

Given to Idolatry

Acts 17:16-31

- We have a longer-than-usual text of the day on this edition
- It's an account from the New Testament book of Acts
- Which includes a portion labelled "Sermon on Mars Hill" from Paul

- We'll break the reading into two distinct sections
- First discussing the stirring within Paul when he observed the city of Athens
- Then exploring the message he presented to the people of Athens

- A lot can be said and explained about this ancient city
- The one thing we know for sure is that it was wholly "Given to Idolatry"
- Which is our theme, from Acts 17:16-31

- Paul came to Athens from Berea
- Where he was preaching the gospel with Silas and Timothy
- Now he was waiting in Athens and observed something about the city
- Let's read the first six verses of our passage of the day...

Acts 17:16-21

16 Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry.

17 Therefore disputed he in the synagogue with the Jews, and with the devout persons, and in the market daily with them that met with him.

18 Then certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the Stoicks, encountered him. And some said, What will this babbler say? other some, He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods: because he preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection.

19 And they took him, and brought him unto Areopagus, saying, May we know what this new doctrine, whereof thou speakest, is?

20 For thou bringest certain strange things to our ears: we would know therefore what these things mean.

21 (For all the Athenians and strangers which were there spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing.)

- Paul was stirred or provoked or even distressed by what he observed in this city
- The whole place was given to idolatry
- But he continued his habit of teaching in Jesus' name in the synagogue
- And he also encountered some philosophers
- Those who spent all of their time either hearing or telling something new
- They brought him to Areopagus to explain his new doctrine

- The next portion of our text outlines what he said...

Acts 17:22-31

22 Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars' hill, and said, Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious.

23 For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you.

24 God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands;

25 Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things;

26 And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation;

27 That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us:

28 For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring.

29 Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device.

30 And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent:

31 Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.

- Paul presented the Creator of all things
- The One who does not live in temples made by man
- Who made every man Himself and placed us here on earth
- Those who may grasp in the darkness to find him
- Even though He is not far off

- Paul spoke of a God who was not fashioned from gold or silver
- One who commanded all men to repent
- To embrace the Savior He sent
- Who was raised from the dead and will judge the world

- This is just an introduction to the text
- We want to look closer...

Acts 17:16

16 Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry.

- There was compassion in this observation from Paul
- His spirit was stirred when he saw their idolatry
- They needed to know the God who loved them enough to send His son
- Who paid the penalty for their sin
- Who was real, and could be known

- And Paul set out to tell them

- First arriving in the Jewish synagogue...

Acts 17:17

17 Therefore disputed he in the synagogue with the Jews, and with the devout persons, and in the market daily with them that met with him.

- Paul reasoned with the Jews
- And with those he met in the market
- We find in the next verse (and from his history recorded in this book) that he reasoned about Jesus
- And the fact that He had been raised from the dead
- This intrigued or perhaps annoyed the followers of Epicurus and the stoics...

Acts 17:18

18 Then certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the Stoicks, encountered him. And some said, What will this babblers say? other some, He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods: because he preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection.

- These philosophers were described in one commentary this way...

"The Epicureans entirely denied a providence, and held the world to be the effect of mere chance; asserting sensual pleasure to be man's chief good, and that the soul and body died together. The Stoicks held that matter was eternal; that all things were governed by irresistible fate; that virtue was its own sufficient reward, and vice its own sufficient punishment."

- There is very little truth in these philosophies
- In many cases, they directly contradict truth
- Asserting that the world appeared by mere chance
- And that pleasure should be man's chief aim
- Or that the world was governed by fate
- Not by the God of the universe
- And so they took Paul to this hill dedicated to Mars, the heathen god of war...

Acts 17:19-21

19 And they took him, and brought him unto Areopagus, saying, May we know what this new doctrine, whereof thou speakest, is?

20 For thou bringest certain strange things to our ears: we would know therefore what these things mean.

21 (For all the Athenians and strangers which were there spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing.)

- The things they were about to hear were neither strange nor new
- In fact, they were eternal

- Things that would sharply contradict their world views
- But, that could lead them to a relationship with the One True God
- Through His son Jesus Christ
- Paul spoke...

Acts 17:22

22 Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars' hill, and said, Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious.

- He says the Athenians are religious in everything
- They have devoted themselves to idols
- And he has observed some of the (small g) gods that they worship...

Acts 17:23

23 For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you.

- Their ignorance provided Paul with an opportunity
- He would reveal a God they could know
- The One who created them and gave them life
- That is where he begins...

Acts 17:23-29

24 God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands;

25 Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things;

26 And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation;

27 That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us:

28 For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring.

29 Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device.

- The God of which Paul spoke was nothing like their invented gods
- The multiplicity of gods their culture embraced
- He was the One they were searching for
- Within reach, but just outside their grasp
- It was His son Jesus Christ that provided a way to Him
- This is how Paul continues...

Acts 17:30-31

30 And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent:
31 Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.

- It was timely and important that these men turn to Christ
- For He commands all men to repent
- To embrace His son Jesus, who raised from the dead

- Because judgement is coming
- There is no time for debate over worldly wisdom that rejects God and exalts idols

- Paul's compassion and commission drive him to speak
- To confront the ideological, but wrong
- To lovingly, but boldly, proclaim the gospel
- The truth that every man needs
- That brings eternal life

- I wonder if we are watching closely?
- Alert to the needs of our community?
- And informed enough on scripture to speak?
- To confront the philosophies of our day?
- That lead men to destruction?

- God provides the strength and wisdom
- We must trust Him

Christopher Harper, Take Note 2023