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Sermon Notes

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Paul's Timeless Witness to a Pagan City

Acts 17:15-34

In June of 2007, I was in Greece with my daughter, Jenny, to preach at a missionary conference. We had the opportunity to visit the Acropolis, with its famous ancient ruin standing hundreds of feet over the modern, bustling city of Athens. As we were climbing up the winding road to the top of that famous mountain, I saw a small, rocky outcropping, a little rocky knob jutting out of the side of that mountain. I saw a small sign and some stairs leading up to the top of that rocky knob... As we walked over to it, I suddenly realized what it was... it was Mars Hill, the place where the Apostle Paul had preached the gospel to the Greek philosophers that met there every day. Those brilliant but arrogant men demeaned and insulted Paul, but his words were recorded by the Holy Spirit in Acts 17, and were cast in raised Greek letters in a small bronze plaque and mounted there. His message ended with these words:

Acts 17:31 For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.

As Jenny and I stood and looked at those words, most of the tourists and guides walked by the plaque without even a glance. Actually, on the rock where the plaque was mounted, there was ugly graffiti from irreverent people. Far down below, the modern residents of Athens drove to and from their places of business and their residences, many of them without a single

thought to the central reality of Paul's message and of this text this morning...

JUDGMENT DAY!

Our task in this world is to prepare bustling ignorant people who never think about God or eternity... to prepare them for standing before Christ on that final day. For the last three months, many of us at FBC have been preparing our hearts in prayer to be powerful evangelists... since that prayer emphasis began, COVID-19 struck us... it is the greatest pandemic in the history of our country (though not of the world... the Black Death of the 14th century was far more devastating)

Many of our neighbors and co-workers in the Triangle will be asking ultimate life questions for years to come based on these shocking events. It is for us as Christians to tell them the truth... to prepare everyone we encounter for the Judgment Day that is certainly coming on the Earth... a Judgment Day at which Jesus Christ will sit enthroned to judge the living and the dead. It is for us to tell them the GOOD NEWS, that sins are forgiven through faith in Jesus, and that we can all live forever even after death, as Jesus' own mighty resurrection from the dead has proved.

This morning, I am going to walk through one of the greatest examples of evangelistic preaching found in the Bible... the Apostle Paul at Mars Hill in Athens almost two thousand years ago. We're going to see how timeless are his thoughts, and how relevant for evangelizing the people who surround us in this city... intelligent people, many of them scholars and philosophers in their own right, with amazingly many of the same philosophies and worldviews that the people Paul was preaching to that day.

I. The Gospel of Christ and the Calling of Paul

A. The Person and Work of Jesus Christ

1. Acts is the second of a two-volume set about Christ... Luke-Acts... it begins with the announcement to Mary about her son

Luke 1:31-32 You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David

2. Then the Gospel of Luke unfolds the mighty words and mighty deeds of Jesus Christ... proving the deity of Christ; culminating in his death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead

Luke 24:39 Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have."

B. The Gospel Command of Jesus Christ

***Acts 1:8-9 you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."* ⁹ After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.**

This was the final command of Jesus Christ to the church... the lasting commission to take the gospel of his salvation to the very ends of the earth.

- C. The Power of the Holy Spirit... poured out like a flood of fire from heaven on the Day of Pentecost... resulting in 3000 baptisms

D. God's Strategic Preparation of Paul

Saul of Tarsus... Amazing triangulation of three world cultures

1. Quintessential **Jewish man**, zealous for the traditions of his Jewish ancestors
2. Steeped in **Greek culture**: Born and raised in Tarsus... a truly Hellenistic city; saturated in pride in the Greek way of life; Paul

was trained in Greek rhetoric and philosophy; he had memorized Greek poets and philosophers.

3. He also was born a **Roman citizen**... his father was a Roman citizen and conferred that exalted and privileged status to his son

E. Paul's Own Conversion

1. The story told THREE TIMES in the Book of Acts...
2. Paul was the henchman of the Sanhedrin in its persecution of the church... Acts 8 says Paul was destroying the church
3. The morning of his conversion, Paul was breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples

Acts 9:3-6 As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" ⁵ "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. ⁶ "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

F. Paul's Fruitfulness

1. By the time we get to Acts 17 and Athens, Paul was in the midst of his second missionary journey
2. The first one, with Barnabas, resulted in churches being planted in Cyprus and in modern-day Turkey, Paul's home region
3. This second missionary journey was with Silas, and had already resulted in churches being planted in Greece—Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea

G. Paul's Personal Torments

1. Paul was persecuted and oppressed wherever he went... first by the Jews, then by Gentiles
2. Paul had been beaten and imprisoned in Philippi; Paul's enemies had caused a riot in Thessalonica, and Paul escaped at night

3. By the time Paul got to Athens, he was probably at one of the lowest points of his ministry... he was alone in this great city waiting for his friends to join him

II. The City of Athens: Brilliant but Dark Paganism

A. One of the Greatest Cities in History

1. Magnificent buildings: architecture that has stood even to this present day
2. The Acropolis, soaring above Athens, with three temples including the Parthenon... built sometime around 447 B.C. and STILL STANDING after almost 2500 years... their knowledge of mathematics and architecture was staggering
3. Athens itself was the center for world knowledge, boasting some of the greatest thinkers the world had ever seen: Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Pythagoras, Democritus... the names go on and on
4. A reflection of both human potentiality and human corruption
 - a. Potentiality... created in the image of God; able to do astonishing things with the amazing brains God gave us
 - b. Corruption... in their IDOLATRY

Acts 17:16 the city was full of idols.

Romans 1:22-23 Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

- c. One ancient writer said "It is easier to find a god in Athens than a person"
- d. Therefore, overwhelmed with demons... and darkness

1 Corinthians 10:20 the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons.

B. Paul's Reaction

1. Alone in this great city, he looked around at what was there

2. Instead of being impressed by the great architecture and the evidence of human brilliance, he was DEEPLY DISTRESSED

Acts 17:16 While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.

- a. The Greek word implies a high level of emotional anguish
- b. He walked around looking at their objects of worship and was torn up inside over it

Application: Do we have this kind of response? Are we in anguish over the lostness of the people of Durham, Raleigh, Chapel Hill? We have our own philosophers and scientists and achievers who are building idols to their own ingenuity here at Duke and UNC and the Research Triangle Park

Do we see the spiritual darkness behind the brilliance?

3. His response was to PREACH THE GOSPEL with reasoned arguments both in the synagogue and the marketplace

Acts 17:17 So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there.

The synagogue was his usual starting place, and there he reasoned from Scripture with his fellow Jews.

But the marketplace was as pagan as it got... a noisy din of meat sellers and merchants and political figures and wranglers saying "Step right this way!" like a carnival.

Paul dove right in and began to talk to whomever he "chanced to meet" (literally)... notice his zeal, for he did it DAILY

C. The Invitation to Mars Hill

1. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers listened and were disdainful but interested... they invited him to the Areopagus

Epicureans = the goal of human life is personal happiness, resulting from absence of physical pain and mental disturbance; they also believed in atomistic materialism, and a naturalistic account of evolution, from the formation of the world to the emergence of human societies. Epicurus believed he could disprove the possibility of the soul's survival after death, and hence the prospect of punishment in the afterlife. The elimination of the fear of judgment would leave people free to pursue their own pleasures, both physical and mental

Stoics: Stoicism was one of the new philosophical movements of the Hellenistic period. They believed that emotions like fear or envy (or impassioned sexual attachments, or passionate love of anything whatsoever) arose from false judgements and that the sage – a person who had attained moral and intellectual perfection – would not undergo them. The sage is utterly immune to misfortune and that virtue is sufficient for happiness. Our phrase 'stoic calm' perhaps encapsulates the basic idea of these claims.

The Athenians did nothing but talk about and listen to the latest ideas, like a bunch of those chess player hustlers in Central Park New York, ready to challenge you to a game of chess, ready to wipe the board with you and prove their superiority.

Tremendous amount of arrogance in the statement... "*What is this babbler trying to say?*" A "babbler" = "seedpicker"; like an intellectual vagabond, a philosopher HOB0 who has a tattered bag of ideas and wanders around adding to his collection with no filter or organizing theme.

But, at least they were intrigued... Paul's boldness in the marketplace won him a hearing at Mars Hill. Now it was time to speak.

And given that our own culture is becoming more and more philosophical, pagan, in love with science and technology, and more and more hostile to Christianity, it is beneficial to sit at the master evangelists' feet and learn from him

III. Paul's Strategic Message

A. "To An Unknown God"

Acts 17:22-23 "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. ²³ For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.

1. Paul is a fascinating speaker... he connects with them, shows an interest in their city and their culture
2. BUT he goes right to the matter at hand... Paul doesn't waste time on philosophy or architecture or history or politics... he talks about their RELIGION.
3. We can learn a lesson here... Andy Winn mentioned in his sermon a few months ago about evangelism, **"Speak of Jesus early and often..."** So we see here with Paul; but notice that while he speaks immediately of religion, he doesn't speak immediately of Christ... he begins with God the Creator
4. "To an unknown God"... how tragic and pathetic is this polytheism and idolatry... they have hundreds and thousands of gods and shrines and temples and monuments... but it is never enough; lest they should offend anyone they have missed, they have a single altar there "To an unknown God"—Paul SEIZES on this, a foothold from which he can gain a landing in enemy territory like on D-Day. The true God is not represented by any of their many idols and shrines and temples; but this lonely perhaps obscure altar is just the ticket... the UNKNOWN GOD
5. And since Paul immediately goes to God the Creator, may I suggest we learn to do the same thing; speak to visiting scholars from China or unchurched highly educated researchers in pharmaceutical companies or drifting poor people who have never been to church and have no religious background... start with the "Theater of God's Glory"—creation

6. Paul's mission: "What you worship as something unknown, **I am now going to PROCLAIM to you**"; friendship and acts of kindness only go so far; truth about God must be PROCLAIMED

B. God the Creator

Acts 17:24-25 "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. ²⁵ 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.

1. God made the world and everything in it
2. This is **the existence question** of apologetics... **why is there SOMETHING rather than NOTHING**
3. The question of origins is vital to all that follows; the creation/evolution debate is not some sidetrack, but is essential to a proper worldview
4. Materialistic atheism makes a god of created matter, basically saying the universe created itself at the Big Bang
5. I do not have time to get into all the ways that worldview is staggeringly flawed, but it's worth listing just a few
 - a. Evolution is BAD SCIENCE, because it has no answer to three basic questions
 - i) First, where did the first living cell come from?
 - ii) Second, why doesn't the fossil record show a continual development of species?
 - iii) Third, what good is 60% of an evolved wing? Or eyeball? Or any other exquisitely complex organ that requires all of its component parts to be fully functional or it won't work?
 - b. Evolution cannot answer **the purpose question**: if everything is evolved from non-personal matter, what is the purpose of life?

- c. Evolution cannot answer **the morality question**: What basis is there for any morality at all, if there is no God?
- d. Evolution cannot answer **the destination question**: Where is everything heading?

6. But the Bible settles all this right from the start!

Genesis 1:1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

- 7. And Paul preaches it clearly here... ***“The God who made the world and everything in it...”*** But only by faith will anyone be able accept this (Heb. 11:3)

C. God the Ruler

- 1. Paul goes beyond this to speak of God’s sovereign right to rule the universe he has made

Acts 17:24 “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth...”

- 2. Lord of heaven and earth = sovereign ruler... he made it, he rules it
- 3. By this we know that God makes laws and rules by which we should be governed

- a. The Ten Commandments:

I am the Lord... you shall have no other gods;

You shall not make any idols nor worship any idols

You shall not take the name of the Lord in vain

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy; do all your work in six days and rest on the seventh, for God made heaven and earth in six days and rested on the seventh

Honor your father and mother

You shall not murder

You shall not commit adultery

You shall not steal

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor

You shall not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor

b. The Two Great Commandments

Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, strength

Love your neighbor as yourself

4. This is essential to our salvation, for the essence of sin is rebellion against God's sovereign kingly rule
5. Therefore, salvation is YIELDING GLADLY to God's kingly rule

Mark 1:15 "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"

In other words, stop your rebellion against my laws! Submit gladly to me!

D. The Folly of Idolatry

Acts 17:24-25 "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. ²⁵ 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.

Acts 17:29-30 "Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone-- an image made by man's design and skill. ³⁰ In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.

1. Their altar "TO AN UNKNOWN GOD" shows how foolish is this idolatry... because even with all their gods, they were still insecure, afraid of missing one who might be offended
2. They do not realize how offended God is at their demeaning of his glory

Henry Martyn, the great missionary to India in the early 19th century. A Muslim man in India told Martyn that Muslim Prince Abbas Mirza had killed so many Christians that Christ came down from the fourth heaven and took hold of the hem of Muhammad's garment begging him to desist. This was merely a vision or a dream had by one man. But when Martyn heard of it he was overwhelmed with horror. Martyn wrote "I was cut to the soul at this blasphemy." [picturing Jesus kneeling in submission to Muhammad and begging him for something.] When asked by this was so offensive he answered, "I could not endure existence if Jesus were to be thus dishonored." His Muslim visitor was astonished and again asked why. Martyn answered, "If anyone plucked out your eyes, there is no explaining why you feel pain. It is a feeling. It is because I am one with Christ that I am thus dreadfully wounded."

The Apostle Paul felt this deep in his soul... deeply offended at the city of Athens full of idols. But his zeal for the glory of God and of Christ and Henry Martyn's are like flickering candles compared to God's zeal for his own glory. Idolatry deeply offends him... to the very core of his being

3. Look at the specifics of what Paul says

a. God DOES NOT LIVE IN TEMPLES BUILT BY MEN

[Solomon] *1 Kings 8:27 The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!*

b. God is not SERVED by human hands AS IF HE NEEDED ANYTHING

i) God has never NEEDED anything and he never will

ii) God is a perfectly FULL being; he actually GIVES to all human beings life and breath and everything else

iii) He doesn't NEED you at all... that doesn't mean we can't serve God; it does mean he doesn't need us to serve him at

all; and everything you would ever give to God in worship and service is HIS ALREADY

- c. God is not made by man's design and skill out of gold or silver or stone or anything... actually man is made by God's design and skill

Psalm 139:13-15 For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. ¹⁴ I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made

E. God the Creator, Sustainer, and Ruler of All Humanity

1. God the Creator of all humanity

Acts 17:25 he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.

Acts 17:26 From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth

2. God the sustainer of every human being

Acts 17:28 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'

Paul is quoting pagan poets here; the basic message is our continued existence constantly relies on God

Daniel 5: you did not honor the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways.

3. God the sovereign ruler of every human being

Acts 17:26 From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live.

This is staggering! God made every nation of humanity from one man, Adam... and God orchestrated through his sovereign will and providential control the places where they would live; he actually ASSIGNS to nations their boundaries and how long they will live there and how powerful they will be

So the Greek empire of Alexander the Great went from Macedonia across Persia, down through Egypt and as far west as India not merely because Alexander the Great was an amazing warrior and empire builder, but because God orchestrated it for his purpose; and God ordained that Alexander would die at the height of his power, and that his empire would be divided four ways, none of them having anywhere near the same power

So also every nation in history... God ordained how long the Mongols would rule 25% of the earth's land, and when they would sink back into obscurity; God determined how long the Apache would rule the plains of North America, and when the Europeans would come with their superior technology and their greater numbers and defeat them.

F. God Seeks People to Worship Him

Acts 17:26-27 he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. ²⁷ 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.

1. God sent the apostle Paul to declare the UNKNOWN GOD to them
2. How marvelous it is that God is reaching out to all people everywhere... Paul has been proclaiming a TRANSCENDENT God; but now he turns to the nearness of God!!
3. The Immanence of God... God is NEAR us... we move in him, for he sustains our very existence at every single moment of our lives
4. God wants people to KNOW him and have an intimate relationship with him... finding our delight in worshiping his glory

G. God Calls All People Everywhere to Repent

Acts 17:30 In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.

1. The idolatry of these pagans is not okay... it's not just some other option

2. It incenses God to the core, but he has been very patient with all the idolatries of the nations; what Paul calls IGNORANCE
3. But that amnesty is coming to an end

H. Judgment Day is Coming

Acts 17:31 For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed.

The pagan philosophies and false religions all have man's sin at their roots... they explain away a powerful holy God so they can sin as much as they want and not need to give an account for it

But Judgment Day is coming... and God will judge every single person on the face of the earth with JUSTICE

That day is SET by God's own purpose; he alone knows when it is

I. Christ's Resurrection Proves His Role as Judge

Acts 17:31 He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.

1. Paul says that this judgment will be done BY THE MAN HE HAS APPOINTED... Jesus Christ

John 5:22-23 the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, ²³ that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father.

2. Jesus will judge the whole world with justice
3. The proof of Jesus' role is his RESURRECTION FROM THE DEAD
4. Next week we will celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead... Paul uses it here as PROOF of life after death, and therefore of judgment after death; and of Jesus' RIGHT to judge the world

IV. The Varied Reactions of the Athenians

A. Sneering Rejection by Many

Acts 17:32 When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered

Neither the Epicureans nor the Stoics had any room in their philosophies for a resurrection of the body... it was ABSURD!

SO... they SHUT HIM DOWN! Paul didn't get to finish!!

B. Piqued Interest by Some

Acts 17:32 but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject."

C. Genuine Faith by a Few

Acts 17:34 A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others

So it will be for us, as we faithfully share the gospel to modern pagans from Durham, Raleigh, or Chapel Hill

Some of them will mock us... some of them might be interested in carrying on a conversation

And some might very well repent and believe the good news

V. Applications

A. What About YOU??

1. As you hear me today, are you among those who have believed in Christ for the salvation of your soul?
2. Are you clinging to your own religion of your own making... with a little of the old "eat, drink, and be merry" philosophy of the Epicureans? Or the materialistic atheism that frees you from judgment day?

3. Or do you see in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ your only hope for surviving Judgment Day?
- B. Christians... Learn from the Apostle Paul
1. Our time of extraordinary prayer for the spread of the gospel is almost over
 2. Now, we need to go share the gospel with as many people as we can... COVID-19 has made people ask ultimate questions about life and death like few things in our lifetimes!
 3. Learn from Paul: grieve deeply over the idolatries of our age! Grieve over the lostness! Be deeply perplexed by the way people are rebelling against God to feed their own desires
 4. Reason with people... study his different approaches to evangelism... one approach to the religious Jews in the synagogue, quoting lots of scriptural texts—commands and prophecies; a different approach on Mars Hill where he used their own city and their own poets and their own philosophies as pre-evangelism
 5. Be PERSISTENT and BOLD like Paul...
 6. Let's keep PRAYING like the early church did for the power of the Holy Spirit
 7. Leave the results to God!