

O Church Arise: Through the Book of Acts

A City Full of Idols (Acts 17:16-34)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on July 5, 2015

Introduction

- ❖ I know a couple times we've mentioned our ministry theme of going *Into the City*, but we really haven't unpacked it. That's because ministry around here really operates along an academic calendar (a September to August schedule), so we're waiting till September to work out that theme in a dedicated series.
 - ▶ But this idea of going *Into the City* is derived from our previous theme of being a church *For the City*. We've talked about being a church that's for the city. For *our* city of Houston. For the good of our neighbors in all dimensions, especially the spiritual.

- ❖ Now in being for the city, we're not naive. We understand that cities are places of problem. Places in great need of the gospel of Jesus. But we also recognize that cities are places of potential for the mission of Jesus.
 - ▶ But for us to tap into that potential. To leverage it for the glory of God and the good of all our neighbors, we can't stand aloof or distant. We can't retreat into our churches. **We must intentionally enter into the heart of our city.** And from there (within its heart) **discern** the city's idols. **Expose** its idols. And **confront** its idols with the gospel.

- ❖ This was Paul's approach whenever he entered a new city. **Because he knew if you fail to confront the idols of the heart, if you leave them be, if they remain undisturbed, then you can't expect any real change in a city.** It's like going after a symptom without addressing the underlying disease. It's like trying to floss more because you're told that's how you deal with swollen and bleeding gums. But not realizing that bleeding gums can actually be a symptom of heart disease. So here you are swishing Listerine every night but totally unaware that your heart is diseased and dying.
 - ▶ So if we go into the city to deal with poverty, with hunger, with human trafficking, with illiteracy and failing schools – but completely ignore the idols underneath these problems – then we've yet to address the real disease at the heart of our city.

- ❖ And the same goes for individuals. **The reason why so many people claim a conversion experience but evidence no real change or growth in their lives is because their idols have gone untouched and undisturbed.** They can comfortably sit through a service and a small group meeting because no one has challenged their heart idols. So long as an idol is allowed to rule the heart (the control center of our lives), then they've yet to be truly converted and transformed by the gospel of Jesus.

- ❖ **Friends, if we want to see real change in our lives, real change in our city, then we have to call out and confront the idols that reside in the heart of the city and the hearts of its people.** That's how Paul did it. He took on his city's idols in his gospel preaching. The best example of this would be the short-lived but significant time he spent in Athens.
 - ▶ Here in Acts 17:16-34 he offers a great example of how to speak the gospel into a city full of idols. There are five things he teaches: 1) Where to go. 2) What to look for. 3) Why to speak. 4) What to say. 5) How to say it.

Where to Go

- ❖ The first lesson to learn from Paul's example is *where to go*. Paul wants to make the greatest impact he can for the gospel's sake, so he likes to go to strategic cities. And once he's there, he goes to where he believes he can best observe and discern the idols at the heart of the city.
- ❖ At the end of chapter 16, Paul is whisked away from Berea where opposition was brewing, and he arrives at Athens to wait for Silas and Timothy. Now Athens was as strategic of a city as you could get. **Athens was the intellectual and cultural capital of the Greco-Roman world.**
 - ▶ The city was into the production and exportation of ideas. It was home to great minds like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. The ideas and culture developed in Athens was exported throughout the empire impacting the thought life of every man, woman, and child. Just imagine the intellectual pull of Cambridge, MA and the culture-shaping influence of Manhattan and Hollywood all combined into one city. That's Athens.
- ❖ And that's where Paul wants to be. Not for fun and adventure. Not for the life experience. Or just to try something different. **No, he wants to be in a strategic city like Athens because of the strategic role it could play in his gospel mission of witnessing to Christ.**
 - ▶ Have you asked yourself: *Why do I want to apply to this or that school? Why do I want to switch jobs and move to this or that city? Why do I want to leave Houston and try something different?* More often than not, we're driven by a personal preference or personal ambition. And I'm not saying those can't be factors, but in our decision-making do we even factor in the strategic location of this or that city for the sake of our gospel mission? That's what we can learn from Paul.
- ❖ Now when he arrives in Athens, Paul shows us where to go to best observe and discern the city's idols. First, he visits a house of worship. He goes to the synagogue and teaches the Jews and God-fearers. Houses of worship give a feel for the religious climate of a city.
 - ▶ **But to really know a city, to know what makes it tick, you've got to go to the marketplace (the *agora*; v17).** Now when you hear "marketplace" don't picture a farmer's market or a night market. The *agora* was not just a marketplace of goods but of ideas. A marketplace of ideas and culture.
- ❖ The *agora* was the city's central public square where you'd find temples, law courts, libraries, shops, theaters, galleries, etc. There you'd find city officials, judges, philosophers, thinkers, and of course merchants and vendors.
 - ▶ So when Paul wants to talk about religion, when he wants to share his faith, he goes to the marketplace. *The* public square. Which is so counter to what's expected today. **In our culture, you're supposed to keep your faith private.** Don't bring it to the marketplace. Don't inject your religion into public life, into the public square.
 - **But as Christians, we cannot *but* be public with our faith.** Paul explains why a little later on in v20. There he describes God as the one who made the world and everything in it. He's the Lord of heaven and earth.

- ❖ If that's true, then he's also Lord of the public square. Lord of the marketplace. **So how can we keep this God and our faith in him private?** We can't compartmentalize our faith to just what happens in our personal devotions or our local church. We take Jesus with us wherever we go.
 - ▶ But I guess the real question is do we even go into the city's marketplace? Do we regularly interact and communicate with every day people, every day pagans and secular people? Or are we so preoccupied with church activities that we never have the time to enter the marketplace like Paul and closely observe our city?

What to Look For

- ❖ But then the question is: *Once we go to the marketplace what should we be looking for?* Paul shows us **what to look for**. We go looking for our city's idols. Athens, we're told, was a city full of idols (v16). That phrase literally conveys the idea of the city being *under* the idols. It's like saying the city was submerged or swamped with idols. They were everywhere. One ancient writer joked that you were more likely to meet a god in Athens than a person.
- ❖ Now you might be thinking, *"Sure, Athens was a city full of idols. I've been there. I've seen all the statues of stone. But that's not us. That's not Houston. We're not swamped with idols."*
 - ▶ Well sure we don't have statues lining the streets. But that doesn't mean our city is clean of idols and idolatry. **An idol is *not* just an image carved in wood or stone.** I know that's the conception most modern people have of idol worship.
- ❖ We think we're so much more advance than these primitive cultures, but in fact we're still worshipping the same idols. **We just know by their modern names: Career, Education, Beauty, Love, Marriage, Pleasure.** But the Greeks called them: Hermes (commerce), Apollo (knowledge), Aphrodite (beauty/love), Hera (marriage), Dionysus (wine/celebrations).
 - ▶ So we're not that different. Don't buy the lie that we modern people are somehow more sophisticated than ancient people. **We still worship the same idols. We just call them by different names, and they appear to us in different forms.**
- ❖ So if you think about it, anything could be an idol. It doesn't have to be something inherently evil, harmful, or frightening. A **career** can be a good thing, but if you turn it into an ultimate thing – where you're willing to sacrifice your children, your marriage, your health to satisfy its demands – then your career has become Hermes, the god of business and commerce.
 - ▶ The **desire to marry** is a good thing, but if it grows so strong to the point that you're willing to sacrifice your convictions, values, and standards just to have a special someone in your life, then it's no longer marriage you're seeking. It's Hera, the goddess of marriage. **That's how idolatry works: Good things are elevated and turned into ultimate things that end up achieving god-like status and control over our lives.**
- ❖ And no one is immune to this. We all worship something. Even the most ardent atheists worships something. **Everyone has something in their lives, that if they lost it, then they've lost the will to live.** It's so central to you, that you can't imagine a meaningful life without it.

That's what you worship. So what is it for you? *What is it that you're living for that's so important that your life essentially depends on it?*

- ▶ This is how you know if you're really a Christian. If that central thing for you is Christ alone. I love lots of things and lots of people on earth. But if you took them all away but left me Jesus – there will be grief for sure – but there will be contentment. Because Jesus will still be there. And he's enough. That's how you know you're a Christian.

- ❖ When you share the gospel, if you're not helping people discern their heart idols, then they might embrace Christian values, a Christian lifestyle, a Christian vocabulary – but their hearts still bend the knee to a god besides Christ. **That's how it's possible for people to claim to be Christians, but you don't see the kind of change you'd expect if Christ reigned supreme over their hearts.** It's because their idols have yet to be dethroned.

- ❖ **So if we're on a mission to speak the gospel into our city, and if we want to see gospel transformation, then we have to confront the idols of our city, of our culture.** But that first requires identifying them. *How do you do that?*
 - ▶ Look at what Paul does. In v23, he says he passed along the city and observed the objects of their worship. He walked the city and carefully studied it. He conversed with the thinkers and culture-shapers of the day. Epicurean and Stoic philosophers (v18).

- ❖ **Epicureans** were essentially secular agnostics. They didn't deny the existence of the gods but saw them as distant and far removed. They're not involved. So there's no order, no rhyme or reason to the events of your life. It's all random chance and then you die. After which there's no final judgment, no accountability. You simply cease to exist. **So for an Epicurean, the chief end of man is to ... enjoy.** To eat, drink, be merry as much as you can before you die.
 - ▶ Stoics were the rival school of thought. They were pantheists who saw God as an impersonal force. Stoics were fatalistic and believed in a cruel fate. **So the chief end of man is to endure life's hardships with a stiff upper lip.** Don't get too attached to anything or anyone. Don't let emotions control you. Conceal. Don't feel. Put on a show.

- ❖ These were the dominant schools of thought in Athens shaping the worldview of its citizens. So if you can grasp the dominant philosophies of a city, if you can understand what its people are chasing, then you get a far better sense of their idols.
 - ▶ **Epicureans idolize pleasure.** They chase after pleasure to avoid contemplating the futility of life. **Stoics idolize discipline.** They want self-control, to be free of passions and led by pure reason, because they're trying to cope with the pain of life.

- ❖ Do you see what this means? **If you better understand the underlying philosophies that shape people's thinking (their worldview), then you can better identify their idols.** That's the point. So what about us? What's shaping our thinking?

- ❖ I think for us there are two clashing philosophies undergirding two clashing cultures. **On one hand, you have traditional cultures that elevate honor and the family.** They become idols. If you lose your honor or do anything to dishonor the family, your life is not worth living. This is why honor-killing makes sense in these cultures.
 - ▶ **But on the other hand, you have western culture that elevates freedom and the individual.** Those are our idols. So the greatest insult and offense is to try to limit or restrict my personal autonomy. To suggest that my beliefs or behaviors are wrong. Because you're attacking my gods, my idols.
- ❖ **If we want to see the gospel truly penetrate and transform a city, then we can't ignore the cultural idols of its people.** We have to identify them and call them out whether they're the idols of traditional cultures (i.e. Asian) or western culture. But before we speak up like Paul does starting in v22, we need to check our hearts and our motives.

Why to Speak

- ❖ That leads to our third point. Another lesson we learn from Paul is **why to speak**. Why to confront people with their idols. In v16 we're told exactly why Paul spoke up. While he was waiting in Athens, *"his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols."*
 - ▶ That word "provoked" (*paroxyno*) is where we get the medical term paroxysm. A paroxysm is a severe outburst or attack like you might experience in a seizure. **Luke is suggesting that Paul has a paroxysm of grief seeing the city swamped with idols.**
 - That same Greek word is used in the Septuagint (Greek OT) to describe God's reaction to idolatry (cf. Isa. 65:3; Hos. 8:5). It's an emotion closely related to jealousy. Which is attributed to God himself. Exodus 34:14, *"for you shall worship no other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God."*
- ❖ **Jealously, at its root, is the resentment of rivals.** And though it carries a negative connotation in our day, it's not necessarily a moral flaw to be jealous. It depends on the context. If you're jealous of someone's intellect, beauty, or talent, then yes that's wrong. You have no right to be jealous because you have no claim to an exclusive right over those things.
 - ▶ But if a wife is jealous of a rival to her husband's heart, then that's a righteous and proper emotion. Because she does have an exclusive right to her husband's affections.
- ❖ **If God is Lord of heaven and earth, he has every right to be jealous when idols try to woo the affections of those whom he created for a relationship.** Paul gets that. More importantly he feels that. He feels God's jealousy when he sees these idols. He's equally provoked.
 - ▶ Likewise, the reason why we speak up and confront idols has got to be more than mere duty or mere compassion for the lost. **In the end, we speak because of our passion for God's glory. Our zeal, our jealousy to see his name rightfully praised.**
- ❖ So we need to ask: Why don't I speak up like Paul? Why am I hesitant to confront the cultural idols in my city? **Perhaps we don't speak like Paul because we don't feel like Paul.** We're not provoked by idols. We're not jealous enough for God to receive all the worship and glory.

Perhaps before we speak to others, we need to speak to God and pray for a greater zeal, a great passion, a greater sense of jealousy for his name.

What to Say

- ❖ But when you finally are provoked, when you experience that paroxysm of grief, then you're ready to speak. *So what do you say to the culture?* That's our fourth lesson: **What to say**. In v18 we're told some were curious about what Paul was teaching. They assume he's a preacher of foreign deities. Jesus and the resurrection. Concepts they've never heard before.
 - ▶ So they bring him to the *Areopagus* (Mar's Hill). Commentators suggest he probably faced a council of the intelligentsia. Like a philosopher's review board trying to determine if he should be censored or given a free pass to preach his message.

- ❖ He begins by pointing out their admitted ignorance. He stumbled across an altar with this inscription: To the unknown god (v23). **For being the intellectual capital of the known world, it's ironic how when it comes to the most important truth in all the world, they were ignorant.** They didn't know. They had an altar to an unknown god.
 - ▶ He's not suggesting they actually worship the one true God but just without knowing his name. Paul's emphasis in on their ignorance. And now – what they cannot name or rightly know – Paul will explain.

- ❖ He starts by explaining that **1) God is the God of creation.** In contrast to Stoicism, God is Creator. Not a part of creation. **2) God is not confined to a temple** where he has to be attended to by priests. He is not *“served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.”* (v25)

- ❖ **3) God is the God and Sovereign of all nations, all peoples.** It says in v26 that God made from one man (Adam) every nation of mankind to live on the face of the earth. God is God over everyone. And he *“determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place”* (v26). So he gives order and purpose to the events of our lives – in direct contrast to Epicureanism, which taught everything is random.
 - ▶ And in contrast to Stoicism, our lives are not guided by some impersonal force but by a God who orders our lives in such a way that we might have a relationship with him. Look at 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”*.

- ❖ Paul's point is this: **If you were created by a personal God for relationship, then it's ridiculous to think you can fashion a lifeless, speechless image with your two hands and call it God.** Look at v29, *“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.”*
 - ▶ Try to remember everything you learned about Greek mythology. About how the gods and goddesses were so petty, so driven by pride or greed or lustful intent. Paul's saying: ***How could you think these images, these idols, are gods?*** They act just like us. They're just projections of us carved into stone and written into myths and stories.

- ❖ Paul goes on to say that God's forbearance of our ignorance is done. Look at v30, "*The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent,*" To turn away from idolatry to worship the true and living God. Why the shift? Continue in v31, "*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.*"
 - ▶ A day has been established and a judge has been appointed to judge us in righteousness. **God has proven and identified this judge by raising him from the dead.** And with that, Paul's interrupted and the meeting is over. Some openly mock him. Some are intrigued and want to hear more. And some trust in the gospel right then and there.
 - It just goes to show how everything is fine if your teaching stays theoretical and in the clouds, but once you get real and call for action, for repentance, that's when people start to squirm in their chairs. That's when they've had enough.
- ❖ But this is our task. Like Paul, we have to confront the idols of our culture. **And demonstrate how idolatry is foolishness.** You're giving earthly, creaturely things heavenly, god-like status.
 - ▶ **And explain to people how idolatry is oppressive.** Idols are never satisfied. They always want more. You have to serve their every demands. How different from Jesus who said he came not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many (Mk. 10:45). *When was the last time anyone's career sacrificed and died for them?*
 - **And lastly show people how idolatry is futile.** The gods always fail. Idols will always disappoint you in the end. They don't keep their promises. They don't satisfy you in the end. You were made by God for God, so your heart will always be restless until you find your rest in him.

How to Say It

- ❖ Let's conclude with one last lesson from Paul when it comes to speaking the gospel into a city full of idols. It has to do with **how you say it**. You know your job is to confront and call out the idols in the heart of our city, of our culture, but it's important that we follow Paul's example in how to say what we need to say.
- ❖ It's really interesting when you consider Paul's approach. He knows his audience. He's not speaking to fellow Jews who share a similar view of the Bible or a shared hope in the Messiah/Christ. He's speaking to pagans.
 - ▶ **So he recognizes that it won't be helpful when sharing the gospel to jump right into a doctrine of Christ and salvation. He needs to take a few steps back and begin with a basic doctrine of God.** So he starts by proclaiming God as Creator, Sustainer, Ruler, Father, and Judge.
- ❖ We need to show the same kind of sensitivity when sharing with our non-Christians peers. There's a good chance these days that they have little to no exposure to Christianity or at least a robust, doctrinal version.

- ❖ **So you can't assume they share the same presuppositions or knowledge base.** Let's say you start with an explanation of sin and guilt and judgment and one's need for a Savior, but you're assuming your audience even believes in the concept of sin, feels guilty, accepts the reality of judgment, and even senses a need to be saved.
 - ▶ We can no longer make such assumptions in our day. **This means we can't just rely on pre-packaged, canned gospel presentations, when sharing our faith.** We need to start with where the listener is at and work our way to the cross.

- ❖ **Another interesting thing is how Paul frames his argument.** In v28, he quotes pagan philosophers that essentially teach the idea that God is the source of all life. *“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.’”*
 - ▶ So Paul's identifying the similarities and shared premises between their pagan worldview and the gospel's. We both believe *this* about God. **But then in v29, he turns it around and challenges their idolatry as being inconsistent with their beliefs on the basis of their own premises.**
 - He's arguing like this: You yourself believe that we're God's offspring, that he fashioned us in his image. The gospel agrees. But then how can he be fashioned by us into gold, silver, or stone? That makes no sense. Isn't true that you're just fashioning idols in your own image?

- ❖ Paul's saying what needs to be said. He's critiquing their culture. He's confronting their idols. But it's all about how he says it. **He's so effective at disarming people and showing how their own belief structures are contradictory. They're self-defeating.**

- ❖ This is such an important skill to pick up. When you're talking with a non-Christian friend, you want to build those connections and help them see that the Bible agrees with *this* belief of yours about God. But then how can you believe *that* about God?
 - ▶ **You believe God is love. Yes, the Bible agrees. But then how can you *not* believe in the Bible when it says that God is jealous and gets angry at sin?** Would you describe a husband as loving if he didn't angry at another man's attempt to seduce his wife?
 - You're trying to show them that if you truly believe in a loving God, then you have to believe in a jealous God who gets angry at sin.

- ❖ This is how you winsomely and persuasively speak into a culture and call out and confront at the very heart of our city. May God grant us grace to do so.