

The Good News We Need

[Michael keep playing through intro] The last two weeks, we've taken a diversion from our series on evangelism to talk about hearing from God. The truth is, probably the greatest motivator of evangelism is how much your life has been changed by Jesus. If your life is pretty much like everyone else's except you go to church, then you're probably not going to be very motivated to tell other people about Jesus. If it doesn't make a difference for you, then it won't make a difference for anyone else, either.

The truth is that there's probably many of us in here today where that's the case. Our faith amounts to attending church and maybe listening to some Christian music so we feel good throughout the week.

But there are others here who have simply forgotten what Jesus saved us from. We've forgotten how Jesus has carried us through low times when the world was chaos around us and yet we had peace because we knew God was with us. Or maybe we were caught up in a lifestyle that was leading nowhere—drugs and alcohol, sex, workaholicism.

Or maybe you have a painful history of abuse, neglect or always having to live up to someone else's expectations and you found life in the truth that God is your heavenly father who accepts you and you don't have to try to impress. But you've forgotten and

have settled into a routine. And now you've become religious, but you've forgotten where you've come from.

But in this moment, before we go any further I want you to take the time to remember, because I don't want to simply go through the motions of learning how to share our faith if we're not really motivated to do it. So, Michael's going to play quietly for a few minutes and during this time, I want you to remember and thank God for what he's brought you through. Then we'll sing and move forward. // *Acts 17:16-34*

We are in a series about evangelism where we're looking at the various approaches used in Scripture. Today, we're going to be taking a more intellectual approach and looking at how we can share the good news of Jesus in a society that believes there are many paths to God. This is an important topic because if there are many paths to God then it would be pointless to try to convince people to follow Jesus. Let them find their own path.

Even the way we talk about evangelism plays into this problem when we call it "sharing our faith." If it's just sharing OUR faith, then the way our society sees it, there's no compelling reason for anyone else to believe what we believe because after all, society is very happy to say, "Good for you. I'm glad you have faith," but what's good for you is good for you and what's good for me is good for me.

And add on top of that the fact that even many Christians treat Christianity as simply a way to accomplish their agenda of living a satisfying life or attaining self-fulfillment. But again, if that's what Christianity is about, then there are many ways to fulfill your life's agenda.

But that's not Christianity. It never has been. That's not at all what Jesus meant when he called us to follow him. Instead, Christianity is a complete re-orientation of your life so that your life is no longer about accomplishing your agenda, but about re-aligning your life with God's agenda.

If that's what Christianity is about then sharing the Gospel suddenly becomes much more important. The question is, how do you share Jesus as the way to God in a world where people believe there are many paths to God. To answer that question, we're going to take look at how the Apostle Paul did it in a society that had many things in common with our society today. The story is found in the passage we just read from Acts 17.

We should get our first clue that the message of Christianity is about self-actualization from looking at Paul's ministry. You see, Paul considered it a privilege to endure all kinds of terrible things for Jesus. He writes this in 2 Corinthians 11, **"I have worked hard, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. ²⁴Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. ²⁵Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, ²⁶I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. ²⁷I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. ²⁸Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches."** And finally, he was executed for

preaching Christ. So, if Paul believed the message of Jesus is the self-actualization, we should consider him a miserable failure.

Paul's stream of trouble continues in Acts 17, he was run out of Thessalonica so he moved on to Berea where he was initially accepted, but men from Thessalonica followed him there and ran him out of Berea, too. Paul's team stayed in Berea a little while as some other men escorted him out of Berea to Athens, where he would wait for them to join him.

Paul wasn't one to sit around, so when he got to Athens started checking out the sites. The first thing he noticed was that Athens was filled with idols and it says he was "*greatly distressed.*" Some translations use the word "angry" others just say "his spirit was stirred." It's not that Paul didn't know the Greeks and Romans had idols, but in Athens, it was striking because there were so many.

My wife and I tend not to watch rated R movies. It's not a hard and fast rule. We might watch a historical movie about war that's rated R because of its depiction of war, but stay away from movies with nudity. In general we don't love them. One of the things we don't love is that oftentimes, rated R movies have a lot of gratuitous swearing. Some movies have some swearing once or twice and it doesn't bother me much.

But it doesn't take long for a movie with constant swearing to grate on me. When it does, even if the plot is good, it will bother me enough I'll have to shut it off. I think that's

what was happening for Paul. He was used to seeing idols and Pagan temples, but Athens was *shocking* to him and he was distressed and it motivated him to share the gospel.

Just like ours, Roman society was a pluralistic society. It was a melting pot of countless nationalities and backgrounds. And because of that there were many gods and many ways of life.

In fact, when the Romans would conquer another people group, rather than telling them they can't worship their gods, the Romans would just incorporate them into their pantheon. It was OK to worship their gods if they accepted the Roman gods. They were more than happy to accommodate as long as they didn't claim their god was superior.

This was a problem for Judaism and Christianity because this directly contradicted their core teaching. So, Paul had a problem—how to communicate the truth of Jesus in a society that believed in many paths. Acts 17, tells us some about how he did it.

The first thing we see here is that Paul *affirms* their quest and *challenges* their idols. This is key, because I think a mistake we often make is to do one or the other, but both are necessary.

Growing up, I was always taught that evangelism had to show people they were wrong. You know, because they're sinners in rebellion against God. Right? "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God!" I learned to apply Romans 3 to non-Christians, **"There is no one righteous, not even one; ¹¹there is no one who understands; there is**

no one who seeks God. ¹²All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.” Well, that some pretty serious stuff. And if that’s the case, the only thing you *can* do is challenge them. The problem is that it’s exhausting for you and off-putting for everyone else.

But most of us probably fall prey to the other extreme where we affirm without challenging because we want to be nice. The problem is that only affirming people allows them to continue down destructive paths, and that’s not the loving thing to do either.

I had a conversation just this week with a friend who was engaged in negative thinking that was leading him down a destructive path. And I tried to do it as gently as I could—that’s a character trait I’ve been working on—but he was looking at a situation completely negatively and I just said, “Maybe things aren’t as bad as you’re making them out to be.” And we talked about it a while and came up with a good solution to the issue. After the conversation, he felt better and changed his destructive thinking. It wouldn’t have been good for me to affirm his thinking. But because I wasn’t afraid to challenge him, he was able to change his approach.

If you are only indignant or only compassionate, you’ll never change anyone’s life.

So, how did Paul walk that line? In verse 22, Paul affirms their quest, **“People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious.”** In other words, your quest to know God is admirable and I just want to let you know that I’m with you on that. We’re

all on a quest to know God. And I don't believe he just did it to flatter them, but he wanted to find some common ground—a common humanity.

I believe it's critical for us to affirm what we can affirm with people. It immediately disarms people because then rather than me vs. you, it becomes us figuring this out together. Maybe you've noticed that people are more receptive to what you have to say if they believe you're for them and not against them.

But this can't just be a strategy. You have to actually be *for* them. Evangelism has to come from a heart of love that seeks the best for people.

While our society certainly isn't perfect, there is much to affirm in our society. People today want justice and racial and gender equality. We want a better life for our kids. Even if we wouldn't agree with some people's politics, we should at least be able to recognize that there are some good things about our society.

Once Paul establishes common ground, he doesn't stop at affirmation, but he challenges their idols. The proof of their religiosity was also their problem. But he does something brilliant here. Verse 23, **“²³For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So, you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.”**

Essentially, Paul is saying that even they themselves recognize their worship is incomplete. You might say, well incomplete isn't necessarily wrong, but actually it is. It's kind of like having only part of a map. It might get you somewhere, but without the whole thing, you won't be able to find where you're going.

You see, the Athenians believed they could reason their way to god—that through philosophy, they could know the gods. So, they had a god for everything—a god of war, love and romance, hunting, agriculture. Each “community” had their own god—businessmen, hunters, artists, you name it. Cities and nations had their patron god. But yet there was always a nagging fear that they missed one. I mean, how could they possibly know about “the god of the internet,” so they made the altar so any forgotten god wouldn't be offended because he was left out. They were *very* religious. So are we.

A recent Gallop poll says that 89% of Americans believe in God, ut most people would also say they're “spiritual, but not religious.” What this means generally is that I want to believe there's something out there, but I don't want to be dogmatic about it. 2/3 of Americans say they pray every day. Most just don't know who or what they're praying to. If you drill down further into the beliefs of Americans, the god we believe in is the god we *want* to believe in.

Polls show we want a god who stays out of our way until we need help. We want a god who helps us accomplish our goals but doesn't demand too much of us. Once in a

while we are willing to make a deal if he gets us through hard times. We want a god that doesn't think our sin is a big deal. Just like the statues made of marble, our god is a god we've crafted in our image.

Paul was stirred because he knew how vacuous this is. What stirred Paul to the point where he had to speak up is the same thing that ought to stir us. It's that while people may be able to live that way for a while, ultimately idols will let us down because anything temporary that we put our faith in can't hold up under that kind of pressure.

In 2005, the late author David Foster Wallace gave a commencement speech at Kenyon College. He said this, *"Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And the compelling reason for choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship...is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough...worship your body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly. And when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally grieve you...Worship power and you will end up feeling weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to numb you to your own fear. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart, you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. But the insidious thing about these forms of worship is...they're unconscious. They are default settings."* He knew this very well because he lived it.

What's interesting about this excerpt is that we would probably consider Wallace "*a spiritual but not religious*" type, but he was able to put his finger on the problem with idols. The sad thing is that most people know there's more to life than the idols we create, but in the absence of anything concrete, we settle. People do it all the time.

So, what was Paul's answer to the problem? Jesus. Paul says, "Sure, there are some things we can know about God from nature because nature has God's fingerprints all over it. But if that's all there was, it would be like feeling around in the darkness to try to know what God is like." That's why they had the altar to the unknown God. They were grasping in the dark out of fear and confusion.

This won't be the case with everyone, but there are a certain number of people you will encounter who are at the place in life where they feel lost and confused about their purpose. Chances are, they've tried many things and have probably even been successful at times, but what they achieved hasn't lasted.

A number of years ago, I was surprised to see that a friend of mine from high school was sharing his testimony at a Christian high school. When I knew him, he wasn't a particularly religious guy that I knew of. He wasn't a bad guy, I'd just never known him to have any interest in Jesus. So, I got a hold of his email and asked him what happened.

He was always a great athlete and when he graduated, that didn't change. He started running iron-man triathalons. That's 2.5 mile swim, 112 mile bike ride and finish

by running a marathon. I don't remember all the details, but he told me that he was on the verge of going pro when an injury derailed essentially ended his career. He was devastated. Being an athlete was always his identity. It was the direction his life was going to take and in a moment it was taken from him.

It was at that time that a friend talked to him about Jesus and he realized that while he thought he found his purpose in running, he was really lost because what he was living for crumbled under the weight of expectations.

If you're willing to listen, you'll find people like my friend all over the place who have lost their spiritual direction. We think sharing Christ as the way to God is a hard sell, but many people are ready for it because when you're lost, getting directions is the best news.

People will be open to Jesus when they realize that what they set out to make them happy isn't actually making them happy. But we have to resist the temptation to give people the impression that when they come to Jesus, he'll make all their dreams come true. Now, I suspect that when you give your life to Christ, your life will be more fulfilled and satisfying on the whole, but not because God is making your dreams come true. No, what God will do if you'll let him is to reshape your dreams and desires so you will no longer try to find satisfaction in things that can be quickly lost.

That's the point Paul makes at the end of his speech in verse 30. He says, "³⁰**In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.** ³¹**For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed.**" So, what changed that God allowed people to grope around for him for so long, but now they are responsible? God revealed himself in Jesus.

In Colossians Paul describes Jesus as the perfect image of the invisible God and the firstborn over all creation. In other words, Jesus shows us not only who God is, but who we are supposed to be. So, we don't have to grope around anymore. We don't have to create our own purpose because our purpose is live out the image of God by becoming like Jesus, to take on the task God gave us in the garden of caring for the world.

But what's the proof that among all the belief systems in the history of the world, THIS is the answer? Is it a satisfying life? No, many people live satisfying lives. Is it success in business or love or war? No, it's none of those. The evidence for Christianity is not a perfect life, but the Resurrection of Jesus. End of verse 31, "**He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.**"

Throughout Christian history, the evidence for Christianity has always been the resurrection because the claim of Christianity is not just an abstract philosophy to argue about, but it's revealed in a real event at a real point in history. If it happened, you should believe it and follow it. If it didn't, then find whatever works for you and follow that.

Now this is a more intellectual approach, but it also addresses the needs all of us have. There are some commentators who say this isn't given as an effective approach because only a few people begin to follow Jesus.

Truth is, not everyone is going to respond. But people who are ready, will. Just remember to listen for people who have lost their spiritual direction. Always want the best for people, find common ground but don't be afraid to challenge beliefs. And finally, make sure your path leads to Jesus. We aren't responsible for the outcome, we can only be faithful to share the good news we all need and leave the results up to God.