

One Gospel, Many Contexts - Acts 17:16-34

Notes, Family Worship, Bible Reading

Notes from the Sermon

There are few cities in history with the allure and impact of Athens, and few locations with the commemorated impact as Mars Hill. This was the place of the philosophers, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle. Athens is where Alexander the Great launched his crusade that led to the conquest of the western and middle-eastern world and began the spread of Hellenism, advancing Greek culture, customs, religion, language, and philosophy around the world. By the time Paul had arrived the city had long been under the rule of Rome, yet it maintained its beauty, pride, and influence. Athens remained the intellectual and cultural center of the world, and Mars Hill was the epicenter. We learn from Acts that Paul left Berea after the Thessalonian Jews followed him there, leaving Silas and Timothy behind to care for the new church. But Paul jumped on a ship and sailed to Athens.

Once Paul arrived he sent message to Silas and Tim to come join him, but now he had a few weeks to do his work in Athens. Yet, the first thing Paul noticed shook him deeply. He noticed the depth of the idolatry in the ancient city. One ancient historian tells us it was easier to find a god in Athens than a human, as it is estimated that there were some 30,000 statues to the gods around the city. They were everywhere, and the Athenians worshiped these deities who also shaped their entire story and sense of identity. Paul was deeply grieved at the front and center proof of the complete lostness of the Athenians. Here you have a city that represents ultimate greatness in the ancient world, yet Paul sees them for who they are, people who are lost, pursuing false gods who resemble themselves, and on a fast track to eternity apart from the true Creator who will judge the world. So Paul does what he always does. He preaches in the synagogue and then makes his way to the marketplace. The marketplace or Agora in Athens is famous with a long history. It sat near the high city (more on that in a moment), and was way more than a mall (although it actually had a big one). This is the town square, and is where people went for almost everything. It was the seat of government, shopping district, place of learning, and center of worship. There were multiple temples to Greek gods, and it also had two significant outdoor theaters. As Paul preached in this part of the city he began to interact with the philosophers of that day. Epicureans were the materials who had turned to hedonism as an attempt to make sense of life. Eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die, was their motto. The Stoics were pantheists (everything is god and god is everything) who believed meaning and purpose in life came as a person shed themselves of the passions of this world. While they did not reject pleasure, they focused on a disciplined and simple life as the path to meaning. More importantly, these two primary philosophical schools in Athens represent the ancestry of Aristotle and Plato's thought in pop culture. Now members of these two groups are debating and interacting with Paul. While some begin to mock Paul, others hear in his preaching a new god, maybe one they should add to the pantheon. So they take him to the Areopagus, which is both a place and a group. The place, also known as Mars Hill, is a giant rock formation just below the Acropolis (meaning high city) and Parthenon (the famous temple to the goddess Athena sitting on the top of the Acropolis). The group is a tribe of thinkers and leaders who form the philosophical court of Athens, getting their name because their place of meeting was on the Areopagus. A few hundred years before our story it was this group who condemned Socrates. So Paul is given the opportunity to preach in front of the most influential group of thinkers in the world at one of the most recognizable places on planet earth. History tells us Paul would have had about 3 hours to make his case, so of course, Acts 17 is giving a synopsis of the sermon. Yet, what we do have is packed with glory and meaning. Paul contextualizes the Gospel in an amazing way. Contextualization is the effort to preach the one true and

timeless Gospel in a given context and culture with a view to make the Gospel understandable and relatable to the people in that context. Time does not permit me to give a commentary on the sermon here (you will have to hear the sermon for that), but notice that Paul quotes their poets and never references the Bible. He tells them that their spiritual quest is good, but their idolatry is useless. Their need is the One True God who “made the world and everything in it.” The sermon is a masterful reshaping of the Athenian story calling the people to repent and replace their idolatry with the worship of Jesus through repentance.

Paul’s work of Gospel contextualization reminds us of a couple things. First, the good news of Jesus really is for everyone. Second, we must work diligently to hold to the deep truths of the Gospel with conviction while at the same time strive to communicate the Gospel to our world in ways that relate, connect, and communicate in the heart language of lost people.

Bible Reading for the Week

Daily Bible Readings

Sun	Mon	Tues	Weds	Thurs	Fri	Sat
Leviticus 3	Leviticus 4	Leviticus 5	Leviticus 6	Leviticus 7	Leviticus 8	Leviticus 9

Reading from this past week: Acts 17:16-34

Reading in preparation for this coming Sunday: Acts 18:1-16

Family Worship

Song - *His Mercy is More*

<https://youtu.be/l1GiZL60c80>

Gospel Project

Unit: The People Disobey

Story: We are to worship God alone

Big Picture Question: What is idolatry?

Answer: Idolatry is a sin of the heart in which we love and value something else above God.

Scripture: Isaiah 44

New City Catechism

Question #40: What should we pray?

Answer: The whole Word of God directs us in what we should pray.

Verse: Ephesians 3:14-21

Scripture

Acts 17:16-34

- What gets Paul’s attention when he first enters Athens? Where do you see idolatry in our world? When was the last time you were grieved about the idols in our culture?
- What in this sermon gets your attention? What do you most like about how Paul communicated the Gospel in Athens?
- What were the three responses by people who heard Paul? What does it look like in our world for people to make each of these responses to Jesus?

Prayer

*Pray for our service at the EHS Homecoming football game.

*Pray that we would effectively contextualize the Gospel for our culture so that people in our community would see the beauty of Jesus.