

Day 56, Acts 17

by David Servant

Paul's sermon on the Areopagus in Athens demonstrates a respectful and humble approach to sharing the gospel with a Gentile audience.

Scripture: Matthew 7:7, Acts 17:11-30

Topics: "Evangelism Strategies", "Apologetics Ministry"

Description

David Servant preaches about Paul's varying receptivity of those he preached to in Macedonia and Achaia, highlighting the persecution faced in Thessalonica and the open hearts of the Bereans who eagerly received the word. In Athens, Paul interacted with Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, tailoring his message to bridge their beliefs with the gospel. Despite the different philosophies, Paul respectfully engaged with the Athenians, using their altar to an unknown god as a starting point for sharing the truth about God's nature and the folly of idolatry.

Transcript

How interesting it is to read of the varying receptivity of those to whom Paul preached as he journeyed in Macedonia and Achaia, what is now modern Greece. In Thessalonica, after initial success, the persecution from unbelieving Jews grew so intense that Paul and Silas had to flee for their lives under the cover of darkness. At their next stop, however, in Berea, they found "more noble-minded" Jews who "received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily" (17:11). Because of their open hearts, "many believed, along with a number of prominent Greek women and men" (17:12). Note that Luke was no Calvinist. He did not pin the responsibility on God, but on free-willed human beings, for their salvation.

Fleeing persecution in Berea that was instigated by Thessalonian Jews, Paul boarded a boat for Athens, a seat of idolatry. Luke highlights Paul's interaction with Epicurean and Stoic philosophers there, and knowing something about their different philosophies helps us to appreciate Paul's message to them on the Areopagus.

Epicureans denied any divine activity by the gods, believing that everything occurred by chance, and asserting that man's chief aim is pleasure. Life's goal was to live without any physical pain or mental anxiety, fully enjoying material things, as well as sex, companionship, acceptance and love. In their minds, there was no such thing as life after death.

Stoics were pantheists who believed that everything was governed by an irresistible fate, and that virtue was its own reward, while vice was its own sufficient punishment. Rather than making pleasure their highest goal, they focused more on the virtues of wisdom, bravery, justice and moderation. The perfect person yielded himself without passion to fate, and it is from this philosophical school that we derive our English adjective, stoic, which means "forbearing."

Paul began his sermon to the philosophers by complimenting them for being religious (17:22). We often see people's false religion as a barrier to the gospel, but we should use it, as Paul did, as a bridge to their hearts. Paul didn't castigate the Athenian philosophers for their idolatry, but used their altar "to an unknown god" as a launching point for the gospel (17:23).

Notice that Paul didn't quote any Old Testament scriptures as was his custom when preaching the gospel to Jews. They would have been all but meaningless to his Gentile audience. Rather, he briefly explained some fundamental truths about God's nature and even quoted a Greek poet who wrote that all people are God's offspring (17:28). Paul could have pointed out the technical error of their poet's thinking, as he (Paul) knew that only those who are born again are truly God's offspring. Yet he no doubt agreed that all people have been created by God, and he used the poet's line to help persuade his audience of the folly of idolatry. How could we, as God's offspring, have been created by idols of gold or stone? Why would the superior worship the inferior?

Not only did Paul strive to find points of agreement with his audience, but he displayed respect, humility and tact as he spoke. It was not a condescending sermon. Notice how he identified with his listeners as he used the editorial, "We" instead of "You" in his sentence, "We ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver" (17:29).

Paul did not, however, compromise the gospel or make it more appealing in hopes of gaining more converts. He proclaimed Jesus' resurrection, the necessity of repentance and the coming day of judgment (17:30-31). Recognizing the mixed reactions of his audience, Paul did not press for immediate decisions or even share what could be considered a complete gospel. Rather, he gave them just enough information to motivate those whose hearts were receptive to question him later, which they did, and some ultimately believed.

According to what Paul said, God expects all people to seek Him and find Him, because He has revealed Himself to everyone (17:27). If any person, anywhere on the face of the earth sincerely seeks to know God, God will see to it that the person finds Him. Jesus promised, "Seek, and you will find" (Matt. 7:7).

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