

**Acts**  
**Week 8**  
**Athens**

We're continuing our study through the book of Acts this morning. Our specific emphasis throughout this series has been equipping us to be on mission and today we get a case study on a way to share the gospel with others.

Paul is in a city named Athens as he is asked to provide a reason as to why anyone might trust Jesus and become a Christian.

This is another passage that we have taught a few times in the past so I will try to add some extra commentary in there for the Midtown veterans.

**Acts 17:16-34**

16 Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, Paul left his friends Timothy and Silas behind in Berea and they are gonna catch up with him in Athens.

Athens was the intellectual capital of the world. All the top philosophers – Socrates, Plato, Aristotle – came from there. Think Harvard. The sharpest thinkers.

His spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.

There was an ancient saying in Athens: "It's easier to find a god in Athens than a man."

This is gonna be a key point as Paul moves forward so let's just make sure we are on the same page.

When it says that the city is full of idols, it means that they are polytheistic and have created actual objects for all these multiple gods that they worshiped. And apparently these are everywhere.

The biblical category of idolatry is broader though, and includes anything someone places as ultimate in their life, whether there is an image for it or not. So for example, your life can be lived for money. You find your hope and joy and identity in how much money you have, you make it the decisive pursuit of your life and make all your decisions off of it...money for you has become an idol. Functionally, it's a god that you worship. It's an idol. Only real difference between us and them is that they believed there was a god named Plutus who decided how much wealth to give out.

Paul sees all this and it says "his Spirit was provoked." Paul is motivated here by love and concern for these people who are misled and confused and wrong. Everything that he will say and do next flows out of that love and compassion and concern. This is what drives mission in our lives. People are not projects, they are persons. We love people because God loves people. And we believe that Jesus is worthy of being worshiped by the people he loves. And that lives begin to fracture and break down the more that the one true God is pushed out and replaced.

17 So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.

The marketplace (the agora) in ancient cities was a sort of cultural center, not just the place you shopped. We don't really have anything like it today. If you wanted news and updates, there weren't newspapers or televisions or internet so you had to go hear a herald who each day would give the bulletin announcements. It was where business happened, it was an arts district. It was an intellectual center...there were no journals or editorial pages. So new ideas got debated here.

Paul takes the gospel right straight into the cultural center and it says he reasoned. It means he was engaging and interacting and presenting arguments for the resurrection of Jesus. He is presenting a reasoned explanation for why someone might trust Christ.

18 Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him.

There were Stoic philosophers were all about self-control. Their ideal was imperturbability: Unable to be perturbed. Pain doesn't bother you; pleasure doesn't seduce you.

Then there were Epicurean philosophers. They focused on experiencing every kind of pleasure.

Epicureans were basically hedonists.

And some said, "What does this babbling wish to say?" that's an insult: seed picker. it means bird that picks up seeds and spits them back out without digesting them. Babblers were people who rambled on about ideas they picked up from other people without really understanding them. Shallow thinker. A second-class mind. People acting like they are intellectually superior to Christians is not new.

Others said, "He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities"—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. That's the summary of what they are hearing from Paul. Jesus and his resurrection. That's his main point.

19 And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? 20 For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean." 21 Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.

They were intrigued, though, by what Paul was saying in the *agora*, so they invited him to the Areopagus. The Areopagus was the council of Athens. It was the city council. And they had authority over the civil and religious life in Athens.

Historians say that these philosophers were always on the lookout for new gods they could add to their Pantheon. So this is an interview. Does this new faith have the intellectual chops to be added to our Pantheon?

22 So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: speeches at the Areopagus were not short, We're just getting the outline of Paul's talk.

"Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. Or spiritual.

23 For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: 'To the unknown god.'

This was their "just in case" god. Just in case they might have missed a god and he might get angry and he might blow everybody up, they built an altar to the unknown god just in case somebody angry showed up. They could say, "No, no, no. That was you. No, this is you right there. I'm sorry! We didn't know your name. We will get that fixed." That's how nervous they were.

Paul steps in to that cultural norm, that cultural grid, and he says, "I perceive that you are very religious.

In fact, I saw this altar to the unknown god. It happens that I know him! I'd love to tell you about him."

What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.

He starts with their question. This is different from how Paul operates elsewhere. Earlier Acts 17:2, when Paul was in Thessalonica, Paul went into the Jewish synagogue... and "reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead." When he speaks to Jewish men and women who accept the authority of the old testament, he argues from the OT to point them to Jesus. Here in Athens, they don't accept the authority of the Old Testament, so he starts with their questions.

**My favorite example of this is when we were planting Two Notch.** There was a group doing outreach at Benedict and they quickly realized that people had a pretty high view of the bible but a low understanding of it. So we started a bible study at Benedict, just walking straight through scripture and studying and

explaining it. Guys walked around campus yelling out “we’ve got pizza and Jesus, they’re both free!” At first Ant said he would try to connect with people by telling a story about himself or something and they’d get impatient. “What are you doing man? You said you were gonna teach us the Bible. You’re holding the word of God but are just talking about yourself! Let’s get on with it.”

When Paul engages people who are Jewish, he starts with the OT and explains who Jesus is and what he’s done from there. But here, in Athens, they don’t care about OT scripture. So he doesn’t do that. He starts with their questions and where they are coming from.

24 The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, 25 nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. He points out logical problems with their approach to God. He asks them, “Does it make sense that the God who created everything could be contained in a temple or would need you to put food out for him?”

In order to get a new religion started (at least as far as the Areopagus was concerned) you needed land, a temple, and an annual feast. But Paul claims that the whole earth belongs to God, he doesn’t live in a temple. Also, we don’t need a feast, because our God is not hungry. Actually the way that Psalm 50:12 says it is “If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine.”

26 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, 27 that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him.

Greek and Roman gods were always a means to some other thing.

Plutus: god of prosperity, money. If you wanted that, you went to his temple and made offerings.

Athena: the goddess of wisdom; politics.

Aphrodite: goddess of sexuality, beauty, fertility.

Nike: the goddess of victory, worshipped by soldiers and athletes and basketball players, who made you run faster, jump higher, and soar above the competition.

Bauctus: god of partying and alcohol.

All these gods were a means to something: prosperity; power; whatever was important to you. The real God is so glorious and transcendent, Paul says, that he is his own reward, and not to be sought as a means for anything else...

Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, (even though he is so glorious and transcendent)

28 for “‘In him we live and move and have our being’; See the quote marks? This is a quote, but not from Scripture, from a song written about Zeus in 600 b.c.

as even some of your own poets have said, “‘For we are indeed his offspring.’”

That was from a poem written by a Stoic poet. Paul is well-versed enough in their culture that he can quote some of their own prophets and literature.

29 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.

If God is the Creator, you’re foolish to think you can reduce him to something you can hold in your hands. You think you need to build a temple for God but God built the earth for you. Who provides for whom?

30 The times of ignorance God overlooked, which just means God stayed uninvolved, leaving you to your error but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 31 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.”

Jesus has come; he is God descended from heaven; and God has given us proof that he is the true God by raising him from the dead. Assurance (vs. 31) means “proof.”

32 Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, “We will hear you again about this.” 33 So Paul went out from their midst. 34 But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them. He gets 3 different responses. Some make fun of him, others want to hear more, some believe. It’s worth noticing this because these are possible reactions we will get from others as we go through life as Christians. Some people will make fun of us. Some people will be interested and want to hear more about our faith. And some people will become Christians and trust Jesus. We should expect all 3 of those reactions from time to time.

**In college**, talking to an older man about a friend that just wasn’t interested in Jesus. Nothing I did or said or prayed changed anything in him that I could see. “What am I doing wrong?” Why do you assume you’re doing something wrong? “Because nothing is happening.” Did people ever turn away from Jesus after he preached? “yeah”. Did Jesus do it wrong? “Oh I hear it now.”

--So that’s the story of Paul in Athens. This is one of the most studied and discussed passages in scripture on the topic of mission and engagement.

What we are seeing here is Paul contextualize the gospel for the City of Athens. He meets people where they are and using their own quotes and ways of thinking, he presents the good news of Jesus.

What should we take and apply? How can we learn from Paul on how to engage people on the subject of faith and effectively share the good news of Jesus with them.

### **1) Observe the idols**

16 his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.

23 For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship,

What are our idols? the objects of our worship? Everyone is pouring out their lives for someone or something. The opposite of Christianity is not atheism but idolatry.

### **I think if someone from Athens, 2000 years ago came here, in some ways they would feel right at home.**

-They would see the obsession we have with buying things, accumulating new and better. They would see that storage units are a multi billion dollar industry because we have more stuff than our houses can even hold. They would see our massive debt as individuals and as a nation, Scrolling through the endless maze that’s Amazon in this secret hope that they next purchase, the next transaction, the next package that comes in the mail will make your life just slightly better, more productive, more comfortable than it was before...They would think we don’t just worship Plutus the goddess of wealth and prosperity, we have perfected it.

-If they showed up at a MAGA rally, with all of the chanting and cheering and passion, they would say “oh this is just like how we used to worship Athena. It’s just that you guys seem to be worshiping the orange gentleman.”

-They would head down to 5 points for the gathering of worshipers of Baucis the god of alcohol and partying.

-They would see our outright obsession with beauty and appearance and sex...”Oh you guys worship aphrodite. Cool, me too.”

**It’s not that different.**

**And observing the idols of our day requires knowing our friends' and neighbors' beliefs.**

-What do people long for most passionately? What are people most afraid of? What do people go to for comfort? What do people complain about most? What makes people happiest? How do people explain themselves to others? The way people define themselves is usually an indication of what is most important.

For those who believe in God, what makes them angry at God? Usually, people get angry at God because he fails to provide them with their idols. What do people brag about?

Whose approval are people seeking?

One of the ways we’ve talked about before, and we borrowed this from pastor Tim Keller. He says there are four main drives for humans... all of which are meant to find their fulfillment in God, but what we do is turn to a host of all sorts of things to fulfill those.

**Control:** My life only makes sense when I feel in control. You know you have a control idol if your greatest nightmare is uncertainty.

**Approval:** My value comes from being approved of by others. I will finally feel loved if enough people approve of me and accept me and laugh at my jokes. You know you have an approval idol if your greatest nightmare is rejection.

**Comfort:** The greatest drive of my life is ease. You know you have a comfort idol if your greatest nightmare is stress or demands.

**Power:** I can only be content when I’m winning. You know you have a power idol if your greatest nightmare is humiliation or embarrassment or losing.

What are your friends and neighbors beliefs and idols? How have they built their lives?

**After he observes the idols, Paul...**

## **2) Undermine the idols**

Here is how Paul undermines their idols in Athens...

Vs 24“...nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.” In these temples, you would have servants. Those servants would serve the golden image. They would feed the golden image. They would wash the golden image. Paul’s very clever subversive argument is, “If you have to make his sandwich, he is not much of a god. Right? If when he gets dirty, you’re required to wash him, how is he supposed to help you when you’re dirty?”

The same way that Paul quotes from their culture, I’d like to do that.

**David Foster Wallace** was an award-winning, best-selling novelist who committed suicide in 2008. But before his death he gave a famous commencement address in which he said this to the graduating class: “In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism .... Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And ... pretty much anything you worship will eat you alive.

If you worship money and things—if they are where you tap real meaning in life—then you will never have enough ....

Worship your own body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly, and when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally plant you ....

Worship power—you will feel weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to keep the fear at bay.

Worship your intellect, being seen as smart—you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. And so on.”

**And if Scripture and David Foster Wallace aren't enough for you then surely you will listen to the GOAT, Tom Brady...**

**17 years ago Tom Brady had won 3 super bowls.**

Brady: “Why do I have three Super Bowl rings, and still think there's something greater out there for me? I mean, maybe a lot of people would say, "Hey man, this is what is." I reached my goal, my dream, my life. Me, I think: God, it's gotta be more than this. I mean this can't be what it's all cracked up to be. I mean I've done it. I'm 27. And what else is there for me?”

Interviewer: What's the answer?

BRADY: I wish I knew. I wish I knew.

Brady has since won 4 more super bowls for a total of 7. Pretty much unanimously considered the greatest football player ever, retired after last season he said to finally spend time with his family. Only to realize he couldn't walk away from football. Still playing at age 45 and his wife just filed for divorce. So whatever he is looking for on the football field, he has still not found it.

**Anthony Hopkins**, two time oscar winning Best Actor, 6 time nominee.

“I meet young people, and they want to act and they want to be famous, and I tell them, when you get to the top of the tree, there's nothing up there. Most of this is nonsense, most of this is a lie.

-Anthony Hopkins

**Jim Carrey** - “I think everybody should get rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamed of so they can see that it's not the answer.”

**Drake Interview** a few years ago, after being nominated for 2 Grammys. “There was a point where I felt like I needed to keep the company of a different woman every night. I was trying to fill a void. But in the 15 or so seconds after sex, I'd know it wasn't working. That 15 or 20 seconds is the realest moment a man will ever have in his life...the next day I'd convince myself to do it again. But during that time, I knew it wasn't working.”

The people who have the things that everyone thinks they want are telling you that it doesn't work. Nothing can take God's place as the ultimate thing in your life. It won't work. You will never be as famous as Anthony Hopkins, you will never make as many people laugh as Jim Carrey, you will never win more than Tom Brady and you will never have as much sex as Drake. And they are telling you, even if you can achieve their level, it's still empty.

That's how you undermine the idols.

What do your friends and neighbors and coworkers believe? What are their idols and how can you help them see disconnects?

**3) Show how Jesus is better**

now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 31 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.”

Repent, stop chasing after false gods and turn to the true God. The one who will judge the world in righteousness and who died on a cross to provide us the righteousness we all lack for our idolatry.

“Repent of your sins and put your faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ.” Repent. Believe. That’s always the invitation. Always. Paul cites the resurrection as the proof, the objective evidence as to why you need to turn away from your gods and turn to Jesus. He actually rose from the dead. And if that’s actually true, then the ball is in our court. What are you gonna do? Despite your problems and barriers and objections, Jesus actually rose from the dead and offers you life to the fullest if you repent and believe.

And in return, when we follow Jesus we see that everything we’ve been searching after ultimately finds its deepest fulfillment in Christ.

Meaning,

- if **control** is what you’re after, you can never have enough and the pursuit of it will ruin your life...but you are invited to rest in the arms of the one who works all things according to his good purposes. In him you have the security you’ve turned to other things to find.

-If **comfort** has been your god, there is a God in heaven for whom you were created at whose right hand are pleasures forevermore. There is a peace that passes understanding available to you in Christ. There is no need to look elsewhere.

-If **approval** is what you’ve built your life on, you have the Lord of the Universe who says in Christ, he delights in you. God will accept you, who cares what other people think!

-If **performance** has dictated your life, Jesus has performed in your place.

Jesus is the only god who won’t let you down, who laid down his life for you. And not just that, but rose from the dead to prove that every word he ever said was true and right.

**Author Christopher West tells a story** - dinner with wife. and she observed that something was different about our marriage in recent years, something good. She asked me if I had any insight into what it was. After reflecting a bit I said with a smile, "Yeah, I think I know what it is. I think I've been realizing deep in my heart that you can't satisfy me." She got a big smile on her face and said, "Yeah, that's it. And I've been realizing the same thing: you can't satisfy me either." I imagine anyone overhearing us in the restaurant would have thought we were about to get divorced, but to us that realization was cause for joy and celebration. Only to the degree that we stop expecting others to be "god" for us, are we free to love others as they really are, warts and all, without demanding perfection of them, whether a spouse, a friend, a son or daughter, or any other relationship. And only to the degree that we are free from idolizing ... human beings are we also free to take our ache for perfect fulfillment to the One who alone can satisfy it.  
- Christopher West, Fill These Hearts

#### 4) Be provoked

And with all of this, we have to be provoked, like Paul was. Not ridicule, not become indignant. Provoked. Heartbroken. Because these things never turn out well, in the long run.

I want you to be provoked. By your neighborhood and the brokenness you see. By our city. By the ways people are trying to make life work apart from God.

It’s incredibly sad, and we should hate to see how idols dishonor God and bring so much pain and destruction into peoples lives.

The thing that gives me hope is that our God is even more provoked than we are,

So if you find yourself not caring as you should be, look to Him! To the one who’s hatred for sin and idolatry led Him to the cross where he died for our sin. Where he conquered sin and death when He rose from the dead, and see Him seated at the right hand of the Father

and He is working to make His Kingdom come and His will be done on earth as it is in heaven, and one day He's gonna return to make everything right and reconcile all things back to Himself!

Let's fix our eyes on Him, and trust His Spirit to cause our hearts to be provoked by what provokes Him.