

ACTS 17:16-34

[INTRODUCTION]

- Have you ever walked into a conversation and realized—*I am completely out of my depth?*
 - I'm in a book group, and one of the things I love about it is that I am the dumbest person in the room.
 - And that's not faux humility—it's just the reality.
 - If you were a fly on the wall, you wouldn't say, *James, that's not true!* You'd say, *Wow—you weren't kidding.*
 - We'll get talking about a wide variety of subjects...
 - History, science, philosophy, culture—debating how our age has been shaped by the Byzantine Empire and quantum entanglement...
 - And I'll have almost nothing to contribute.
 - But it's okay because I've developed a rock-solid tactic: pull a serious face—and nod.
- We're in the book of Acts, thinking about what it means to be the church at its best.
 - Jesus has called us to be his witnesses:
 - It's a beautiful, compelling call to live with purpose, energy, and joy.
 - To tell the world that there's a new king, that everything can be better now—and that after our days are done, there's eternal life to come.
 - But here's the challenge: Fulfilling that call can land us in conversations where we feel completely out of our depth.
 - We're not sure how to tell people about Jesus.
 - We're not sure where to start.
 - So often, we just don't.
- Thankfully, in our passage today, Paul is going to help us—ordinary, out-of-our-depth people like us—do something much better than pull a serious face and nod.
 - Last week, we left him in Philippi.
 - This week, he's made his way through Thessalonica and Berea to arrive in Athens—one of the most sophisticated cultural centers of the ancient world.
 - The home of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle.
 - A city packed with philosophers, ideas, and gods.
 - And when he gets there, he shows us how to **engage**.
 - If we learn from him...
 - We too can be the church at its best.

[Transition]: So, let's enjoy our way through this story, noticing two things: 1) What Paul Saw, and 2) What Paul Said.

[WHAT PAUL SAW]

[State]

- **V16:** Now while Paul was waiting for [Silas and Timothy] at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.
 - Let's not rush past that word: **provoked**.
 - The Greek word means to be stirred up, agitated, deeply moved.
 - Paul isn't shaking his head in polite concern.
 - He is stirred to his core.
- Why? Because the city is full of idols.
 - Statues everywhere. Altars everywhere. Temples everywhere.
 - And Paul—knowing the one true God—sees this and his spirit is moved.
- But notice what Paul doesn't do.
 - He doesn't **retreat**:
 - Throw his hands up and walk away.
 - Write Athens off as a lost cause.
 - But he also doesn't **attack**.
 - Grab a sledgehammer and start smashing statues.
 - Stand on a street corner and scream at people.
- Instead, he **engages**—look at **V17:** 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.
 - Do you see the pattern?
 - His heart is stirred—and then he steps toward the people with a heart of love.
 - He goes to where they are—the synagogue, the marketplace.
 - And he reasons with them.
- **V18** tells us who he meets—the Epicureans and the Stoics—these were the two dominant philosophies of the day.¹
 - **Epicureans:** Believed life was about pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain—you only live once, so maximize the experience.
 - **Stoics:** Believed the good life was about virtue—keep your emotions in check, accept your fate, and get on with it.
- It sounds familiar:
 - Many in our day live for **pleasure**—chase the next experience, comfort, fun.
 - While others pursue **discipline**—head down, work hard, do what's right.

[Illustrate]

- But here's what strikes me about Paul—he **engages** them both.
 - When he looked at Athens—a city full of idols, full of confusion, full of people going in every spiritual direction—he didn't feel disgust.
 - He felt a kind of holy longing.
 - These are people God loves, made in his image, searching for something they haven't found.
 - His heart isn't full of contempt—it's full of compassion.

[Apply]

- And that's instructive for us because it's easy to make the errors we discussed.²
 - To **retreat**.
 - Shake our heads, lock our doors, and live in our bubbles.
 - It's too dark out there, too confusing, too far gone.
 - To **attack**.
 - Shake our fists, post the angry thing, fight the fight.
 - Treat people like enemies rather than people to be loved.
- Paul doesn't do either of those things. Instead, he **engages**.
 - He moves toward the people.
 - With a heart full of love.
- It leads to a simple application: Where has God put you—and are you engaging?
 - Your **workplace**—do you just keep your head down, or do you move toward the people around you?
 - Your **neighborhood**—are you hiding in your house, or are you walking over for a conversation?
 - Your **campus**—are you only in Christian circles, or have you made room for friendships with people who see the world differently?
- The church at its best doesn't retreat, and it doesn't attack—it **engages**.
 - Moved by a heart of love...
 - We move towards others in love.

[Transition]

- But it doesn't stop there.
- After seeing what Paul saw—let's hear what Paul said.

[WHAT PAUL SAID]

[State]

- Apparently, word of Paul's presence in Athens gets around.
 - And eventually, the philosophers decide to hear what he has to say for themselves.
 - So they bring him to the Areopagus—a kind of public forum or intellectual court—where Paul stands up and says, **V22: Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious.**
 - Now, watch what Paul does here—it's a master class in gospel engagement.
- **First**, he finds a point of connection.
 - **V23: As I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: "To the unknown god."**
 - Apparently, the Athenians had an insurance policy.
 - They had temples and altars to every god they knew of—but just in case they'd missed one, they also had an altar, **To the unknown god.**

- So, Paul points at it and says: *That God you don't know? Let me introduce you: V23: What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.*
 - Isn't this fascinating?
 - He doesn't start by telling them what they've got wrong.
 - He starts with something they already know.
 - He meets them where they are.
- **Second**, after finding a point of connection—he then proclaims who the real God is: And his description is full of rich theology:
 - **V24:** The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man. He is the **Creator**.
 - **V25:** 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 is also the **Sustainer**.
 - **V26:** 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. Every human being has been made by God, and he is **sovereign** over them all.
 - **V27:** that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us. The sovereign God is **near**.
 - **V28:** for “In him we live and move and have our being”; as even some of your own poets have said, “For we are indeed his offspring.”
 - Paul quotes two of their own poets—he's been doing his homework, reading their stuff.
 - To show them that the truth they half-know can be fully known.
 - And then, having drawn them in—he turns the corner: **VV29-31:** 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. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent 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.

[Illustrate]: In other words, Paul preaches the gospel:

- There is a God—he made you, he sustains you, he rules over you, and he is near.
- And one day, he will judge you.
 - He's appointed a Judge—Jesus—raised from the dead.
 - Repent and believe in him—and you will live.

[Apply]: Let me suggest three things we can do to engage like Paul.

First: Be Curious.

- Paul had obviously been paying attention—he can quote their poets!
- How well do we know the people around us who don't know Jesus?
 - Your friends, your colleagues, your kids.
 - Do you know what they read, what they listen to, what they long for, what they fear?
 - One of the most loving things we can do is pay attention—understand what makes them tick.
 - Read the bestsellers, listen to popular podcasts, pay attention to people's longings and fears.
 - Not so we can ambush them...
 - But so we can show them how Jesus meets their needs.
- You can't engage a culture you refuse to understand.

Second: Be Compassionate.

- Paul doesn't lead with anger, rage, or condemnation.
- Instead, he meets people where they are and tries to persuade them that Jesus is the one they've been looking for all along.
 - Your friend who sleeps around because they want to be wanted.
 - We could lead with judgment.
 - Or we could help them see they're already deeply loved.
 - Your relative who deals with fear by saving money.
 - We could lead with judgment.
 - Or we could share that a deeper security can be theirs in God.
 - Your spouse who always wants to be in control.
 - We could lead with judgment.
 - Or we could share the deeper rest we've found in God.
- Most of the things people are chasing aren't wrong—they're just looking for them in the wrong place. Compassion says:
 - I see and honor what you're longing for.
 - Let me show you where it's actually found.

Third: Be Clear.

- Paul's sermon moves from connection to clarity.
 - He meets them where they are—but he doesn't leave them there.
 - He quotes their poets—but he ends with resurrection and judgment.
 - He affirms what they've got right—but he also tells them they've done wrong.
- It's tempting, when we get into a spiritual conversation, to stay in the safe zone.
 - To talk about faith in general or God in general.
 - To keep things vague enough so no one gets uncomfortable.
- But Paul doesn't do that.
 - He doesn't end with: *There's a higher power and we should all be kind.*
 - Instead, he moves from connection to clarity—from the unknown god to the Savior who can be known.

- In other words, he speaks truth:
 - There is a God.
 - You belong to him.
 - You will answer to him.
 - But we can all be saved by Jesus.
- And we need to speak truth in our conversations too.
 - What changed me wasn't just believing in God—but trusting in Jesus.
 - What helped me wasn't just forgiving myself—but being forgiven by Jesus.
 - What gives me hope isn't vague positivity—but the fact that I belong to Jesus.
- The gospel will always have an edge.
 - It says we're not as good as we'd like to think.
 - That all of us need forgiveness.
 - That none of us are in control.
- But that same message is also the hope.
 - Don't stop short.
 - Name Jesus.
- Doing this doesn't guarantee a certain response.
 - We've seen this throughout Acts, and we see it again in our passage.
 - **VV32-34: When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, "We will hear you again about this." ... But some men joined him and believed.**
 - Some mocked. Some delayed. But others believed.
 - The same will be true in Knoxville.
 - As we've said throughout this series—we don't need to worry about that.
 - We do our part and leave the rest to God.

[Transition]: So, where does all this leave us? Two things as we close.

[THE CLOSE]

First, if you're not a Christian this morning—or you're still working it out.

- I want you to notice something about this passage.
 - Paul doesn't treat the Athenians as stupid.
 - He doesn't mock their questions.
 - He doesn't dismiss their longings.
 - He takes them seriously.
- And I want you to know—we take you seriously too.
 - If you've come with doubts, with questions, with objections to the whole thing...
 - You are welcome here.
- But can I invite you to notice something Paul says in **V27**?

- God made us so that we should seek God, and perhaps feel our way toward him and find him. He is not actually far from any of us.
 - Maybe you've been feeling your way in the dark for a while.
 - Maybe you've been looking to "unknown gods"—career, relationships, self-improvement, wellness, whatever.
 - And maybe somewhere in all of that—you've felt a longing for more.
- Here's the good news of this passage:
 - The God you've been looking for—is not far from you.
 - He has drawn near in Jesus—and he's looking for you.
 - He made you, he sustains you, he rules over you, and he sent his Son for you.
 - If you believe in him—you will be saved.
- He is the hope that can be yours today.
 - Don't be one who mocks.
 - Don't be one who delays.
 - Be the one who believes.
- If you'd like to talk more—please come find me after the service. I'd love to help you take that next step.

Second, if you are a Christian this morning—let me give you an invitation for the week.

- Remember the gospel:
 - God made you, he sustains you, he rules over you, and you are his.
 - Whatever struggles and difficulties you face—and we all face something—you have a peace that can never be taken away.
- And from that place of security, let's not **retreat** or **attack**—let's **engage**.
 - There are people in our lives—here in Knoxville—who need the hope of the gospel.
 - So even if you feel out of your depth, even if you feel like the dumbest person in the room—don't just pull a serious face and nod.
- Instead, move toward them with a heart of love—with curiosity, with compassion, with clarity.

That's the church at its best.

RESOURCES

Resources

This list includes some of the resources used to prepare this sermon series. Check them out if you want to dig a little deeper.

- John Calvin, *Commentary Upon the Acts of the Apostles*.
- Ray Cortese, *The Mission: Clarified, Mobilized, Empowered*.
- Dennis E. Johnson, *The Message of Acts in the History of Redemption*.
- Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Acts*.
- Alan Thompson, *Acts: A Commentary*.
- N. T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone—Part 1 and Part 2*.

Endnotes

¹ See N. T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone—Part 2*, 83-84.

² The retreat/attack/engage language draws on Tim Keller's sermon *A World of Idols*. For the broader theological framework, see also James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World*.