**The Gospel Explained**

Acts 17:16-34

This chapter gives us one of the clearest presentations of **the gospel to a pluralistic culture** like our own. The Greeks there in Athens had a cultural heritage of honoring a complex pyramid scheme of gods, headed by Zeus. But much of that worship was ***superficial and superstitious*** - it wasn’t deeply thought out or personal.

They had the same **division we have today** - where ***the common person*** held shallow beliefs and superstitious practices while ***the religious teachers*** had more detailed knowledge and a broad, liberal appreciation of many views. That’s what **pluralism** is - the liberal embrace, the tolerance and even celebration of many views, many gods. The credo of the pluralist is ***“everyone has part of the truth.”***

You’ve probably heard the analogy of **the blind men touching the elephant**. In this picture God is the elephant and the different religions are represented by blind men. One of these men is touching the body of the elephant and says ***“this is a wall.”*** Another blind man is touching the trunk and says, ***“this is a snake.”*** A third man is touching a leg and says, ***“this is a tree.”*** Of course the point is - none of them see the whole picture - they all have part of the truth, but not the whole truth.

**Theological liberals** love this analogy because it sounds so humble and affirming of all religions. “Come on,” they say, “We all have part of the truth - let’s appreciate and accept one another and agree that God is found in all of our religions!”

The problem with this approach is that the one asserting that all religions are partially true - **that person is claiming an objective, omniscient perspective**. ***They are claiming to not be blind***. They are saying that ***every major religion is blind*** while they - the modern liberal scholar - can see. Do see the profound arrogance of this picture? If all religious views are essentially blind then how would we ever know the truth of the whole picture? ***God could be an elephant or a hippo or a Tyrannosaurus Rex for that matter!***

We would have no way of knowing because we are all blind and every religious holy book is the documented work of a blind person!

Thankfully, while our understanding is limited, the elephant - which, remember, is God in this case - **the elephant has SPOKEN**. To stick with the analogy, the elephant has been saying for about 4,000 years now, “***Hey everyone, I’m an elephant***. Don’t let anyone tell you that I’m a snake or a wall or a tree, because that would be silly. I’m here - I exist - I’m talking to you - I want to show you who I really am so you don’t go around worshiping and serving false gods like trees and rocks and the sun and such.”

And the ultimate way God has spoken is through **the person of Jesus Christ**. In the fullness of time God sent His only Son to show the world, once and for all, what He is like. And Jesus, the Son of God, allowed himself to be killed on a Roman cross to prove that God is love - sacrificial, self-giving love. Then God the Father raised Jesus from the dead to prove that Jesus was His Son and that the sacrifice Jesus offered was sufficient to cover our sins! Praise the Lord, Jesus is alive!

***God is not an elephant - JESUS is God!***

Come with me to Acts 17 and let’s look at **the gospel Paul presented** to the people of Athens, as if he was sharing it right here in Tampa today! He gives us **three simple but powerful truths** about God. Let’s get started.

1. God is **Closer** than you think

“I perceive that in every way you are very religious… What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.” Acts 17:23

***The Athenians are rightly famous*** for their elaborate and beautiful archaeology and their detailed mythology and philosophy that has shaped civilization for two thousand years. Walking through their marketplace was discouraging to Paul - he was provoked in his spirit to see all of the idols - all of the misguided worship of the many Greek gods. In the middle of their religious market, Paul found statues to many gods and even one marked “to the unknown God.” Talk about covering all of your bases!

Picking up on their openness to the idea that there may well be a god they did not yet know, Paul announced to them that ***there is, indeed, a God who exists*** beyond and above their entire known system.

Aren’t you inspired by Paul’s boldness to step right into their religious discussion and make this claim? Isn’t this how we should approach people - stepping into their world to learn what they believe and then looking for ways to point them to the truth!

We had **Hindu neighbors** in Chicago we started to get to know and at one point they had us over for dinner. They couldn’t come to our house or eat with us anywhere else because they were so devoted to the worship of their gods that before Harsha, the dad, could eat he had to present some of the food to their gods at their little shrine. Of course, they also couldn’t eat meat.

By eating with them, we learned about these practices and asked them to share more about what they believed and how they worshiped. They told us about the primary Hindu God in their view, Krishna. They were delighted to talk about their ***Sunday worship*** - which often went for 6-8 HOURS, involving a lot of singing and DANCING. Don’t let me hear you complain about a service that goes more than 70 minutes! We’ll start planning 6-8 hour services with significant DANCING involved! Yes, you’re right, that’s a totally empty threat - a baseless bluff.

The saddest thing we learned is that they felt bound to rehearse their Hare Krishna ***mantra for 2-3 hours EVERY DAY***. They expressed this as a blessing but it felt to us like such bondage. They repeat, over and over again, the same phrases about Krisna being God, using prayer beads to keep track of how many times they pray the prayer. And they truly believe that if you miss a day of prayers or a Sunday of worship, bad things could happen to you. It is such a religion of BONDAGE!

Naturally, after listening to them, we shared our belief in Jesus - the freedom and joy we have in Him. They quickly stated that they too believe in Jesus - that Jesus is Krisna and Krisna is Jesus. ***We tried to explain*** it didn’t work that way, but that was as far as we got in that discussion. They came to a couple of our services and events, but unfortunately were too caught up in their beliefs to break free from them.

But this illustrates our first point:

1. God is **Closer** than you think

“He made from one man every nation of mankind… that they should seek God… yet he is actually not far from each one of us.” Acts 17:26-27

Paul moved from the religious practices he saw in Athens to point them to the truth. God is near you! The true, Creator God, is close to you if you will just seek after Him. Then Paul quoted **two ancient Greek poets**.

1. God is **Closer** than you think

“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.’” Acts 17:28

The first quote was from 600 BC in reference to Zeus. **Epimenides** wrote about Zeus’s tomb, claiming that Zeus was not dead but still alive - so he could claim “in him we live and move and have our being.” Zeus was the chief god in the Greek pantheon. By the time Paul was visiting Athens, more enlightened philosophers had moved beyond the idea that **Zeus** had come to earth in human form, believing he ***was now a mystical force, a transcendental power*** binding everything together. Sound familiar?

The second poem reference quotes a different Greek writer named **Aratus** who also presented Zeus as more than just the god of the sky and the storm - but as the ***controlling power behind and within the whole universe***. Paul says, in effect, your own Greek poets are right in one sense - there is an all-powerful God who rules over all things in the universe. But they are wrong in calling him Zeus and certainly wrong in worshiping a whole pantheon of gods. No, Paul says, **there is One God** - and (to quote Captain America) “I’m pretty sure he doesn’t dress like that.”

But notice what Paul is doing here - how he is ***connecting with their commonly held beliefs***. This is a great example for us as we reach out to people: start where people are! Explore their understanding of the universe - where did all of this come from? What holds it together? Do you believe in some kind of destiny or guiding hand behind things?

God has built into our souls an awareness of Him. “He is not far from each one of us.” That is our first lesson about God for the day - He is closer than you think. Here is the second.

1. God is **Greater** than you imagine

“The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man.” Acts 17:24

***Paul was grieved*** in his spirit by the fact that the people in Athens were spiritually minded but so badly misguided. They believed in the supernatural and a whole host of gods, but their gods were so small, so provincial - and mostly made of silver and gold!

As Paul walked around Athens he saw statues being bought and sold by people who **hoped to get some help from those statues**. By honoring Zeus they hoped for good crops. By worshiping Athena they hoped for wisdom. By making offerings to Aphrodite they prayed for fertility. Each god, each statue had an area of expertise, so you could tailor your worship according to your needs.

We look back on that superstitious idolatry and ***scoff at those simple minded pagan*** tree and sun worshipers. But if we’re honest, don’t we do the same things? Oh, we don’t worship gods of silver and gold, the gold standard and silver standard went away a long time ago.

* We worship the god of **the Almighty Dollar** and pray for more zeroes in our bank accounts.
* We pray to the god of **success, recognition, achievement** - serving this fickle deity, trying to reach the top of the ladder in whatever field we work.
* We devote ourselves to the god of **romance**, relationship and family.
* We bow down in service to **the American dream**.
* In short, we give ourselves in worship TO OURSELVES.

The primary idol in America is **the god of SELF**. Whom do you worship? Whom do you serve? In whom do you trust? Self. Self. Self. It might as well be a gregorian chant in our culture - “believe in yourself… follow your heart… pursue your dream… treat yo-self…” We have drums and songs and dances and rituals - they just don’t involve statues anymore.

***This should grieve our hearts.*** We should be broken over the fact that the people around us are worshiping gods of this broken, fallen world that cannot help them. It is fruitless, hopeless, tragic.

Why would you pray to a wooden carving or a gold statue? You wouldn’t! You would rightly say, “That’s a waste of time! That’s not going to do you any good!”

But we might as well have little shrines to ourselves on our nightstands and dressers as we dress ourselves up, indulge our every desire and go constantly to **the temple of our choosing** - the gym, if you worship the god of fitness; a restaurant, if you worship the god of indulgence; the bank, if you worship the god of financial security; the office, if you worship the god of career advancement; the bar, if you worship the god of romance… Pick your temple. You’ll find people worshiping there.

Here is the point: **God is so much greater** than our little tiny idols we worship.

* Why worship **MONEY** when you can worship the God who made the entire universe?
* Why worship **CAREER** when you can worship the God who gave you your mind and body and abilities?
* Why worship **FAMILY** when you can worship God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit?
* Why worship **YOURSELF** when you know you are weak and fragile and broken - and there is an Almighty, All-knowing, All-Glorious God in heaven?

Do you feel this truth Paul is proclaiming? **God is greater than you can imagine!** He doesn’t live in temples people have built…

1. God is **Greater** than you imagine

“Nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.” Acts 17:25

***Why would you worship a god who needs you to serve him?*** Why would you bow down and pray to a statue some human made? Why would you trust in an idol that can’t breathe or move or lift a finger to help you? You wouldn’t trust in a literal idol statue.

Yet **we do trust in 1,000 other idols**. But God is so much greater! He doesn’t need us to serve Him - He WANTS us to serve Him. He doesn’t need food, He gives us food!

1. God is **Greater** than you imagine

“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.” Acts 17:29

Idols were statues designed and made by PEOPLE. Athens was filled with those statues. And today is no different - **the idols are just dressed up** as Hollywood stars or business heroes or political icons. But these are still gods fashioned by “the art and imagination of man.”

Remember when **Brad Pitt** was all the rage? Everyone was obsessed with Brad Pitt - he got all the leading roles. He was with Jenn and that was so sweet when she was super famous. But then he did that movie with Angelina and she was a bigger deal, so he left Jenn and hooked up with Angelina and they were the big item.

**Hollywood** lives or dies by its art and imagination. They design and produce heroes for us to worship and emulate. And, unfortunately, we eat it up.

But ***God is so much greater*** than anything we can imagine or see on the silver screen. And this is the point Paul is driving at. First, God is closer than you think. Second, God is greater than you imagine. And third:

1. God is **Calling** you to Himself

“But now he commands all people everywhere to repent.” Acts 17:30

Notice, this is **not a suggestion**. “He COMMANDS.” And notice the audience addressed - “ALL PEOPLE EVERYWHERE.” That’s pretty comprehensive. It’s actually totally comprehensive. Not a single person ever is left out of that. God is calling everyone to come to Jesus in faith. “The times of ignorance God overlooked,” but now He demands repentance.

Think of ***the patience and mercy of God*** throughout history. For thousands of years God considered the world in “the times of ignorance.” They simply didn’t know much of anything. Even though Israel was there, even though prophets came, and some even went to far off places like Nineveh. Still, God knew the majority of people on earth were simply IGNORANT. So He didn’t just wipe them out for their immorality and idolatry. He let them live in spite of their disgusting and futile worship of other gods.

**No more**. When Jesus came everything changed. The times of ignorance ended. Feel the force of that “BUT NOW.” There is a thick red line in history separating the time BEFORE CHRIST from the time AFTER Christ. Before was the time of ignorance. Now is the time of TRUTH. The elephant has spoken! And he’s not an elephant. Paul goes on. “He calls all people to repent...”

1. God is **Calling** you to Himself

“Because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed.” Acts 17:31

There is a **final buzzer** that will sound bringing this game called HISTORY to an end. God has fixed that day. It has been established. And it is not very far away anymore.

**Jesus is coming back**. And when He does, it will not be like the first time - to die on a cross in humiliation. No, it will be to crush His enemies and usher in His glorious, eternal kingdom. It will be to judge every single person in perfect righteousness - bringing everything into the light that has been hidden in darkness, righting every wrong and making sure everyone gets exactly what they deserve.

If that does not make you tremble you didn’t hear what I said.

***The All-knowing, perfectly righteous JUDGE is coming***. His name is Jesus. We know this with absolute certainty because the Bible says it over and over. It is the nearly constant refrain of the Old Testament prophets. It was the primary message of John the Baptist - “His winnowing fork is in his hand and the Lord will clear his threshing floor and burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

And it was the message Jesus preached. Oh, the modern “Jesus” has been thoroughly sanitized and his “harder” sayings have been bleached out of common use. But Jesus talked a lot about judgment and hell, eternal suffering, the blazing fury of God’s terrible wrath.

Jesus knew all about this righteous judgment - because He is the one who faced it for us on the cross. In fact, ***Jesus is the only One who really knows*** what the full wrath of God feels like. None of us want to join Him in that knowledge. Nor do we want a single friend or loved one to experience that.

Lest we doubt it’s Jesus Paul is talking about, he makes it crystal clear.

1. God is **Calling** you to Himself

“A man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.” Acts 17:31

***Who else in history has come back from the dead?*** Who else has walked into the impregnable fortress of Death and come out again? The answer, of course, is no one. A few people were raised from the dead in the Old Testament, but that just prolonged their final death - they still died and then stayed dead for good. Same for Lazarus and the other people Jesus raised from the dead - they still died and had a funeral later on. And yes, Elijah and Enoch didn’t die but were swept up to heaven without dying.

***But all of those are different from JESUS***. He is the only One - ever - who died; fully dead, all the way deceased - three days in the tomb with no heartbeat, no brainwaves… and God breathed life back into His corpse, making Jesus the firstborn from among the dead, the first to receive a GLORIFIED, eternal, indestructible human body.

So let me summarize our message for today - the three truths about God all point to Jesus.

**The Truth about God:**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 1. God is **Closer** than you Think | 1. Jesus **Came** to us! |
| 1. God is **Greater** than you Imagine | 1. Jesus **Died** for us! |
| 1. God is **Calling** you to Himself | 1. Jesus **Demands** your total commitment |

***How close is God to us?*** Jesus brought the knowledge of God directly to each of us! He is the Son of God who stepped into history - literally enfleshing Himself in a fully human body. God could not have come closer than He did in the person of Jesus. Except maybe when you think about the Holy Spirit who approaches and pursues each of us personally, gently, graciously, consistently. **God is CLOSER** than you think!

And **God is greater** than you imagine! What proves the greatness and love of God once and for all? The Son of God died for you and for me! You may wrestle with the evil and suffering in the world or the personal struggles in your life. But if you just think about the cross - if you remember and really process all Jesus did for you as He suffered and died - you will see and feel and know, deep in your bones, that God is LOVE, He is GOOD, He is JUST.

And you’ll know that **God is calling you to Himself**. Amazing, impossibly, the Creator God who reigns over the Universe and upholds it by the word of His power, wants YOU. He wants ME. He calls us, like a shepherd calling His lost sheep - and you know it. You already know what His voice sounds like. Listen to verse 30 and 31.

C. Jesus **Demands** your full commitment

“But now he commands all people everywhere to repent… he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed.” Acts 17:30-31

Have you bowed to King Jesus? Have you surrendered completely to Him? This is not a suggestion, it is a COMMAND. We do not come to Jesus to barter terms of surrender, He demands unconditional, total surrender. He sets the terms. We fall on our knees and beg for mercy.

And **TODAY is the time of God’s favor.** TODAY is the Day of Salvation! Now God has offered terms of forgiveness and peace. But that offer will soon expire. On that last day when Jesus appears “every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.” But at that point it will be too late for sinners to repent and call on Jesus to save them.

NOW - right now - is the time sinners must repent and call on the Name of the Lord.