

Book of Acts Series - Part 26 | Style and Substance

by Jim Cymbala

Jim Cymbala's sermon emphasizes the centrality of Jesus Christ in the gospel and the importance of personal conviction in sharing faith amidst cultural challenges.

Duration: 33:32

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, Acts 17:27-28, Acts 17:30-31, Colossians 1:15, Hebrews 1:1

Topics: "Book Of Acts"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the challenges faced by those who preach the word of God. He mentions the Apostle Paul as an example, who endured beatings and persecution for his faith. The speaker encourages believers to continue sharing Christ despite the potential negative reactions they may encounter. He emphasizes the importance of feeding oneself with the word of God daily and highlights the need for both style and substance in preaching. The sermon concludes with a call to action, urging listeners to follow Jesus and trust in Him rather than just talking or discussing ideas about Him.

Transcript

We've been doing a study in the book of Acts. Every church you go to, the sermons ought to focus on Jesus Christ, not the law of Moses, not the Psalms of David. They all have their place in our theology, but they have to point to Jesus.

God, in different ways and in different manners, has spoken to us through the prophets, but in these last days, Hebrews 1.1 says, He has spoken to us through His Son. The only image of God that we're allowed to have is in the face of Jesus Christ. You can cherry pick verses from the Old Testament and actually create a monstrous God, but what you have to do, not rightly dividing the scripture, that's what you end up with, but rightly dividing it, you remind yourself that Jesus is the image of the invisible God.

Any question you have about God, just look at Jesus, study Jesus. What did Jesus say? What did Jesus do? So this is easy now as we're going through the book of Acts because it's all about the early church spreading the good news of Jesus. And we have Paul and Silas and their team on the second missionary journey of Paul.

They've left Antioch in Syria and now they're in Greece. The gospel is now coming to Europe for the first time that we know of. And Paul began in Philippi, and now he's made his way through a bunch of places and last week he was in Berea where things got hot because the folks from Thessalonica who persecuted him wouldn't let it go.

They traveled the 50 miles to get to Berea and they stirred up trouble for Paul there and the brethren said, you gotta get out of here, Paul, and they sent him to Athens, the great capital city of Greece, and he went and was left there alone. He sent the people who accompanied him, he sent them back with a request, tell Silas and Timothy to join me when they can. But as our story continues today, he's in Athens all alone.

And let's see what we can learn. Let's look at it together. While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed or provoked or troubled in his spirit to see that the city was full of idols.

So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews, that's where he always began, we've learned, and the God-fearing Greeks. Who were they? Those were Gentile worshipers of the God of Israel drawn to monotheism and would go to the synagogue and worship God although they were not Jews by birth. As well as in the marketplace, day by day with those who happened to be there.

Let's just stop there for a second. I just wanted to point out two things here. That's basically maybe the first street meetings that we hear of.

He went to the marketplace day by day and he was on Saturday in the synagogue. This is something new now that we haven't read about. So on the Sabbath he's there reasoning from the scriptures.

But now he's talking to pagan idolaters who are in Athens, caught up with philosophy of that age, the different philosophies, and now he's reasoning with them tirelessly every single day, the Bible says. And then on Saturday in the synagogue. I want you to all notice in the first verse he was troubled in his spirit by the idolatry.

That's one of the things that happens when you become a Christian and the spirit of God comes to live in you. You can become troubled and grieved by things happening around you that before you were a Christian, you not only weren't bothered by it, sometimes you were part of it. These convictions that come from the Holy Spirit are either an impetus to do something about your own lifestyle because you feel this grieving, this quenching, this deep feeling, troubling, or you're sometimes around things that God wants you to speak out about or witness for Christ about, and the way it starts is not in su cabeza but in su corazon, in your heart.

You're troubled, you don't even know why, but something is just gnawing at you. And as he saw all the idols all around Athens, he began to be provoked. Actually, in the Greek, it says his spirit was sharpened, meaning he just was agitated inside.

What happens then? A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, what is this babblers trying to say? Others remarked, he seems to be advocating foreign gods. They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.

So there were two schools of philosophers that he was running into, and they called that word, babbler, actually means, who is this seed picker? Who is this little bird that goes around and is trying to pick up little seeds? In other words, it was a derogatory term. In other words, this guy's a chump. This guy's a joke.

We're learned philosophers, and we're in Athens, and who's this Jew talking about what Jesus and the resurrection? So notice what Paul's message was. He preached the good news. He didn't preach the law of Moses.

He didn't preach about Elijah. All of that has its place. He preached, his message was Jesus Christ, the good news about Jesus Christ.

What is the good news about Jesus Christ? That God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, Jesus Christ, that whoever would believe in him, repent of their sins and believe in him, they wouldn't perish. They would have all their sins forgiven. You're here today, and you're bothered by guilt.

You're afraid to die. You have no peace, no joy. I have the good news for you.

Though you have sinned and violated God's law, God has made a provision. He loves us so much, he sent his own son to die in our place so that the punishment you and I would have got, Jesus took on the cross so that we could be free. I think we ought to clap and say amen to that.

That's the good news. That's the only message of the Christian church. It's not join my church.

It's not be a Pentecostal or a charismatic or a Baptist or an evangelical. It's not be a five-point Calvinist or an Arminian. It's not all the stuff that we've added to the message.

Our message is supposed to be Jesus Christ crucified and resurrected. That's the message. That's the message that changes people, and why more converts aren't being made is because in churches, the gospel's either not being preached at all because they're afraid to confront people with the claims of Christ.

Otherwise, they might come back and oh, God forbid, attendance would go down, or we're mixing in other things with the gospel. We're mixing in white culture, all American culture, amber waves of grain. We're mixing in black culture.

We're mixing in all kind of cultural additives that dilute the precious, pure gospel of Jesus Christ. He preached about Jesus and the resurrection. Now, the Epicureans were the people who basically, a lot could be said about that school of philosophy, but it basically was the end of life is to enjoy pleasure.

Epicurean is an adjective still used today. He's an Epicurean that he lives for pleasure, for the fine things of life, pleasure in any form, aesthetically, physically, sexually, whatever. Pleasure is what the goal is.

That's what the Epicureans believed in. The Stoics, which is also an adjective we use today, Stoicism, he's like a Stoic, they believe that everything has been predetermined by God. There's nothing you can do about it, and the greatest good part of character that you can exhibit, the best trait that you can have in your life is the quiet endurance of whatever you're going through.

So a Stoic is someone who, no matter what goes on, they don't get blown up about it, they don't vent, they just quietly take it. That was the great positive trait of the Stoics. That's what they lauded and lifted up.

So you had Epicureans living for pleasure, you had Stoics who said endure everything and don't, because what's the sense? You can't change anything anyway. Just grin and bear it. So Paul was amid these people witnessing about Jesus Christ and him crucified.

Then they took him and brought him, they took Paul and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus where they said to him, may we know what this new teaching is that you're presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears and we wanna know what they mean. All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing, nothing, but talking about and listening to the latest ideas. Some people believe that the relative smaller harvest that Paul got, if soul saved, in Athens was because the people didn't wanna do anything, they just wanted to talk.

If you and I are gonna be affected by God's truth, we have to be ready to do what God asks us to do. Repent, believe, go, love, humble ourselves. But they didn't wanna do anything, they just wanted to talk.

What do you think? What's your new thing? Where are you from? Tell me what they believe over there. That's all they did, just talk. Oh, I pray that there's people here today that you don't wanna do more than just talk and share ideas, that you wanna say, this is the truth, now let me follow it.

Christ always calls us to action. Jesus said, come and follow me. Don't talk about me, don't discuss me, don't have ideas about me, follow me.

Believe, trust, be anxious for nothing but in everything by prayer and supplication. That's do, how sad it is when religion just becomes ethereal and up in your mind and it never affects anything in our lives. This is what Paul was dealing with here.

Paul then stood up in the meeting at the Areopagus, which, by the way, is basically called Mars Hill in some other translations, and he said, men of Athens, I see that in every way you are very religious. Notice, by the way, Paul didn't start with a Bible verse here. He couldn't reason from the Scriptures with them because they didn't even know what the Scriptures were.

In the synagogue, he could go back to the Old Testament and say, your own Scriptures say this. Jesus fulfilled that. He was born in Bethlehem, just like Micah said.

Did you know why he suffered? Don't put him down for suffering because in your own Scriptures, he was wounded for our transgressions. He was bruised for our iniquities. That's the picture of the Messiah that Jesus fulfilled, but now he's in a different old ballgame.

These people don't believe in anything of the Scriptures. So he picks up, I walked around and I looked carefully at your objects of worship. That's the physical idols.

I even found an altar with this inscription to an unknown God. They had so many gods. They had one God, didn't even have a name.

It was anonymous God to an unknown God. Notice, he picks that up and uses it as a springboard to be able to talk to them. And he says, now what you worship as something unknown, I am gonna proclaim to you.

He just uses that as a starting point to get their attention. The God who made the world and everything that's in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hand. You gotta remember that, ladies and gentlemen.

There's good theology in what he's saying. God doesn't live in any buildings. Not here, not in Jerusalem.

There are no sacred buildings. God isn't more at the altar than he is in the balcony. Praise God for that.

In fact, you're closer to God in the balcony than you are at the altar. I just thought of that. What an illuminating thought that is.

One time a woman came to me after end of a service years ago and said, I need to talk to you about somebody in the church. I said, okay, tell me, what do you have to say? Not here at the altar, let's go outside. In Santo Domingo, I was holding meetings years ago in Puerto Plata, viva Puerto Plata.

In the church I was in, a Spanish Pentecostal church, the people would come in late to the meeting, but they would not go to their seat. They would come and pray at the altar before they would go to their seat. Why? You couldn't pray back there, why? It wasn't the altar.

Oh, come on, this is where the action is up here. And God's not back in your pew, he's at the altar. This is all fallacious, it's all bogus.

God doesn't dwell in any building. There are no sacred buildings. This building, I thank God for it, it's gonna burn up one day like with the rest of planet Earth.

The only habitation God has beside heaven is right inside of our hearts. Come on, let's say amen to that. So there are no sacred buildings.

Maybe you grew up around that, right, too, where people would come up and pray at the altar. And he is not served by human hands as if he needed anything because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man, he made every nation of men.

From one man, some translation has it from one blood. One man, he made every nation of men that they should inhabit the whole Earth. And he determined the time set for them and the exact places, hold this verse, where they should live.

That means we're all related. Do not say I am not black. I am black.

And you are white. And you are Latino. And you are Asian, we're all related.

Oh, how horrible is racism. How ignorant are these distinctions we make when we're all related. Don't you feel it? Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait.

When you're with people and they're hurting, don't you feel it? I was just sitting in a restaurant and there's a brother, a convert from the Middle East who grew up as a Palestinian refugee. And he's going through some difficulties right now. And although he lives and was brought up in a refugee camp, and although he was born in Palestine, although he grew up as an imam, a cleric in the Muslim faith, then converted to Christ, when I feel his pain and I put my arms around his neck, I knew he was just like me.

Don't you get it? We're all the same. The color has nothing to do, has nothing to do with anything. Black is not beautiful.

White is not beautiful. Everybody's beautiful. Can we say amen to that? Everyone is beautiful.

And we're all related. Turn to your left and right and high five and say hi brother, hi sister. Hi brother, you're my brother, you're my sister.

We're all the same. From one blood, let's look at the rest. Why did he separate people and put them throughout the earth? God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.

Let me look at that again. God did this so that men would seek him, would reach out for him, perhaps they would reach out and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. So I want to talk about very briefly style and substance because we've learned a lot already from reading God's word.

How many love the Bible? Say amen. Brothers and sisters, read the word every day by God's grace. Read it every day.

Make it your daily food. Just like you feed your body. The other day I got so busy working up in my office.

I had a lot on me, finishing a book and doing some other work in the office. I forgot to eat, but I could feel it in the mid-afternoon. My body was saying like, yo, what is up here with this? Send some food down here, right? How many have ever had that happen, right? Your body tells you.

Don't you get it? If you don't have spiritual food, your spirit will tell you that. You'll get weak, you'll get frail, you'll get discouraged. Faith will become a rarer thing.

Feed yourself the word of God. Oh, pastor, I'm too busy. Then you're too busy.

Change your schedule. Wake up earlier. Do whatever you have to do, but feed yourself the word of God.

Get a little pocket New Testament. Carry it with you in the subway, wherever you have to go. Read the word of God.

Meditate on it. Style and substance. I want you to just notice one little thing about style that came out to me as I was pondering reading this over and over and over and over and over.

Oh, what spiritual energy Paul had for Jesus Christ. He has been beaten in Philippi. We heard about that, right? He has been thrown in a dungeon in Philippi where vermin was crawling around him and he was in the blocks.

He took 39 lashes on his back. Not lashes. They used, in this case, a wooden rod.

So a grown man took 39 shots at him. And it was called punishment of 40 minus one because someone died, they said. One time we were receiving the 40th blow, couldn't take it.

So then the Roman Empire, in a great act of mercy, said only 39 from now on. He's been chased out of towns, just escaped by the skin of his skinny skin skin. And now he's in Athens.

And every day he's in the street talking about Jesus. And every Saturday he's going into the synagogue and he knows what the reaction could be. He's already seen what can happen when you preach Christ.

Some get saved and others wanna choke you. And nothing has changed. When you and I share Christ, people can find him as savior or they can get nasty with you quick.

Who are you to judge? What, are you so holy? You're stupid, you really believe that? In other words, you and I have to face the fact this is why God gave us this in the book of Acts. When we share Christ and invite people to church or whatever, you can be the conductor of bringing eternal change to them. They

can find Christ.

Or you can face a little heat. Nothing like this, what Paul went through. But he kept up doing it and sometimes we get shy because someone looks at us a little cross-eyed or someone just makes fun of us or excludes us from their little posse and we're getting all up in arms about that and oh, I better keep quiet about my faith.

We're not gonna keep quiet about our faith. We believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Why not say that? Muslims are not quiet about their faith.

Jehovah Witnesses are not quiet. People with alternate lifestyles, the gay community, they say, I'm gay and I'm proud of it and so on and so forth and everyone's allowed to say that. Why can't we say, I'm a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ.

I'm a follower of Christ. You know, we live in such a bogus country in so many ways and bogus culture. I was just thinking the other day, there's all these words now that you can't say and I'm all for not saying them.

I don't wanna say any word that offends anybody and you shouldn't do that. Never should use any words that offend people. So why don't we raise up and say to, from the president all the way down to all the stations, no more movies, no more people cursing, saying Jesus Christ.

That offends us. That hurts us. That's my savior.

Okay, I won't say this word or that word or this word. We totally wanna be respectful. But how about you being respectful to us? No more for Christ's sake.

Why do you have to say that? Nah, but they're not gonna do that. No, you can't draw a cartoon of Muhammad. You can't do a lot of things.

But you can curse Jesus. And you'll be backed up by the Board of Ed and by everybody else. It is what it is.

But praise God, I have decided to follow Jesus. How many are with me? Raise your hand up if you've decided to follow Jesus. How does he do this every day in the street after giving such beatings? Where's he get the strength? I'm not even talking physical strength.

How about the emotional and mental strength to keep witnessing for Jesus every single day alone in Athens? And then on Saturday, instead of having a day of rest, you have to go to the synagogue. And who knows what could happen there? And he does it. That tells us that God gives strength to his people.

But here's the secret I've learned about strength. If you ask for strength just to get by, you're really not praying as biblical as we should be. Paul wasn't a lake, he was a fountain.

He wasn't just receiving enough to get by. He was receiving so much from God that he was pouring out to others. He was filled to overflowing.

Most believers, unfortunately, we can fall into the peril of just getting enough to eke by and make it through another day. Pray for me, brothers, and I'll just make it through this day. Praise God, he can help you make it through this day.

With Jesus, I can make it. With Jesus, I can take it. But how about beyond that? He has made us more than conquerors.

And out of your belly will flow rivers of living water. Not just for yourself, but rivers that go out to other people. How many want more from God, not just for yourself, but to overflow to other people? Wave your hand at me.

That's what God has promised, and he says he'll do it. And if he can do it for Paul, he can do it for us. Not just help me make it, but God, give me so much of an overflow that I can bless others.

You know, it's like that promise made to one of Joseph's sons or grandsons of Jacob. And it says, his tree will grow over the wall. His tree will not just grow, but he'll be so blessed by God that it'll go over the wall so that people who walk by outside the wall can take a piece of fruit and eat it.

Don't you want your tree to grow over the wall? Or you just wanna get by and say, whew, got through another day? Or do you wanna have something that's going out to people, blessing people? I remember a man of God staying in my house when I wasn't even one year in the ministry. He had like an apostolic ministry, planting churches all over Africa. I can see him now coming down.

I was so young, so new, so naive, so afraid, so complex ridden, so whatever. And he would come down the stairs and not knowing what I was battling with, how am I gonna do this? How am I gonna make it in the ministry? How am I gonna preach? He would come down the stairs and he'd see me and he'd say, Brother Jim, God is good today. Praise God.

And I would be like, whoa. You know, I'm like semi-depressed. And he's like, no, God is on the throne.

God is good. Oh, wait, he's the same man. Oh, God bless his memory.

He's the same man who the last time I ever saw him face to face, he sat with me in that restaurant on Atlantic and Third Avenue. And he looked at me and Carol and I had just started the Brooklyn Tabernacle. We were there like full time, maybe four or five months.

And he was there, no people, no money, broken down building. We both have second jobs. And he looked at me and eating and he just was so happy.

His exuberance in God was so great that he looked at me and I'm just there and he's going, oh, praise God, Brother Jim. Oh, brother, is God gonna do something in your life? And I was like, what, my life? I thought he was talking to somebody else. He said, what, no, because the building, the block, you have no experience.

You don't know what you're doing. Oh, is God gonna do something awesome? And you know what? He convinced me. His tree went over the wall.

He didn't have enough just for himself. He was blessing other people. He blessed me.

Brother Dodswite, when I see you, I'm gonna hug you in heaven because that's what he meant to me that day. He was talking faith that I didn't have. He was talking blessing to me.

He was encouraging me. He just did it naturally. It was no big thing.

It was just, boom, coming out of his life. That's what Paul had. Paul says two things which seems contradictory.

He says, number one, God created the heavens and the earth. Everything you see, God created. He's the one who made everyone out of one blood.

He's painting a picture of this awesome God. He's saying, get rid of these idols. This is stupid.

You made them. How could they be God if you made them? Like the Old Testament. And if someone bumps into them, they could fall and break.

That's your God? How could that be a God? Some statue. He's showing God being so great. And then he says, but when he put people out there in hopes that they would reach out and seek him, maybe they would even reach out and look for him even though he's not far from any of them.

This awesome God who made heaven and earth is just a breath away from you today. It sounds crazy. The God who knows everything, whose home is in heaven, he is half a second from imparting wisdom to you today for what you need it for if you'll just look to him.

For Paul says, even though he's the great and awesome creator God, he's not far. No, he's just a half a second away if you'll just open your heart. He's right there.

If you're hurting today and you think no one understands what you're going through and someone has really put a dagger in your back and turned it once or twice, did you know that the healing that God wants you to have, you don't have to climb a mountain, you don't have to do five Hail Marys, you don't have to go on a pilgrimage, you don't have to do anything. You just have to look right now and say, God help me. How many are happy that on the subway, in the street, in our bedroom, God is just a prayer away, a breath away.

Can we put our hands together? He's that close to us. Someone says, no, I've fallen so away from God and we can fall away from God and that's why the Bible says draw near to God and he will what? Draw near to us because God wants us near him. Like, if you love someone, you want them near you.

You want them near you. But in your lowest condition, if you'll just turn. Right now, all you have to do is open your heart and he's there.

You don't have to say, wait, wait, I gotta get my life in order because then that'll draw you closer. I gotta do this, I gotta do that. What country was I in? It was in Argentina where some of the pilgrimages that they did as part of Roman Catholicism, they would have to walk on their knees almost like Luther did on the steps of Rome of some of the churches there when he was a monk in the 1500s, 1510, 1515.

But in Argentina, they would go on their knees and their knees would be a bloody pulp and they would walk on the dirt and climb up this small hill because when you got to the shrine or forget the Spanish word for that, on the top of the little hill, then God would say, wow, with your knees like that, now I'm gonna draw near to you. You don't have to crawl on your knees anywhere. Jesus loves us so much that he's as close as the mention of his name.

Come on, has anyone ever here just been in a situation and you just looked up in your heart and said, oh, Jesus, and you felt him draw near to you? Has anyone ever had that experience? Oh, yes. He's as close

as the mention of his name. This God who's so great and awesome is so close to us.

And just think, some people go through their whole life never having communion with God. Maybe you're here today and you don't know what it is to have fellowship with God. You don't know that peace, that joy.

He's not far away. He just opened your heart. Some people go to church, like all across America today, people will go to church and God is longing to have fellowship with them, but they only have church.

They never have Jesus. You don't want church. You want Jesus.

You don't want Pastor Cimbala. He can't help you. You don't want the Brooklyn Tabernacle.

That's less than nothing. Ah, what you need is God, because imagine he's just looking for us to feel after him. Oh, God, I need you.

God, I need you today. Maybe he needs to save you. Maybe he needs to heal you.

Someone was just healed last Tuesday night and sent me an email. They were healed during the prayer meeting. Well, we were praising God.

No one even laid their hands on him because God doesn't work the way we think he works. You can't put him in a box. God is everywhere just looking to bless us.

Could you bow your heads with me? Let's pray. Father God, I thank you for your word today in Acts chapter 17. And we've learned a lot about Paul's stay in Athens.

Some converts were made. Then he moved on to go to Corinth. But we do want to stop and ask you, God, would you strengthen us so that we can be bold and energetic like the apostle Paul was? If you did it for him who used to persecute the church, I pray that you'll do it for us today.

God, you said in your word, you give strength and power to your people. Help us to open our mouths and not get tired of doing good. Those who serve in ministries, give them extra energy, Lord, to be faithful in the ministries in the church that you've called them to.

And those who are sitting here and feel, no, I'm too tired and just, I'm too weak, I'm too frail to get involved to serve others. Oh God, quicken them by your spirit. Let their tree grow over the wall.

Let there be not just a stream, but a fountain, a spring bubbling up within them that goes out to others, Lord. We just don't want grace to make it through ourselves. We want grace to encourage others, Lord, like Brother Dodswhite encouraged me.

And we thank you, Lord, that no matter where we are, you're as close as the mention of your name. We don't have to get to church. We don't have to call a priest.

We don't have to see Pastor Semblar, one of the elders, pastors of the church. We just have to turn our hearts towards you. Just lift our hearts towards you.

Could we all just, for just 15 seconds, just everyone lift up your hands, high or low, but just lift up your hands right now. And out loud, just tell Jesus that you love him or praise him or say hallelujah or say something out loud with your lips. Come on, open your mouth.

Give him those lips, the calves of your tongues and lips. We praise you, Jesus. Te amo, Señor.

Te amo mucho, Señor. Gracias por todo, Señor. Gracias, Señor.

Hallelujah. And now, Lord, as we leave this building, we thank you for a wonderful time together, singing, hearing your word, praying, rejoicing, laughing, crying. I pray you'll bind us all closer to one another and help us to remember that from one blood, you made all of us.

From one person, you made all of us. And we're all related, human-wise, but now even closer through the blood of Jesus. You have made us brothers and sisters in the family of God.

Be with us today. Let your faith shine upon us, for we ask it in Christ's name. Everybody stand.

Give someone a hug. Greet them now. Say something good to them.

Audio: <https://sermonindex1.b-cdn.net/25/SID25135.mp3>

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