

I. Introduction

- A. This message is part 10 in a series. It is the Summer Stories series. Some famous and some not so famous Bible stories. Each weekend, we open our hearts to God's message in his written Word.
- B. Today, I invite you to think with me on the story of
 - 1. *Scoffers, Hesitators, and Believers.*
- C. You will see where this title comes from as we go.
- D. Every page of Scripture is relevant for today. But this is one of those stories that could pretty much happen this afternoon.
- E. It is the story of one believer in Jesus standing in a crowd of skeptics and speaking of Christ crucified and risen again.
- F. And of how doing that doesn't necessarily make you popular.
- G. Let's go.

II. "Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols." (Acts 17:16, NKJV)

- A. The time is a few years after Jesus' life on earth. Jesus died, rose again, and ascended into heaven.
- B. The focus is this man named Paul. A few weeks back, we actually looked at his conversion — how mighty Saul became humble Paul.
- C. The place is Athens. Athens was one of the greatest cities of its day.
 - 1. [[Let me just broaden the frame here. In the beginning of this book of Acts, Jesus gives marching orders to his believers. He says,
 - a) *"But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."* (Acts 1:8)
 - 2. [[This turns out to be an outline of the whole book.
 - a) The first two chapters talk about how the early Christians received the power of the Holy Spirit.
 - b) Then in next section (ch 3-7), Christ is preached in Jerusalem.
 - c) In the next section (ch 8-12), Christ is preached in Judea and Samaria.
 - d) And in the last section, (ch 13-28), Christ is preached to the ends of the earth.
 - (1) One of those great preachers is Paul, who is now in glorious Athens.
- D. In many ways, Athens was the ground zero of culture and thinking for the world. The Romans borrowed from the Greeks, because art and architecture had reached a high point in Athens.
- E. Philosophy and rhetoric also reached a high point in Athens, which we are going to see.
- F. And so also did the worship of idols. Athens was known for its idols. Thousands of them. Idols lined the streets. They were in every store, in every home, on every corner. You could not get away from idols.
- G. When Paul saw all these idols, his spirit was provoked within him.
- H. Let's just call this a fire in his belly that stirred him to act.
- I. There's a gigantic difference between having a fire in your belly that stirs you to take action, and airing your gripes on social media.
 - 1. One comes from compassion, the other comes from anger.
 - 2. One leads to action, the other leads to shouting matches.
 - 3. One works by logic and love, the other works by intimidation and fear.
 - 4. One seeks to change the heart, the other seeks to coerce conformity.
 - a) There is a gigantic difference between a fire in your belly, and a complaint on your lips or on your fingertips all the time.
 - (1) *Lesson 1: The more deeply you encounter the grace of God, the more passionately you want everyone to find the treasure you found when you found Christ.*
- J. I am amazed at this Grace I have found. It is the most priceless, most precious thing in the world. The grace of Christ is the best thing in my life, and I want you to find it too. When that script runs through all our hearts, our city can never be the same.
- K. Paul had a fire in his belly. No doubt he saw people lay their sacrifices at the feet of idols. Dead idols. Men, women, sometimes whole families. They would lay their last bit of food at the foot of an idol, hoping for a favor in return.
- L. Paul ached for them. They were in bondage. They had fallen into a snare. They needed to be set free from row after row the demonic lies shaped like idols.
- M. He remembered when he was the same way. When he scoffed at Christ, and when he offered his own sacrifices over and over again. He remembered what it felt like to have no hope.
- N. And now he sees these intelligent, rational, artistic people with beautiful souls trapped in the same web of lies he once believed. He feels compassion for them.
- O. Across the world the people of God have all the machinery and all the facilities and all the ideas we need. What we need more than anything is a great fire of love for lost people in the hearts of saved people to set the machinery in motion.
- P. Paul loved lost people.

III. 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. (Acts 17:17)

- A. The method of his action was the normal way of talking about these things among the Greeks. He reasoned with them, the Bible says.
- B. This translates the Greek word, *dialogomai*, which gives us the word dialogue. *Dialegomai* was a form of instruction among ancient cultures. Jews used it. Gentiles used it. Philosophers used it.

- C. *Dioalegoma* is basically Q and A.
- D. There were two leading schools of thought among the Greeks. One was the Epicureans. The other was the Stoics.
- E. Both philosophies dealt with the same questions: What does it mean to be human? What is our duty to ourselves, to one another, and to the gods? What is our destiny after we die? How do we relate to the universe?
- F. Those were their questions, and they are the same questions today. And the same questions as always.
 - 1. [[This is because human nature doesn't change, the world in which we live doesn't change, and God doesn't change. So given that equation, the questions really don't change either. We're still asking them today, and the Bible is still giving the exact same answers.
- G. There has never been a more logical, rational, emotionally healthy, life affirming, and radically liberating message as biblical Christianity, and it's time we learned to say so.
- H. Epicureanism
 - 1. Epicurus was famous philosopher about 300 years before Christ. He bought a beautiful garden in Athens, and taught his disciples there. The school continued to Paul's day.
 - 2. For Epicurus the main thing was enjoying life. Pleasure — Greek word *hedoné* — was the main thing. These were the original hedonists.
 - 3. But for them, pleasure was not a beer commercial, sensual sort of pleasure. Epicureans taught an elevated and lofty sense of pleasure that came from modestly, tranquillity, and avoiding things that caused stress. The gods, they said, were secondary, because they really didn't care much about us at all.
 - 4. One of their mottos had become, "Let us eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die."
 - 5. Later, Epicureanism evolved into a more sensual pursuit of pleasure.
 - 6. The polar opposite of the Epicureans would be the Stoics.
- I. Stoicism
 - 1. The founder of Stoicism was named Zeno. Whereas Epicurus ran his school in a garden, Zeno ran his school on the porch of a home, called a "*stoa*."
 - 2. Did you know Stoicism is making a comeback? Everybody from Tim Ferriss to Brett MacKay are talking about the Stoic writers.
 - 3. What's the appeal?
 - 4. Stoicism emphasizes virtue above all else, and a toughness of spirit no matter how you feel.
 - 5. Without a biblical worldview, however you would have a hard time saying what that virtue is. That's because there was no objective standard of right and wrong. And if there is no objective standard of right and wrong, there can be no objective definition of virtue.
 - 6. But it gets worse for the Stoics. Even if you could define virtue, how could you ever live up to it? There is no power to lead a human spirit on the right path, even if you could define it.
 - 7. Grit your teeth, grin and bear it, and try hard to be a good person.
 - 8. Paul is now facing some of the great Stoic philosophers of his day.
- J. In our day, our debate is not so much with Stoicism and Epicureanism.
- K. Today, I would say our debate is with another pair of opposites: Modernism and Postmodernism.
 - 1. *Modernism*: everything is fixed and certain, and follows the laws of science and physics.
 - 2. *Postmodernism*: nothing is fixed and certain, because it's all social construct and relative, so there is no law to follow.
- L. But I'm telling you that if the gospel of Jesus Christ is a treasure to you, you can talk to anybody about Christ... you can bring forth treasures from your own life and God will use you to help people find him. Educated in schools or educated on the streets. It makes no difference.
 - 1. I've worked on cars and have had spiritual conversations with mechanics.
 - 2. I've collected old coins, and had a spiritual conversation with an 80 year old dry wall contractor who was also an avid coin collector.
 - 3. When I was first interviewed to come to this church, the interviewer said, "You know Bill, they have a lot of professors and Bible professors over them. Can you handle that?" When the interviewer said that, I said, "They're just a bunch of highly educated sinners. I can talk to them."
- M. If you have Jesus Christ, there's nobody you can't speak to.
 - 1. So live your life. And then study like crazy. God will use it all.
 - 2. *Lesson 2: The gospel of the grace of God has power in every culture and to every person across the great sweep of history.*
 - 3. Jesus told them to bring the gospel to the ends of the earth, because he knew the ends of the earth would respond.
 - 4. The gospel of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen again,
 - a) Is exactly what Stoics need.
 - b) It is what Epicureans need.
 - c) It is what Modernists need.
 - d) It is what Post-modernists need.
 - e) It is what atheists need.
 - f) It is what soccer moms need.
 - g) It is what liberals need and conservatives need.
 - h) Whatever people think they are groping for, they are groping for the gospel of grace.

(1) We have it and they need it. So let's do something about it.

5. The most perplexing problem is the gospel is what they need, but it's not what they think they need.

IV. The Twenty Four Hour People

- A. I want to paraphrase a really powerful illustration I found in a 140 year old book.
- B. Imagine a race of super intelligent beings. They are born and become fully mature in five minutes. Their whole lifespan will last 24 hours.
- C. Suppose they begin their lives at the beginning of night. The first half of their existence is night. At first there was darkness. Then the stars appeared. After the stars, the full moon appeared.
- D. The world, they thought, was glorious. Their light was complete. They could not conceive of anything brighter than the moon. To them, it was amazing, and beautiful, and true glory.
- E. They have, by now, developed their faculties of thought. They have fixed the boundaries of their imaginations.
- F. But then, the day dawned in the east, and the sun came up in its strength.
- G. These were people used to the darkness. Their senses are attuned to darkness. They are most happy, most content in the darkness.
- H. So what do they do? They busy themselves weaving thick curtains to keep the sunlight out.
 - 1. These are the Athenian philosophers. They had seen the light of the sun in the reflection on the moon, and were content with that. But when the Sun appeared, they shut their eyes against his healing beams.
 - 2. Even so, when Paul begins to speak of a God and a Savior, using their language, and their categories, they want to hear more.
 - 3. So they move the whole discussion from the marketplace to the meeting place, called Mars Hill.

V. *Then certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him. And some said, "What does this babbler want to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods," because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection. 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. (Acts 17:18-21)*

- A. Ares was the Greek name for the God of War. The Latin name was Mars. The Areopagus was the hill of Ares, or Mars Hill. Take your pick.
- B. This was a large sloping rock outcropping, flat on the top. It rose 60 feet above the plateau where the markets were. And all of this was in the shadow of the Acropolis, and of a glorious Temple of Athena.
- C. Back in the day there was a large patio, and an elevated platform. There were special seats for the city leaders and judges. It was a place of politics, and trials, and debate.
- D. The people of Athens take Paul from the marketplace to the meeting place. Think about that. They go from the food court at Costco to the civic auditorium.
- E. They call Paul a babbler — a seed picker, or a scrap collector, because they couldn't put together everything he was saying. Part of the reason they wanted to get out of the bustling marketplace was so he could speak at length and put it all together for them.
- F. They said he proclaimed strange gods — and they used a word which is only used in a bad sense in the Bible — a proclaimer of demons. In classical Greek this could be good or bad... it simply meant a minor god. A god of lesser rank. Which to Christians is always a demon.
- G. They asked him to clarify "this new doctrine" of which he speaks. It was startling to them. And the main reason it was startling to them was the reason Christ died. In their minds, a sacrifice is a pay off to con a god into being nice to you. The idea of morality or sin had nothing to do with it. But Paul preached Christ as a sacrifice to pay for sin, and satisfy divine holiness of the one invisible God, and this fried their circuits.
- H. The last line will make a special kind of sense to people in Redding, CA. The town of Athens was a magnet, the Bible says, for people who came from all over the world — foreigners, it says — to hear a new teaching and a new truth.
- I. And Paul's message was now the new kid on the block.
 - 1. *Lesson 3: People who will not set their lives on the rock-solid truth of Christ will be "always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth" (2 Timothy 3:7).*
- J. And the reason for this is lesson number four, which comes from this verse:
 - 1. *But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them. (2 Corinthians 4:3, 4)*
 - a) *Lesson 4: The most sophisticated philosophies, and the most advanced theories are still under a spell cast by the god of this age (Satan).*

K. But the gospel has the power to break that spell. The gospel, which is simply the story and truth of Jesus Christ who died for our sins and rose for our standing before God, has the power to pierce that veil.

L. And the people of Athens are about to come face to face with that gospel.

VI. *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: (Acts 17:22, 23)*

- A. He doesn't slam them. He doesn't insult them. He doesn't confront them.
- B. Paul eases into his subject.
- C. And he does so by starting where they all agree.
- D. Why could Paul do this? Because even though they believed a mountain of lies, there were still enough boulders of truth that he could start from a place of agreement.

- E. People will always point to the door they have opened to the gospel. It might not be where you think it should be, but so what. Walk through their open door, instead of trying to pry one open yourself.
- F. If their door is Epicurean, or Stoic, or Modern, or Postmodern walk through it. If their door is art, or coin collecting, or aliens, walk through it. I had some young adults come to me a few weeks ago. They surrounded me and asked if I believe in aliens.
- G. I have two ways to go here — basically no or yes.
- H. What do you think I said.
- I. I said, “Of course I believe in aliens.” Then I just paused and watched their eyes get big. Just like your eyes are getting big right now. Don’t email me.
- J. Because then I added, my Bible tells me of angels and demons, and those are most definitely extra-terrestrial.
 - 1. *Lesson 5: In every heart and every culture, God has placed markers of his glory, his gospel, and his grace. Our job is to find those markers and connect them to the gospel of salvation.*
 - a) Epicureans believe in pleasure. So do Christians, but it is a pleasure that has no regrets.
 - b) Stoics believe in virtue. So do Christians. But it is a virtue that is both defined and energized by the power of God.
 - c) Modernists believe in Science. So do Christians. But it is a science that leads to an UnCaused Cause, and a Designer sufficient to account for all that we see.
 - d) Post-Modernists believe in Freedom. So do Christians. But it is a freedom to be something greater than the social constructs that entrap us.
 - e) My uncle believes in conspiracy theories. So do Christians, because the devil is the greatest conspirer of all.
- K. No slamming. No insults. No confrontation. We start where we can agree, and in every heart there is a place where we can agree.
- L. Just like Paul.
- M. For him, the supreme marker was an idol he saw with an unusual name. It was inscribed TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.
- N. Archaeologists say the Athenians had about 30,000 idols. You would think they had enough gods. You would think they knew enough knowledge.
- O. But there was something inside them that said all their thousands of gods could not be enough.
- P. And Paul read through that one idol to see the incompleteness in their worldview, and the fear that it caused. They knew it. They knew the idols weren’t enough.
- Q. So they were afraid. They were afraid enough to make an idol to an unknown God. They were desperate to cover all the bases.
- R. Each and every person will tell you where they are afraid of falling short, and that is the opening for the gospel.
- S. And Paul saw it, and he took it.
- T. Paul says, Let men tell you of this unknown God. “Therefore, the one you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you.”
 - 1. *Lesson 6: You cannot worship a God you don’t know, and you cannot know God apart from the teaching of the Bible and the gospel of Christ.*
- U. If ignorance is the problem, then what is the solution?
- V. The solution is the knowledge of the truth of God’s Word. And Paul was there to bring it.
- W. And our church is here to bring it to our generation, and our culture and our time.

VII. Conclusion

- A. No matter how religious people get, there is still a God-shaped vacuum inside.
- B. No matter how sophisticated philosophies get, no matter how technological sciences get, no matter how artificial intelligence gets, there is still a God shaped vacuum inside.
- C. Their hearts are restless until they find their rest in God, the Father of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
- D. It is a fact. It is a reality. It is an unshakable truth: a person without salvation and without Christ has a gaping wound in their hearts that all the treasures on earth can’t fill.
- E. Do not be fooled.
- F. Do not be jealous.
 - 1. *Lesson 7: Only Jesus can satisfy the soul.*
- G. No Jesus, no deep satisfaction of the soul.
- H. Count on it.
- I. We are here, in this place, for such a time as this, to bring Jesus to every business, and school, and home, and person within the sound of our voice.
- J. It is the pathway of our lives: God saves you. God blesses you. God grows you. And God uses you in the most wonderful ways you can imagine to make known the unknown God and his grace to everyone we see.
- K. And Paul knew it.
- L. The speech he offers is a monument to his genius and God’s grace. But we’ll have to save that for next time.