**

The same goes for our movement. We are able to think and engage in other forms of motion only by the power of God, who has created and energized us to be like Him.

##### **C. In Him We Have Our Being**

Indeed, in Him we exist. It’s not that without God we would be dead rocks and minerals; the reality is that without God, we would not be at all. Not only would we not be what we are; we simply wouldn’t exist.

##### **D. We Are His Offspring**

Now, to know God as the “ground of being,” as the philosophers say, is something. What a deity! He is the one who created and sustains all things, the one differentiates life from non-life. But more than that, far more than that, is the gift of personality. We are His offspring. Theological liberals were right, in a certain sense, to teach the universal Fatherhood of God. Now, the rest of the Bible is clear that God is only our Father in the full sense through Jesus. He did not “father” Adam the same way He fathered His Son Jesus; and likewise, He is not Father to the whole human race in the same way that He is Father to believers in Christ. But here’s the thing: There is nonetheless a sense in which God is indeed the Father of mankind, the one who created us in His image, after His likeness. We are like God — as like Him as children are like their parents.

That is a stunning claim — but it was made by a Cilician poet 300 years before! Paul knew this poet, who was from his own province, and he quoted him to the Athenians to remind them that their ignorance of God, though severe, was not total.

## **VI. Application II: Do Not Think that Deity Is Like Man-Made Images, v. 29**

Since we are the offspring of God, children of God, we must not think of the divine nature as being like the impersonal stuff of which the world is made, but rather like the personal beings which we are. God is more like me than He is like the sun. He is more like you than He is like a rock or a tree. God is personal, made of Spirit and not of matter. He is nothing like a statue of Zeus.

Nor is He like prosperity, food, affluence, peace, and other non-personal goods. He is like you — a personal being, actually a tri-personal being. He is not something we imagined any more than we could imagine ourselves or each other.

## **VII. Application III: Repent, vv. 30-31**

And therefore, repent! Paul says that since God is personal, Creator, and Provider, you need to turn from sin. God used to overlook the times of ignorance. He did not immediately call sin to account in the era prior to the proclamation of the gospel. But now, judgment day is set and indeed, judgment has already begun.

### **A. Judgment Day Is Set**

God has the day marked on His calendar — the last day. There are no more calendar pages after it. If the day is set, that means that He will certainly call to account.

### **B. God Will Judge the World**

And He's not just going to judge a few exceptionally wicked individuals — the Hitlers and Putins of this world. He is going to judge the entire world.

### **C. God Will Judge by a Man**

Notice, too, that God will judge through the same one who created the world — Jesus Christ, His Son. He will judge by a man. He is not going to sit up there and say "I'm God and I can do this; why can't you get with the program?" It will be a man of like passions with you sitting there on the bench, holding you to account for your failures as a human being. You won't be judged because you're not divine; you'll be judged for not doing what you were perfectly able to do.

### **D. God Has Raised this Man from the Dead**

How do we know that? Because Christ is risen from the dead! He was dead and is alive. That means that He is morally perfect. He has not sinned and cannot sin; He is more powerful than death.

Praise Him, brothers and sisters. Prepare for judgment by taking refuge in the one who created you, provides for you, keeps you in being, and loves you. Live for Him. Amen.