

“God Who Made the World”

Acts 17:16-34

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Introduction:

Sophisticated idolaters!

- I am sure you have run into them in our city!
 - We have many universities in our city and sophisticated idolaters are often found in academic chairs—many of them making an idol of man, still chewing on the scraps of the so called enlightenment.
 - And even in some of the most sophisticated churches in our city there is a long history of idolatry that was introduced centuries ago to accommodate pagans.
- And some of these idolaters are highly educated and proud of their intellectual attainments.

Sometimes it is easy to be intimidated by such persons.

- They have a way of sneering and making you feel like an idiot if they find out that you actually believe God’s word.
- So what should you do when you encounter them?

In Acts 17:16-34, Luke gives us the marvellous account of what Paul did when he encountered such persons.

- Every once in a while, Luke gives us a full example (in Acts) of the kind of message that was preached to a certain kind of people...
 - There was a full of account of Peter’s message at Pentecost to the Jews.
 - At Pisidian Antioch, Luke gave us a full example of the typical message that Paul preached in the synagogues.
 - At Lystra, we had an example of his message to ignorant pagans...
 - And here in our text today, we have a full example of Paul’s message to sophisticated idolaters—the intellectuals at Athens.
- Athens was considered to be the cultural centre of the ancient world.
 - It was a city famous for its art, its religion, its learning, its philosophers and its political scientists.
 - It was the home of Plato, Aristotle, Pericles, and Solon.
 - It had the acropolis, which literally means “the high city” where the temple of Athena was found in the Parthenon.
 - And though the city had certainly declined from its former days of glory, it was still living off of its reputation...
 - The beauty of its halls, temples, and art was still a sight to behold!
 - And there were many intellectuals who lived there.
- What should we do when we encounter such persons?
 - Today I want to show you how Paul responded to them.

I. First, he carefully observed the city's glory until he became deeply troubled by its idolatry.

- Verse 16 says:
 - **Acts 17:16: Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw [carefully observed] that the city was given over to idols.**

A. You must learn to look beyond the surface of all the beautiful architecture and the sophistication and see what is really there.

1. Paul looked and he saw a city that was given over—literally buried—in idols.
 - Apparently the whole city was a like a forest of idols.
 - One visitor said it was easier to find a god than a man in Athens!
 - There were many very impressive sights at Athens, but Paul was provoked within!
 - The word *provoked* is a very strong word here...
 - As R.C. Sproul says,
 - “He [Paul] was not just a little bit peeved or annoyed: his heart was in turmoil. His insides were in a paroxysm of distress as he looked across this city noted for its brilliance, but drowning in evil.”
2. My brothers and sisters, don't allow yourself to be mesmerised by the glory of the city of man!
 - There is art, there are brilliant movies, there is beautiful music, there is technology and there are those who have great intellectual attainment...
 - But there is idolatry!
 - Be sure that you see beyond the surface when you observe these things!
 - Be sure that you see the rebellion and hatred of God in these things...
 - Do not miss the corruption in the songs and the message in the movies that mocks our Lord.
 - Don't ignore the fact that much of the philosophy in the philosophy department and the science in the science department is driven by rebellion instead of truth!
 - Look until you become incensed!
 - Consider that it is affront to the God who made us in His image and who redeemed us by the cross!
 - Look until you are burning within as Paul was!
 - I fear that too often we are strangers to such passion.
 - We are indifferent observers who are easily swept in by the sophistication and glory when we ought to be deeply troubled instead.

B. And when you are incensed, take out your sword as Paul did!

1. It was not the sword of men!

- He did not begin to smash idols and knock them off their stands...
 - He did not begin shouting in the streets or trying to stir up a riot...
 - Like Jesus, he did not raise his voice or begin to demonstrate...
2. He rather took up the sword of the Lord which is the word of God.
- Look at verse 17
 - **Acts 17:17: Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshipers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there.**
 - Not only did he go to the synagogue, but he also began to speak to those who were about their business in the agora—the marketplace...
 - He was moved within so this is what he did daily!
 - He did not rail at them, but he reasoned with them—trying to help them to understand the truth about God.
 - His anger did not make him harsh and unkind—it moved him to constructive action!
 - He could not keep silent—he had to act!
 - He wanted to convince them.
 - Isaiah 42 shows us the amazing nature of Christ’s ministry—that without shouts and wars, He would turn the nations to justice...
 - Not by spear and sword, but by the power of the gospel.

TRANS> Paul cared when he saw God dishonoured and that is why he took out his gospel sword and started using it!

3. We ought to love the Lord enough to care when He is dishonoured.
- a. This is something I always admire about David!
 - He went to action against Goliath because he saw that Goliath was defying the Lord.
 - David was a man after God’s own heart—therefore, he could not bear to see the Lord mocked by this oversized galoot.
 - b. Don’t allow discouragement or weariness to set in.
 - Don’t throw up your hands in frustration.
 - Don’t rail on the idolaters...
 - But pour yourself into doing what you can to reason with them from God’s word that you might turn them into those who honour the true God!
- C. And do not be disheartened by the way people respond to you when you begin to reason with them—especially the sophisticated professor types!
1. You see here how the intellectual arrogance of the Athenians causes them to sneer at Paul...

- a. They call him a babbler—*spermologos*—literally a seed picker...
 - 1) Originally, this word was used to refer to birds pecking at seeds on the ground—you know how they do—seed pickers;
 - Then it was used to refer to vagrants who went around collecting scraps of meat in the market...dumpster divers...
 - And then it was used to refer to a wannabe philosopher who gathered bits of knowledge that he did not understand and tried to pass himself off as a man of great learning.
 - 2) These critics are proud professor types—
 - In this case, Epicureans and Stoics...who both followed philosophies that went back several hundred years.
 - Interestingly, they differed quite a bit from each other...
 - The Epicureans were more or less like our modern day agnostic secularist materialists.
 - They denied life after death and thought it was silly to fear the gods—
 - They said that people should go on and enjoy life because there probably is no God!
 - I don't know if they put signs on the public chariots—but there is a good chance.
 - The Stoics were the dutiful moralists who believed everything was unified in the divine essence.
 - They pursued virtue and tried to mortify their senses—
 - They endeavoured to accept fate and live above pain and pleasure.

TRANS> These intellectuals dubbed Paul as a seed picker—a peddler of other people's philosophical scraps...

- b. Luke says that they also accuse Paul of being **a proclaimer of foreign gods**.
 - 1) This was potentially a serious charge—
 - Socrates had been accused of this very thing in Athens 450 years before and it had led to his execution.
 - In talking about Jesus and resurrection they seemed to think that Paul was introducing two new gods to Athens...
 - A male called *Jesus* and a female called *Resurrection*...
 - 2) But Luke does not indicate that this was a formal charge.
 - They indeed take Paul before the Areopagus which was the world-famous supreme council of Athens,
 - for we are told that Paul stood in the midst of them...
 - But it does not seem to be a formal trial as no verdict is rendered...
 - It just appears to be inquiry.

- c. Luke actually tells us what the main motive of these men was in taking Paul before the Areopagus...
 - It was for sport!
 - Look at verse 19-21:
 - **Acts 17:19-21: And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new doctrine is of which you speak? For you are bringing some strange things to our ears. Therefore we want to know what these things mean.” For all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing.**
 - So you see who the real seed-pickers were!
 - Not Paul, but these philosophers at Athens!
 - They were not interested in truth—they were just curious about hearing new things.
 - Some Christians can be like that too...
 - They are like Talkative in *Pilgrim’s Progress*...
 - They are not interested in learning about the Lord so they can serve Him...
 - They just enjoy talking about theology and religion.

2. But Paul did not really care what their motives were...

- He did not care if they wanted to sneer at him or just satisfy idle curiosity.
 - For him it was a marvellous opportunity to stand before the Areopagus and proclaim Jesus as Lord!
 - As we saw with him at the synagogues...
 - he kept going to one after another despite the ill treatment he usually received because he knew that there might be some there who would believe.
- Don’t let people’s laughter or ridicule stop you in your witness...
 - Just look at it as an opportunity—
 - At least they are willing to engage you—
 - Rejoice and make the most of it!
 - Let them laugh at you in their intellectual arrogance—you just keep on speaking the plain truth.

TRANS> And of course, that is exactly what Paul does.

- And this brings us to the second thing I want you to see about the way Paul handled these intellectuals at Athens.

II. Secondly, he confidently showed them how ignorant they were.

- A. Paul picks up on their charge that he was proclaiming strange gods to them...and bringing things that were strange to their ears...

1. Indeed, Paul took this as a grave omission on their part!
 - How could they be ignorant of the God that made them?
 - Here he had been proclaiming to them the God that made all things—
 - the true and living God that everybody ought to know—
 - And they don't have a clue about this God!
 - After an appropriate address according to the custom of the day, "Men of Athens,"
 - he immediately brings up the problem of this glaring ignorance of theirs.
 - Paul comments that they are very religious—
 - Yet in all this religion, all this devotion to worship, he finds that they have completely missed the one true God.
 - He has examined all their gods, and the closest he can find is an altar to the unknown God.
 - At least they realise that there is at least one god that they do not know—but how amazing it is that it is the God that they ought to know above all the others.
 - Paul says, okay then, you have admitted that you are clueless about the God I have been proclaiming...
 - You have admitted that there is at least one God that you do not know.
 - I will proclaim Him to you now...
 - Do you see that in verse 22 & 23:
 - **Acts 17:22-23: Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you."**
 - For all their learning, their ignorance was really quite remarkable!
2. And so is the ignorance of today's intellectuals.
 - Don't get me wrong—they are much more intelligent than I am—I can't hold a candle to them...
 - But it is remarkable that in all their learning, they don't even know the God who made them.
 - They have missed what is the most obvious, most basic thing in all the world.
 - Don't let them confuse you and cause you to think that the origin of the world or the knowledge of God as creator is complicated and deep.
 - It simply is not!
 - It is nothing but their rebellion that makes them want to complicate everything and spin all sorts of absurd theories!

- B. When you encounter such people, just give them the ABC's of religion as Paul does.
- Show them how terribly confused they are by presenting to them the plain truth about their Maker—
 - Truth which they should have known all along.
 - Truth even child can understand.
 - It is sort of an *Emperor's New Clothes* moment...
1. You see that Paul begins with two simple assertions about God...
- First, in verse 24, he simply calls Him: **“God, who made the world and everything in it.”**
 - There is nothing that needs to be proven here.
 - This is just the plain and simple truth that we all know—that God made the world and everything in it!
 - Paul knew that the Stoics and the Epicureans had various theories of origins—but he simply ignored that and informed them that he was speaking about God who made the world and everything in it.
 - The second assertion is that the God who made everything is Lord of heaven and earth.
 - Again, Paul does not argue this point—he simply states that it is so.
 - The God who made all things is obviously Lord of all things!
 - Of course it is all His—for He is God!
2. And then he makes a few very elementary deductions that are self-evident.
- a. First, that the God who made the world, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with men's hands.
- Of course not!
 - How could God have His dwelling place built by us when He is the One who brought us into being?
 - We can't contain Him in our temples!
 - Solomon declared that in 1 Kings 8 when he dedicated the temple...
 - **1 Kings 8:27: “But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain You. How much less this temple which I have built!**
 - Solomon knew that the temple was simply the place God had appointed in order to reveal His mercy.
 - Through the temple, the Lord showed that His people were reconciled to Him through the blood of the covenant.
 - But the temple certainly could not contain the Creator of heaven and earth!
 - Heaven and earth itself cannot contain Him!
 - He is transcendent! Too great to be contained!

- b. In verse 25 Paul makes a second obvious deduction...
 - That God does not need anything from us—
 - He says:
 - **Acts 17:25: “Nor is He worshiped with men’s hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things.**
 - This was one of the most foolish things that was found in pagan religion—that the gods were thought to be dependent upon sacrifices!
 - That they were actually hungry and needed us to feed them!
 - A god like that is certainly not the God who gives us life and breath!
 - A god like that is no god at all!
 - The Lord did indeed appoint sacrifices in the Old Testament,
 - but not because He needed them for Himself.
 - That was the foolish perversion of idolatrous religion—and if you stop and think about it—it is obviously foolish.

TRANS> Incidentally, the Epicureans would have heartily agreed because in their philosophy, the gods have no dealings with men.

- Perhaps they were thinking—this guy is all right!!
- But now Paul makes a third declaration that completely contradicted their views...

- c. Paul shows that our whole life is in God—
 - Life is neither impersonal fate (as the Stoics taught)
 - nor is it a random accident.
 - If you stop and think about it, it is absurd to hold either of these views.
 - Life begins in God and has its meaning in Him.
 - Look at Acts 17:26-28:
 - **Acts 17:26-28: “And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that 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 have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, ‘For we are also His offspring.’**
 - By making us and then placing us where He has in the world in our various nations and times and places,
 - with all the various circumstances of life—we ought to see His hand and find our life in Him.
 - It is, in fact, inexplicable that men can live on the earth with all the things around them—fearfully and wonderfully made—
 - and miss their Creator!

- Paul even quotes a couple of the Athenians' own poets who had some notion of God...
 - the one who said "in Him we live and move and have our being," and the other who said "For we are also His offspring."
 - These poets had a flash of truth in the darkness.
- This would have blown the minds of these Greek philosophers because Paul was asserting things that both Stoics and Epicureans could not bring together...
 - On the one hand, He was declaring God's absolute transcendence, which the Epicureans would agree with...
 - On the other hand, He was declaring that God was intimately involved with His creation—which the Stoics held.
 - But the Stoics could not hold that without mingling Him with the creation as part of it and impersonalising Him...
 - And the Epicureans could not hold to Him as transcendent without detaching Him from involvement in creation.
 - Paul is telling them that God is both high above us and self-sufficient,
 - Yet, at the same time, intimately involved with us in shaping our lives!
 - The God who made us is obviously neither impersonal nor detached—He is very near.

TRANS> From this, Paul makes a fourth deduction.

- d. Paul goes on to explain that because God is so near to us and because we come from Him,
- we should not think that we can represent God with images of gold and silver.
 - We come from Him—He does not come from us!
 - Look at **verse 29**: **"Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising.**
 - Idolatry is always a distortion of God—
 - a movement away from God rather than a movement toward God.
 - a reduction of God that denies the truth about Him rather than that which enlightens us about Him.

TRANS> These basic truths should be obvious to everyone who lives in the world.

- They are not complicated or obscure—they are basic and ought to be known.
- And *that* means that anybody who is ignorant about God needs to repent!
 - That is the third thing that Paul does with these intellectuals...

III. He boldly calls them to repentance on account of their ignorance.

A. You need to show people that their ignorance of God is wrong!

1. Many times, we point out sin to people by pointing to their fornication or their lying or their hatred...
 - And that is just fine—that does expose their sin...
 - But we should also point out the fact that ignorance of the true God who made them is sinful.
 - This is especially important to do with those who take pride in their intellect—
 - They take pride in their learning, and yet, because of their wickedness, they are ignorant of the ABCs about God.
2. Clearly, it is not because they are mentally slow, but because they are in rebellion that they do not see God.
 - There could be no other explanation for such ignorance among intelligent people.
 - The true God is so near, so involved, and yet they had completely missed Him over all these years!
 - They had missed Him because they hate Him.
 - As sinful creatures, they did not want to retain the knowledge of God.
 - Paul makes that clear in Romans 1:21 that
 - **Rom 1:21: even though they knew God they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts and their foolish hearts were darkened.**
 - In Rom 1:28, he adds that:
 - **they did not like to retain God in their knowledge!**
 - That is the raw truth for every person who does not know the true God.
 - You do not know Him because you do not want to know Him.
3. Paul does not say that they hated God in so many words here,
 - but it is implied because he shows that they **ought** to have known God through creation...
 - And that they **ought** never to have represented Him by idols...
 - And that now God is calling for their repentance!
 - Look at Acts 17:30...
 - **Acts 17:30: “Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent...**
 - He basically says, “God did not say anything to you over the years, but left you to go on groping around in your rebellion—
 - Until now!
 - **Now** He is calling all the world to repent.”

- B. Paul warns them not to suppose that God will never them for their ignorance.
- It is sinful and He will judge them for it...
1. Just because He had not judged it yet does not mean that He will never judge it.
 - It is very dangerous to think that.
 - Augustine once said that God does not judge all sin now because if He did, no one would believe that there was a final judgement at the end.
 2. Paul tells the men of Athens that they should repent of their ignorance because God has appointed a day when He will judge the world!
 - Look at verse 30 and 31 together...
 - **Acts 17:30-31: Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness.**
 - If they know what's good for them, they will repent.
 - a. By pointing out to them that God has appointed a specific day, Paul makes this judgement all the more vivid and certain.
 - It has been scheduled in the divine council, and a date has been set.
 - It is not some vague future event, but a focused, planned event.
 - b. And making it even more vivid, Paul adds that God has also appointed a certain man to execute this judgement...
 - **Acts 17:31: He [God] will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead."**
 - This is where Paul was headed all along—to the great hinge of world history!
 - The man that He has ordained, is of course, Jesus Christ the Son of God who came down from heaven.
 - In Him, God had entered history,
 - And by raising Him from the dead, He has given proof that He, in this man, is the beginning of the New Creation of God.
 3. My brothers and sisters, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the great turning point in the history of the world!
 - This is what brought about the change after all those years of leaving the Gentiles to go in their own way,
 - Now that Jesus is risen, God is calling all men everywhere to repent!
 - The Father was waiting until His Son had come and done His work on the cross before He called the world to repentance.
 - Until then, He had only one nation as His witness to receive all the prophecies concerning Him...

- But now that Jesus has come,
 - The Father honours Him by giving Him the nations as His inheritance.
- Jesus has been raised up from the grave as the first fruits of the new creation!
 - He has been declared to be Lord and Christ!
 - All judgement has been put in His hands!
 - And so the time has come for all men everywhere to repent and enter into His kingdom.
- You see that Paul does not get to the cross itself here—at least Luke does not record it if he did...
 - I am inclined to agree with those who say that Paul was interrupted at this point by those who reacted to his mention of the resurrection.
 - The mention of the resurrection would have offended them all!
 - Greek philosophy universally rejects resurrection.
 - Some of them, like the Stoics, believed in absorption into the divine essence as the consummation to be desired...
 - Others, like the Epicureans, did not believe in life after death...
 - So there was a strong reaction which you can see in verse 32:
 - **Acts 17:32: And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, while others said, “We will hear you again on this matter.”**
 - These seemed to have broken up the meeting and divided the crowd.

C. You see that there are three different responses... according to verse 32-34

- You can expect the same whenever the truth is set forth.
 - You need to think about how you yourself respond...
- 1. First, there were those who wanted to avoid the truth.
 - Even though Paul’s words about the true God had been like rays of sunshine to illumine these intellectuals who had been in the dark...
 - They did not want anything to do with the light.
 - They wanted to suppress the truth because they did not want to come to the true God.
 - As soon as Paul mentioned the resurrection, they latched on that as a way to reject all that he had said.
 - That is what men do to avoid the truth—
 - They try to find something that they can latch on to as a reason for rejecting the truth...
 - Even if it is not adequate, as long as there is something!
 - And if anything better comes along, they will latch on to that.

- For the Greeks, the popular excuse was that there could be no resurrection. All their philosophers—albeit for different reasons—agreed that there was no resurrection!
 - For people today, it is the theory of evolution—every educated person *knows* that evolution is true—
 - even though it is one of the most absurd theories that has ever been concocted.
 - It has gained almost universal approval because it provides a way to avoid facing God.
 - Some have even admitted that even though evolution is statistically impossible, it is the best thing they have so they are going to hang on to it until something better comes along...
 - What do you suppose that will be—ET?
 - Truly, as we saw last week, men love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil.
 - They do not want to know the truth.
 - Do you?
2. Second, there were those who were willing to hear more.
- This was a good thing!
 - Paul had not yet gotten to the cross to explain how men could be pardoned in Christ...
 - He had brought them to the point where they might have been saying, as Peter's hearers at Pentecost,
 - What must we do to be saved?
 - The next sermon would tell them!
 - Perhaps there were some among these ones that were truly ready for the rest of the good news...
 - But then again, it may have been those who were filled with the curiosity that caused them to bring Paul to the Areopagus in the first place.
 - There are people who even profess faith that are just curious—or come for some other reason—but who never come to Christ for salvation.
 - Be sure that there is not an evil heart of unbelief like that in any of you!
 - It is very sad to have the gospel so near and not embrace it!

TRANS> The third response is the best of all.

3. In verse 33-34, we are told that some joined Paul and believed.
- **Acts 17:33-34: So Paul departed from among them. However, some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.**

- Isn't that marvellous!
 - This is what Paul wanted in this city that so dishonoured the Lord!
 - Now there would be those who worshipped the true God who had been unknown in this place!
 - And think what it meant for these new believers themselves!
 - They were brought out of the darkness and into the marvellous light of God.
 - Now instead of all the muddled confusion of Greek philosophy, the truth had set them free.
 - Now they could serve the living God!
- And look, Luke mentions that one of the ones who believed was an Areopagite named Dionysius —
 - He was one of the highly esteemed intellectuals who sat on the supreme council of the Areopagus!
 - Now he was a disciple of Jesus Christ!
 - And there was a woman named Damaris of whom we know nothing more—and others with them!
- You see that they did not remain incognito, but came forth visibly to join themselves to Paul.
 - They took their stand as disciples of Jesus Christ.
 - That is what everyone who trusts in Him must do...
 - Raise your flag and let people know that you belong to Him!
 - He says that if you will not confess Him, He will not confess you.
 - You can be sure that there was a price to pay.
 - The same mocking that had been directed at Paul would also be directed at these new disciples.
 - But it makes little difference for those whose hearts are set free from bondage and darkness by Jesus Christ!
 - Having His acceptance is far better than having the acceptance of man.

Conclusion:

So there you have it—Paul among the sophisticated idolatrous intellectuals!

- Do not be deceived by their arrogant confidence in their learning.
 - If they are without Christ, they are just as much in the dark as anybody else.
 - They sneer and mock and ridicule your faith,
 - but don't let that intimidate you.
 - Just give them the ABCs and rest confidently in your Saviour.
 - He counts them as fools because they are.
 - What could be more foolish than to avoid Christ?
 - Give thanks that He has opened your eyes to the truth and do not be ashamed.
 - Say to the Lord, **“You, through Your commandments, make me wiser than my enemies, for they are ever with me.”**