

(Acts) Paul Reaches Out

by Brian Brodersen

Paul's response to the idolatry in Athens was to reason with people and share the gospel with them, demonstrating the importance of being in the world as a Christian.

Duration: 38:06

Scripture: Acts 17:10

Topics: "Evangelism", "Apologetics"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the philosophy of living for pleasure and indulgence, which was prevalent in the Corinthian culture. He emphasizes the importance of being witnesses for God in the marketplace, where people gather and spend leisure time. The speaker encourages the congregation to seize opportunities to reason with others about Jesus and the resurrection. He highlights the example of Paul, who was moved by the idolatry in Athens and actively preached and reasoned with people in the synagogue and marketplace.

Transcript

Alright, let's turn to the 17th chapter of Acts as we carry on in our study here this evening. Paul has been forced, actually, to go from city to city. Probably he would have gone to many of these places anyway, but perhaps he went sooner than he intended or not under the exact circumstances that he had hoped to go under, but Paul continued to face opposition in the various communities that he went into, like Thessalonica.

He went into Thessalonica and ministered there for some time, but it was opposition that finally drove him out of the city. And so from Thessalonica he went to Berea, and there in Berea there was a ministry that was developing, and there was a good response to his message that was given. And yet before too long, once again, things started getting hot and the opposition began to increase.

And in that particular case, it was the Jews from Thessalonica. They came to Berea because they heard Paul was there, and they came to sort of stir things up against him. And so once again, Paul had to flee and he left Berea, not really wanting to go, but but needing to go because of the circumstances.

And now he's taken and he's conducted from that area and brought to the city of Athens. And so in Athens, Paul is there for a time and he's sort of stranded, not totally stranded there, but in a sense, he's there not so much because he planned to go there. But that was just the place where he ended up and

he's going to have to spend some time there waiting for his ministry partners to arrive and join up with him again.

They were detained back in those other places and sort of following up and maybe, you know, putting the finishing touches on the initial ministry that had begun there. But Paul finds himself alone in the city of Athens and he's going to have quite an experience in that city. Now, Athens, of course, was a city with great historic significance.

It was the intellectual and cultural center of the world, even in Paul's day. It was the place where people, even at that time, would have gone as tourists to view the sites and to see this once great city where those renowned philosophers had sat and reasoned and so forth. And there Paul found himself now around that time, a bit later than Paul's visit to Athens, there was another man who visited Athens.

His name was Pausanias, and he was known as Pausanias, the traveler. He visited Athens sometime after Paul, you know, probably 50 years or so later, maybe even a bit later than that. But as he traveled through the Greek world at that time, he was most impressed with the city of Athens.

And when he came to Athens, he saw the great architecture. He saw the great structures that had been erected. He saw the marvelous sculptures and things like that.

And that was what really impressed him there in the city of Athens. He saw these great things and he felt greatly moved emotionally by these things. He was greatly impressed by all that he saw.

And what he did in response was he wrote six volumes concerning the greatness of the Greeks in their various cities. And the majority of his writing was spent on talking about really the glory of Athens. But Paul had an entirely different response than did this man to the same place.

Paul saw Athens, Paul felt certain things while he was there. And Paul did certain things in response to what he saw and felt. And what we're going to notice is that they are incredibly different.

And so it is the different responses to the world and to the accomplishments of man really depend on the perspective of the person. Paul looked at things not so much for what they appeared to be, but Paul looked at things for what they really were. Paul looked at things through a spiritual lens.

He looked at things through really the eyes of God, how God saw things. And that's why he responded the way he did. That's why he did what he did in Athens.

So as we look at Paul here, as we pick up in verse 16, we read this. Now, while Paul waited for them at Athens, it says his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was wholly given over to idols. So what did Paul see in Athens? Well, I'm sure he saw the same things that Pausanias saw.

He saw the great structures. He saw the Parthenon there on the Acropolis. He saw these magnificent buildings that had been erected.

He saw these beautifully sculptured images to the various deities of the Olympiad and all of that. But yet Paul doesn't mention any of that. Never does he make any reference to that in any of his writings.

Luke doesn't give us any information about any of those things. You see, Paul wasn't in Athens as a tourist. Paul was in Athens as an ambassador for Christ, a minister of the gospel.

And what Paul saw in Athens was idolatry. Everything else paled in comparison to the idolatry and the plight of the people in that idolatrous society. You know, a few years ago I went to the Vatican and while they're at the Vatican, as I walked through this magnificent building, I personally think that the Vatican is probably one of the most magnificent structures in the world.

I've heard the Taj Mahal is quite impressive as well, but it really is. It is a magnificent structure. It is beautiful in so many ways.

But I must say, as I walked through it, even though it was indeed a magnificent structure, I was not so impressed with that aspect of it. I was more taken up with the idolatrous nature of the thing. And I remember walking through there and, you know, part of me being impressed with just the magnificence of it.

But yet another part of me being appalled by the idolatry that I saw there. And in the end, it was rather disgusting to tell you the truth. And I think that's the difference between a tourist and someone who is on the Lord's business.

There are many great cities in this world, but if you look at them just strictly from the tourist standpoint, there are many commendable things about them. But if you look a little bit deeper, if you look a little bit closer, all you have to do is spend a bit of time getting away from the historical or the cultural aspects of it and all of that. And you find that there are places laden with sin and burdened with all kinds of corruption and submerged like Athens was in various idolatries.

And it really, you know, loses all of its splendor and glory. That's true of these great cities. It didn't take me long in London to figure out that all of these magnificent structures and monuments and things like that really didn't mean much.

I could see the lives of people all around destroyed through the various vices and the modern idolatries that they were involved in. And the same is true wherever you go, if you go to Paris or if you go to New York City or if you go to, you know, some of these places. What you will see as God's servant that will sort of surpass everything else is really what's happened as a result of the idolatry.

And so, Paul, his response was it says that he was provoked, but a better translation is Paul was enraged. Paul was enraged by this, that these people for whom Christ died knew nothing of the true and the living God, knew nothing of the loving savior. But they were steeped in this superstition, in this idolatry, and they had given themselves over to this.

And Paul was enraged by this. Not enraged in the in the sense that he began to strike out against everybody, but he was enraged in his spirit, really, at the more than anything, at the demonic forces that had brought the people into this gross bondage to the idolatry. Paul was jealous for God, he was jealous for these people because they were duped into worshiping false gods and that enragement within him led him to activity.

And we read as we go on, therefore, he reasoned in the synagogue and in the marketplace daily with those who happen to be there. So this led Paul to action. Passinius there in Athens, he saw these great structures and he was moved emotionally, greatly impressed, deeply impacted by the greatness of this society.

And so he writes six volumes. Paul sees the same thing, but he doesn't pay much attention to the externals. He sees the state of the human soul and he's enraged.

And Paul begins to reason with them. He begins to share the gospel with them. He begins to preach to them.

You know, many times people have asked me. About our lives, when we lived overseas for a few years and, you know, London and I traveled a lot throughout various parts of Europe while I was there, and there are a lot of great buildings and monuments and museums and things like that. And inevitably, people will ask me, you know, about those things.

Did you see those things? Did you visit this? Did you, you know, in the West End of London, they have all of the theaters and all the plays. And, you know, people will ask me about these things. Did you take in those things when you were there? And I have to say, frankly, no, I wasn't there as a tourist.

I wasn't there to go visit these shrines. I was there as an ambassador of Christ to get the gospel to people. That's where Paul was at here.

And so he began to reason with them and as was his practice in Athens as well, he started in the synagogue. He began with the Jews and also with the Gentile worshippers who were there. So Paul went into the synagogue.

Notice, it is interesting to me that in Athens there was a synagogue in this the epicenter of idolatry, if you will, there's a synagogue. But tragically, it doesn't seem to have had much of an impact on Athens at all, because as Paul will go on, you know, and begin to proclaim to them the one true God, of course, the God who the Jews worshipped, no one seemed to have a clue about that God. It shows that the synagogue had pretty much failed in its purpose there because the synagogue was to be a witness to the true God in the community.

So Paul begins to reason with them in the synagogue. And I would imagine that the response here in Athens in the synagogue was probably similar to what it was in Thessalonica and as well in Berea. There was sort of a mixed response from the Jewish element and, you know, some responding positively, the majority more of an indifference.

But then the Gentile worshippers who were there in the synagogue, they were the ones who generally were more receptive. And that perhaps was the same kind of response that Paul received there. But he wasn't only ministering in the synagogue.

He was also ministering, it says, in the marketplace, not a marketplace. The Agora was a place in that day where people used to just. Spend time, of course, there were the vendors there, people, you know, setting up their wares and selling and people shopping and all of that, but it was also a place where people would just sort of hang out together.

It would be a place where they would have had, even like they do in Europe today, little road cafes along the porticos there and little places where they would gather and sit and have conversation and things like that. And Paul took advantage of those kinds of things and he would get himself into conversations there. As he was spending time in Athens waiting for his friends to join him, he would just go out during the day into the marketplace and probably find a place where people were talking and get into the conversation and begin to introduce the message of Christ into the conversations, because Athens, of course, was the

center of philosophy.

There would have been places where teachers would have just sat and given instruction and Paul might have taken advantage of that sort of opportunity and begun to do that. But he was there reasoning in the marketplace. Now, today we have, I think, similar opportunities, as did Paul in that time.

We certainly live in an idolatrous age and the idols of today have changed their form a bit, but they're basically still things that are taking the place of God in people's lives, which is really what an idol is. And we could, I think, safely say about our own culture that it is steeped in idolatry, submerged in idolatry, as was Athens, the idolatry of the self, the idolatry of the various manifestations of materialism and those kinds of things. And in our response, like Paul's ought to be to reason with people, to get the message out to them, to challenge them and to speak to them about what they believe and why they do the things they do and so on.

You know, the synagogue was, of course, the gathering place for the worshipers of the true God, and today the equivalent would be the church. The church is a place to reason with people today. Because still, and I thank God for this, the church is a place that even unbelievers will come into.

And so part of our responsibility in the church is to be reasoning, to be putting forth a clear gospel message so that people can think it through and hear what God has to say and make a decision. There are many churches still with people attending them, but nevertheless, many of the people are not themselves even true believers.

There is a great mission field in many of the churches today even, but we also have the marketplace. You see, the marketplace was really, to put it simply, the marketplace was any place that people gathered together and spent leisure time together. You see, it would vary today from culture to culture, but it could be any number of things.

John Stott, in his commentary, he speaking of the marketplace, the Agora, he said the equivalent of the Agora will vary from different parts of the world, will vary in different parts of the world. It may be a park, a town square, a street corner, a shopping mall, a pub or a bar, a cafe, a student cafeteria. It's wherever people meet when they are at leisure.

One of the things that I think is unfortunate about our situation here on the West Coast and even more so than the other side of the country is, you know, on the West Coast, we're not all that community oriented. We don't you notice we don't really have any places with a town center, per se. I mean, I live in Costa Mesa.

Where is the town center of Costa Mesa? I've yet to find it. You know, I don't know. And one of the things that I personally really have always liked about Europe is that in most European cities, there is a city center, there's a town square, there is a place where people will congregate and they'll just spend time there.

And because that's the case, you can have contact with people. You know, here in America, we spend most of our time in cars driving back and forth. And the only thing we see is people's cutting us off on the road or doing some annoying thing to us as we're driving down the street.

And we a lot of times we don't get any interaction with people. And I really think that's an unfortunate thing. You know, Europeans think we're really crazy that we drive everywhere, you know, because they they

walk a lot of places.

But Europe is much smaller than America. They come over here and visit and they say, oh, no, don't worry, I'll walk. And then that lasts for about a day.

Can you can you get me a car? They start to understand quickly why we walk everywhere because or why we drive, because everything's spread out there. Everything's real compacted. But one of the things that I do like personally, and I and I see it as encouraging in this regard, in the these kinds of opportunities, maybe, you know, opening themselves up more is what's happening where we have now a lot of these, you know, the coffee houses and the cafe environments and things where we're seeing a little bit more of people having a place where they congregate together.

They sit around and just chat and just, you know, have a good time or whatever. And I think that's an ideal place. Those kinds of places are ideal places for us as Christians to frequent and to seek the kinds of opportunities that Paul was seeking there in Athens to share with people.

I really think one of the big mistakes we make sometimes as Christians is isolating ourselves from the outside world. Now, we have to be careful, obviously, and a person has to be mature enough in their walk with the Lord to not, you know, be in danger of getting stumbled or falling back into some kind of aberrant behavior or something. But I do think there's a place for mature, solid people to be out in places where people frequent and out there with the the vision and the passion for evangelism.

Some of the musicians that I know have recently, recently, meaning the past few years, kind of gone back out and started doing music in places that they had not done music in for years, a lot of them having come out of, you know, that environment in the world and come into the church and spent maybe the last 20, 25 years pretty much doing their music in a church context. But they began to sense the Lord was provoking them to maybe get back out and to get out with the general population to start to see if they could infiltrate and get the gospel out. And I heard some really good reports about how God has worked through those kinds of things.

Richie, if you're a some of you might be familiar with Richie, Richie happens to be the pastor of Calvary Chapel in Boulder, Colorado, a couple of years ago, he was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. He was a guitar player for the Buffalo Springfield and for Poco and and, you know, just a very gifted person musically. And somebody who has a connection with that part of the society and a few years back, Richie was telling me that, you know, he felt like the Lord was sort of provoking him to to get his old band back together and to go out and to start touring some places.

And from some people, the response was, oh, no, no, you can't do that. But he really sensed the Lord was calling him to do it, so he did it and and the Lord's been using it in a significant way. One of one of the guys who helps out with us here in worship a lot, Danny Donnelly, a superb musician, was contacted by Kenny Loggins a while back because he heard what a great musician Danny was.

And Danny addition to play guitar for Kenny Loggins and Kenny hired him to go on tour with him. Some people would say, oh, Danny, what are you doing? You know that you shouldn't be doing that, but he's had tremendous opportunities to share the gospel with these people. And of course, like I said initially, there are some people that shouldn't do things like that because they're not strong enough to do that and God wouldn't be calling them to do that.

But on the other hand, there are people that God might call into those things and use in those areas. And I personally think that the church needs to be careful against isolating itself from the world and disconnecting and missing opportunities to share the Lord with people. And we need to pray for the people that God does give those opportunities to, you know, sometimes when we hear about, you know, maybe like a Christian musician or somebody in the arts of some sort, when we hear about them maybe doing that sort of thing, a lot of times there's just an immediate criticism.

Oh, they're compromising, they're, you know, out there doing these concerts and things and that environment all that's, you know, and and we're missing the point that they're out in an arena ministering and sharing the gospel where few people have the opportunity to do that. And instead of discouraging that, I think we need to pray for those people that those opportunities do come to. I thank God for groups like Switchfoot, the young music group, guys all from Calvary Chapel background, and and God's using them.

They're playing their stuff on on secular radio. They're showing their videos on MTV and some people think, oh, what is Switchfoot doing on MTV? Well, I thank God they're on MTV because everything else on MTV is rotten and filthy. But these guys, God's giving them a platform.

And I really think we ought to pray for people like this and realize that the marketplace is a place for ministry. Paul saw it as a place of ministry. He saw it as an opportunity to reason with people.

And so he took advantage. Notice he started in the synagogue, but he went into the marketplace. And of course, we minister in the church, but we need to get out of the church as well.

I think sometimes we have too great of an expectation on unbelievers. We expect them to come here to us. And again, we thank God that they do, but, you know, as well as I do, that many of them are very resistant.

To coming here to us, I know people that just flat out will not walk in a church. They just won't do it. They've got fears, they've got issues from the past that keep them in a state where they just they can't make that step.

But we go out somewhere in the public and do an outreach. They'll come to that. I have family members like that.

My brother in law, he he cannot cross the threshold of a church without just coming unglued. I mean, he just becomes a nervous wreck at the thought of entering a church. And yet we've had outdoor concerts and outreaches and things like that, and he's fine.

He pulls up this chair, he sits, he listens, and I believe God's breaking through to him. But, you know, to try to get him inside the church walls, he's convinced the building is going to collapse on him. So he doesn't want to he just doesn't want to risk it.

So I think we need to learn a lesson from the Apostle Paul. Now, as he's reasoning there with them. He comes or has an encounter with the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers.

Epicurus was the founder of the Epicurean school of philosophy, and Zeno was the founder of the Stoic school of philosophy. The Epicureans, originally Epicurus, his philosophy was really one of sort of getting back to nature. You know, all philosophers are looking for some way to handle life, some way to

understand life and some some way to cope with life.

And so Epicurus, he looking at life and all of its various aspects at the time. And, you know, experiencing the stresses and the difficulties of his day, he said, you know, things were better when men lived more simply. And so we need to get back to the simple life, need to get back to basics, just, you know, and so he was sort of recognized as the philosopher of the garden.

Man was so much better off when he was in a garden before he was in a city with all the hustle and bustle and all of that. So that's where Epicurus was when he began to expound his philosophy. Now, a few hundred years have passed and like everything after the passing of time, unless it's something from God and remains unchangeable, everything sort of has a tendency to, you know, deteriorate from what it was originally.

So by the time Paul meets up with the Epicurean philosophers in Athens. It was now really that Epicureanism centered predominantly on pleasure as the ultimate goal of life, attaining pleasure, whatever kind of pleasure. Regardless of the nature of it, if it pleased you, that's really all that mattered.

They were the ones who had developed the slogan that Paul made reference to in writing to the Corinthians, let us eat and drink. And be merry for tomorrow, we die, that was their philosophy, hey, just party it up, just have the best time you possibly can. You know, like the old beer commercial said, you only go around once in life, so grab for the gusto.

That was more or less their philosophy. You only live once, man. You might as well have as good a time as you can.

The Stoics, on the other hand, they took more of the stiff upper lip sort of approach to life. They looked at life and said, life is tough. Life is miserable.

But we're not going to be escapists like the Epicureans and just try to, you know, deny reality, bury our head in the sand and pretend like there aren't any real problems in life and just go live in a garden. No, we're going to face it head on, but we're going to face it with a stiff upper lip. We're not going to let us we're not going to let it get us down.

We're not going to let life affect us. You know, you sometimes you meet a person who's unemotional and you say or you hear somebody say, man, that, you know, they're very stoic. Comes from this philosophy, the Stoics were unmoved by circumstances, they were unaffected by emotion.

They were just, you know, going to go through life and just fatalistically, that's how they were approaching life. So so these guys, they encounter Paul there in the marketplace and some said, what does this babblor want to say? Now, the word babblor is literally translated, what does this seed picker have to say? And. I mean, that, you know, conjures up an image in our mind, but even in that day, there was something even more significant about it because it was a very derogatory sort of a reference.

And what it referred to in this context was a person who had no original thought process whatsoever, but was really more a plagiarist who just picked up little bits and pieces from other people and sort of patched everything together and then presented it as a philosophy. But a person like that was greatly looked down upon in Greek society. So they were listening to what Paul said.

And these sophisticated Epicureans and Stoics, some of them, they said, what is this seed picker want to say? He has nothing original to say. He he's just, you know, got a patchwork thing going here and it was a derogatory reference to him. But others said he seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection.

So some were very cynical and sarcastic, but others were curious and they wondered just what he was talking about. He's talking about foreign gods, it seems. Actually, it would seem that they thought Paul, as he talked about Jesus and the resurrection, they thought that Paul was talking about two gods, one a healer and one a resurrector.

And so what they did is they took Paul and then they brought him to the Areopagus. Which at that time would have been the place where all of the religious and philosophical and educational issues were not only discussed in a casual manner, but where they would have been determined in more of an official manner. And actually to preach or to proclaim a religion in Athens, you had to have, in a sense, an endorsement by those leaders there on Mars Hill.

That's what Areopagus means. It means Mars Hill. And so they took Paul and they brought him to the council so that everybody might have an opportunity to hear what he was saying.

And next week we will have an opportunity to hear what he was saying because we've run out of time, so we'll pick up in verse 19 next time together. Father, we thank you, Lord, that you have called us to be your children. And Lord, you've called us out of this world to inherit your kingdom.

But you've left us in this world to be your witnesses. And Lord, as we look at the great cities of this world, great from the human standpoint, but yet filled with idolatry from your point of view, as we look at our own communities. Lord, we see behind all of the glamour and the glitz and all of the pretense, we see lost people.

And Lord, may we, like Paul, be given opportunity and emboldened to reason with them about Jesus and the resurrection. Lord, may we seize those opportunities. Lord, we thank you for those that you have placed in strategic places like those that we've mentioned earlier tonight.

And we pray for them. We pray that you would bless them, we pray that you would use them. We pray, Lord, that they might indeed be your ambassadors in those particular places that you've allowed them to be in.

We ask you, Lord, to work through us, through them, Lord, in our churches. We have people here that aren't saved. And Lord, may we not just depend on what's happening in the pulpit, but may we take the initiative as well personally and individually as we meet people to meet with them, to reason with them, to maybe invite them over for a meal or to take them out to coffee and to talk with them more about the things of the kingdom.

And Lord, lead us to those places where we might also find opportunities to minister. Lord, thank you that you're working today. And thank you that you want to use us.

And Lord, in Jesus name, we pray that you would use us for your glory in these days. We thank you. Amen.

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