

## **The Hope of the World, Part 2**

### **Acts 17:16-34**

**If I were to ask you how you feel about our current national crisis, you might ask, “Which one?” Health, race relations, police brutality, economic inequality, revolutionary rhetoric – it feels as though we are sitting on a tinderbox that could explode at any time. From a church and mission perspective, if America falls apart, what will happen to the support of the gospel ministry that goes out all over the world from these shores? News flash – God is not anxious, nor is the spread of the gospel dependent on the health of our nation. God’s mission has never been dependent on the church in America. It has been our privilege to play the role God designed for us, and we have sometimes glorified him in the exercise of our responsibilities, and we have sometimes glorified ourselves, making a mess of serving God, especially in the ways we have treated one another based on race, socio-economic, or any other number of factors.**

**So, how do we find the place where we remain the church and still have a voice to speak to the issues with which the entire nation is struggling? Today’s text gives us some instruction on how to speak truth to an uninterested or hostile audience. Last week I spoke about the background and context for the Apostle Paul’s address to the lofty Areopagus Council on Mars Hill in Athens, Greece, which boasted some of the greatest minds of the Roman Empire. The summary of what was likely a one to two-hour talk/sermon is given in Acts 17, so please turn there in your Bibles. Although the two-week series covers verses 16-34, we will pick up this week in verse 22. Before we think about the content of Paul’s message, would you join me in prayer?**

**Acts 17:22-34:**

**<sup>22</sup> So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. <sup>23</sup> For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. <sup>24</sup> The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, <sup>25</sup> nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. <sup>26</sup> And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, <sup>27</sup> that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, <sup>28</sup> for**

**“‘In him we live and move and have our being’; (Epimenides – 6th Century B.C.)**

**as even some of your own poets have said,**

**“‘For we are indeed his offspring.’ (Aratas – 3rd Century B.C. Stoic from Tarsus)**

**<sup>29</sup> Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. <sup>30</sup> The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, <sup>31</sup> because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”**

**<sup>32</sup> Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, “We will hear you again about this.” <sup>33</sup> So**

**Paul went out from their midst.<sup>34</sup> But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.**

**The Word of God for the people of God. *Thanks be to God.***

**I want to share two lists with you for you to study and contemplate sometime this week. The first list will describe:**

**What Paul said about God, humanity, and life**

**First:**

- 1. There is a God-shaped vacuum in each of us; all humans seek God in their own way**

**Paul's understanding of this truth was confirmed when he saw a statue titled, "To the unknown God." Both the Epicureans and the Stoics were concerned about this life, not the next – or, so they said. It is amazing how important matters of faith become near death to many who, for most of their lives, deny any existence of God. Near the end of life, some are found searching for the God they have denied for many years. And, many times I have witnessed God graciously bringing men and women to himself at the last hour.**

**Blaise Pascal put it this way: "There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of each man which cannot be satisfied by any created thing but only by God the Creator, made know through Jesus Christ." The Apostle Paul said to the Athenians, "The unknown God you seek, him I declare."**

**Stop for just a moment and still the craziness in your head. Ask God to calm your heart and to cause you to rest in him.**

**Second:**

**2. God is both transcendent and immanent**

**These are theological terms that tell us two things about God. He is transcendent, or, he is far above this world – he is not confined to any one place because he made the world. He does not need us – but, he loves us, and thus, he is near to us. We are told that God is immanent, or he is close at hand. He is not a God who set the universe in motion and no longer cares. He is, however, holy, and we err when we think he will overlook sin for eternity. It took the death of his Son to pay for our sins, which shows us how much he cares for his children. Is God far above us, or is he near to us? Yes! Third:**

**3. God created all humans from one person, thus there is no room for arrogance in our hearts**

**Paul makes the truth of God clear – God made “from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place.” Every group of people separates itself into units based on multiple factors. We feel superior to some and inferior to others. A superiority complex often masks a deep insecurity that must constantly affirm itself to feel accepted and acceptable. I suspect that when we stand before God, we will make no comparison with others. Revelation 7 tells us that people from all nations and tribes and languages will praise the Lord in unison, so we will be aware of our differences, but as it will be then, so are we called to live now – seeing each other as children of God in the sense that all humanity was created by God and we all share a common ancestor. Since there are differences and none are better than others, learn to listen well to those who have been foolishly oppressed. Fourth:**

**4. There is some truth in most religions and schools of philosophy**

**So often when you hear academics speaking about events in the Bible, they begin from the assumption that the writers of Scripture borrowed from other ancient tales and creation accounts. Believers understand it the other way around – the legends were based on truth, even if they were written before Moses wrote the Pentateuch. While we recognize that all humans are part of the family of God in a general sense, we also understand that only those who have been called into God’s family through Jesus can truly claim God as their father. Fifth:**

**5. Believers can confidently proclaim God’s sovereign rule over all creation**

**Either God rules over all or he does not. There are times when our individual lives or our corporate identity as a nation seems to spin out of control. Our hearts can easily become anxious. As we learn to trust God, we can confidently and publicly assert his rule over all people and events, even when life is chaotic. We must, of course, be careful not to be tone deaf as we proclaim God’s sovereignty, and we must fight injustice where we find it. Do not be ashamed of God, though, nor of his people. When we sin, or when our brothers and sisters sin by seeking to control and abuse others, we are called to turn back to God, which is the focus of our next point:**

**6. Repentance from sin and faith in Jesus are required for all people everywhere**

**While we are called to repent of our sins against others and to confess our sins to one another, our first repentance must be before the Lord. If you truly repent of your sins before God, you are likely do the right thing by others. If you repent at the pleasure of man, you may miss repentance before God altogether. Repentance is a beautiful gift from God, available to all – and required of all. There**

**is no access to God apart from repenting of your sins and putting your trust in Jesus' death on the cross as payment for your sins. You cannot do enough good works to save yourself. Being right with the culture does not make you right with God, so make sure the order of your repentance is properly ordered. You can rest in the Lord because of the last point in this section:**

- 7. Justice will be perfect on the day of judgment – make sure you are relying on Jesus' righteousness and not your own**

**God requires justice from his people. You are familiar with Micah 6:8: "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Why justice? It reflects the character of God. Those who belong to God should, of all people, reflect God's character and work towards justice for all. Justice can be tricky, though, so make sure that your first response to justice is to fall on Jesus to avoid God's righteous justice toward a sinner like you or me, and also make sure you listen to others' views of justice so that you can understand your own blind spots, leading you to repent and walk with a heart that pursues justice. The more you understand your need for God's mercy and his lovingkindness to you, the more likely you will be to seek justice for others in this life.**

**Those are a few truths that Paul emphasized in his sermon. Now for:**

**Instructions for the contemporary church from Paul's sermon**

**First:**

- 1. A confident, cogent, consistent, compelling worldview (or, social imaginary) is a powerful witness in our secular day**

**When do you suppose Paul prepared the message he would give to the Areopagus? He likely did not have time to prepare before he was brought before the council. But Paul had been preparing the Acts 17 message from the moment he met Jesus. Once, British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli gave a speech off the cuff and a woman complimented him saying, “Prime Minister, that was a marvelous extemporaneous speech,” to which Disraeli replied, “Madam, I have been preparing that extemporaneous speech for 40 years.”**

**The more you know about God, his Word, and his ways, the better prepared you will be to share Christ when you have opportunity. Second:**

- 2. When sharing Jesus with unbelievers, it is helpful to find points of common belief**

**This may be the most important lesson I learned from Ravi Zacharias, and I was blessed to take a week-long class under him in seminary. I am sure he took his instructions from the ways that the Apostle Paul engaged people as he found them to be – spiritually, socially, and intellectually. There is no better example of this than Paul’s impromptu witness before the Areopagus. Be aware of your surrounds, like Paul was, checking out the statues on his way to the council. Learn all you can about history and philosophy and any number of other subjects. Learn to ask good questions, because people love to talk about themselves and what they do, and you never know when God will open a door to share Jesus. Emphasize the points of interest before you move to the exclusivity of the gospel and you may find more open hearts.**

**A third lesson for our day from Paul’s message is:**

- 3. We are made in God’s image, not the other way around**

**All the statues in Athens gave testimony of the Athenians' desire to make God in their image. The gods of the ancient world were simply bigger versions of humans with all their frailties and petty jealousies. It is convenient to fashion a god who is like you, but Paul said God is nothing like us.**

**As you process the issues of our day, do not forget to spend time with the Creator and Redeemer who is just and righteous in all his ways. Spend time in the Word and you will exude the fragrance of Christ, which will be the sweet fragrance of life to some, but to others it will be the fragrance of death, and they may not like you very much. There will be a lot about this life that will not make sense, but when we follow Jesus, we will understand our next point:**

- 4. Racism is absurd, as is prejudice, since we are made equal in God's image and there are limits on individuals and nations**

**Although most of us are aware of the ugly sin of prejudice in our hearts at some level, prejudice and racism are a contradiction to those made in the image of God. It is absurd to think you are better than others simply because of the color of your skin or the level of your intellect or the family to which you were born or the money that God has allowed you to accrue in your lifetime. Jesus pointed out the foolishness of thinking more highly of yourself than you ought to think by saying that in the kingdom of God, the first shall be last and the last shall be first.**

**Many people who are walking away from the Lord these days are saying that they no longer want to live for eternity, but they desire to make a difference in this present life. For those of you who are familiar with the Enneagram – and you are legion – I am a 2. I know this because I answered about five questions and I discovered what I already knew – I desire to make life better for others. If I see a movie that I like and I think you would like it, I will tell you. The**

same with books and restaurants and sermons. But, when you dig deeper, one description of a 2 is this: I want your life to be better – and I want to be the reason. So, it ends up about me, doesn't it?

## **5. Fear God more than man**

**Kevin DeYoung has written an excellent article for The Gospel Coalition this week about why these days are so hard. I posted it last night on Faithlife – probably because I am a 2 on the Enneagram. If you find yourself constantly angry and if you have planted yourself firmly in one camp and one camp only, there is a good chance that you fear man more than you fear God. I would say more about this, but I have no idea what I need to say or not to say to keep from being fired. I am kidding, of course, but, sooner or later – and probably sooner rather than later – if you belong to God, you are going to need to make up your mind to fear God more than man. Persecution is coming for believers, and, indeed, we have been appointed to suffer, but thank God, we have not been appointed to wrath, which is why we must understand the meaning and value of #6:**

## **6. Do not shun or cheapen God's gift of repentance**

**A friend told me this week that we have entered a cycle of constant repentance with no hope of salvation. When movements or counters to movements have creeds and pledges and constant repentance for which there is little to no forgiveness, they are religious, but they are not proclaiming God's message. Paul told this powerful group of men who "did not believe in God" that God calls all to repent because the day of judgment is coming. Repentance is a precious gift from the Lord. Sometimes when I grieve my sin, even as I am confessing and feeling like I should feel guilt and shame at higher levels than I already do, I sense a joy that begins to grow in my heart – because I know that I am forgiven by God. Brothers and**

**sisters, let us forgive one another and love one another deeply, because, 1 Peter 4:8: love covers a multitude of sins. Last:**

### **7. Sharing the gospel *IS* successful evangelism**

**There were not many converts in Athens. No church was established there, although we know that at least one member of the council and one prominent woman trusted Jesus. Were Paul's efforts in Athens a failure? If you think that converts are the measure of success for evangelism, then, yes, perhaps – Paul was a failure. But that is not the way God judges our witness. As Paul said to the Corinthians, one sows, another waters, but God gives the increase. God calls us to faithfulness. He is in the business of calling men and women to himself. We are, even so, privileged to play a role in the process.**

**Brothers and sisters in Christ, I beg you not to judge what I have said today by the culture, but by the Word. I have said enough to make everybody here mad, but I do hope and pray that you trust my heart enough to know that I love you and to hear what I have said. Again, judge what I have said by the Word.**

**This has been a lot of information and a bit scattered. I wanted to say it with far less words – but 14 points. I would encourage you to sit with this text and with the points from the message and see if they align with Scripture and, then, ask God what you need to do. Let's pray.**