

**The Conversations with Paul in Athens
Acts 17:16-21**

Our text this morning will be in Acts 17:16-21, so you can turn there. And the book of Acts is the history of the church. We've started from the resurrection and the ascension of Christ into heaven as He overcame sin and the grave and is set on high to be worshipped forever, and the church is established with the coming of the Holy Spirit in Acts chapter 2. It's been like seventy messages here since we've started, and we're now twenty years later in chronology. By the time we get to Acts 17, the gospel has gone through the city of Jerusalem to the territories of Judea and Samaria and moved now to the remotest part of the earth. That comes from Acts 1:8, and by Acts chapter 17, we're following Paul the apostle in his second journey as he brings the good news of Jesus Christ to people in far distant places.

The first missionary journey in chapter 13 and 14 was around the area of Turkey, ancient Asia Minor, in the northern part of the Mediterranean. Now, we are in the second missionary journey which covers Acts chapter 15:36 to 18:23, and the second missionary journey moves us to Greece. So, as we follow our map, we can see the second missionary journey started out visiting areas that were established during this first journey from Antioch, but the Lord sovereignly moved Paul to the area of Greece, initially the northern half of Macedonia, where he lands in Philippi, encounters some difficulties because the people there were upset because their economics had been disrupted; and then they persecuted him which led him to flee to Thessalonica. In Thessalonica, he faced persecution from the Jews there which caused him to flee to Berea. The Jews of Thessalonica chased him from Berea (found him there). He had to flee, and now he is gone south to the territory of Achaia.

So, in Acts chapter 17, Paul leaves the northern province of Macedonia and now ministers in the southern province of Achaia, and he starts in Athens. Athens, as you may know, is the capital of Greece, and, back two thousand years ago, it was the cultural capital of the Roman Empire. It wasn't Rome in the place that the military was governed from as the headquarters, it had the cultural part of the Roman Empire. The Greek Empire had spread under Alexander the Great, and the Greek language was the language of the Roman Empire at this time, and so much of what made the Roman Empire culturally Greek is found in this town - in Athens, Athens, Greece.

So, that's where we are now, and so we can read this together. Paul, verse 16; "Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens [And that was Timothy and Syllas he was talking about, Luke is writing about.], his spirit was being provoked within him as he was observing the city full of idols. So he was reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and in the market place every day with those who happened to be present. And also some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him. Some were saying, "What would this idle babbler wish to say?" Others, "He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities,"—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is which you are proclaiming? For you are bringing some strange things to our ears; so we want to know what these things mean." (Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new.) So, that's our text. We are going to (in the next part of this and in the next message) look at what this message, this sermon, this speech, that he gives to the people gathered, is.

But right now, for today, we're just going to look at the context of this speech and who he's talking to and why he's talking to them. Okay, so we're not going to look at what he says. That's going to come later, but today, we're only going to look at the setting of this because I think that there's a lot to learn when we come to Athens and encounter these people now, twenty years after Jesus rose from the dead and the church has now been established and growing. So, the first thing we have to look at is verse 16 because we encounter idolatry and an aggravation of Paul who beholds the city full of idols "...while Paul was waiting for them at Athens..." Well, what's going on here is what Paul intended to do, when he got to Athens, was to wait for his co-laborers, Silas who started with him, if you recall, in Antioch and then Timothy. Timothy he picked up in Lystra as we moved along what is now modern day Turkey. Those two people... he was waiting for him to join him because he left them behind at Berea. He had to flee Berea, but they stayed behind to try to minister to the church that was established in Berea. So, while he's waiting for them, he became provoked in spirit. They were completing the ministry at Berea before beginning the ministry in Athens, but Paul was moved to engage the people sooner because of the idols that he saw there.

The idolatry of Athens was renown. It would be like the hall of fame of idols. Ancient Athens was the center of idol worship. There's a fellow named Petronius, a satirical author of the time, he quipped that there were more gods in the city than there were men. They had statues. They had temples, and it was chocked full. Some of these still exist today. The Parthenon, which sits in the area of the Acropolis in the center of Athens on an elevated area, acropolis meaning high city in Greek... that exists today. It was the temple to Athena the goddess, and a big area, like seven acres of territory, was set just for that worship to that goddess. Many other gods had temples and temple areas. This one still exists as well, the temple of Zeus that had another plot of land and some of that still exists today as well in the city. There's a man named Pliny who also lived during this time period, and he commented about Athens that the number of public statues in Athens to be about thirty thousand. Now, maybe this was an exaggeration because there might not of even been thirty thousand residents in Athens at this time even though it was a large a large city, but Athens had been chock full with idols. Paul encounters a place like no place he'd ever seen yet and beheld the city full of idols, thick is another way to translate that. It's just you can hardly move without bumping into a god of some kind. This polytheistic society - there's this view of many, many, many, many gods.

So, what to do with this? You know, what do you do when you encounter a place... maybe some of you have been to, you know, maybe, Asian countries or places where there's a lot of statues of worship, temples that worship. You know, we have ministry in Japan. You go there, you see them putting the equivalent of wishes into areas to hope that gods would listen and respond. You know, it's kind of sad. So, what to do? Here's what one fella did. This is a man named Francis Xavier. I've shared some of this in men's ministry, but hey since we have a man camp this weekend, I thought I'd share this with you. He was a Catholic from about the same time as the reformation. In 1543, he said this when he encountered idols in India. He was doing a ministry on behalf of Catholicism in India. He was one of the founders of the Jesuits. To give you an idea, the Jesuits were the Catholic answer against the protestant reformation. They got started because of the protestant reformation, to argue against it. He's not exactly on our side, and you can kind of see this as I read this - what he wrote when he encountered idolatry in India. And if you're part of our children's ministry, you might have a special interest in this because he's talking about children that he was ministering to; "These children, I trust, heartily lay by the grace of God, will

be much better than their fathers. They showed an ardent love for the Divine Law and an extraordinary zeal for those learning our holy religion and imparting it to others. Their hatred for idolatry is marvelous. They get into feuds with the heathen about it and whenever their own parents practice it, they reproach them and come off to tell me about it at once. Whenever I hear of any act of idolatrous worship, I go to the place with a large band of these children, who will soon load the devil with a great amount of insult and abuse than he had rate lately received the honor and worship from their parents an relatives and acquaintances these children run at the idols, upset them, dash them down, break them to pieces, spit on them, trample them, kick them around and in short heap do every possible outrage.” Well, that’s one approach to idolatry, ey?

What did Paul do when he encountered idols? He didn’t attack the idols, did he? What he did was something different. He became provoked as we read. He was provoked within him beholding “...the city full of idols,” but he didn’t tear them down. He did something else. It’s the word provoked that is translated anger in the Old Testament, of the Greek translation of the Old Testament, in two places, Isaiah 65:3 and Hosea 8:5, where God was provoked with the idolatry of that day in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, and this is interesting, in the New Testament, this word for provoked is only used one other place, and it’s used in 1 Corinthians 13:5. So, the word provoked in the New Testament is spoken of in the chapter about love where Paul writes, love “...is not provoked...” in a litany of things about love, it “...does not take into account a wrong suffered...” It “...does not act unbecomingly... is not provoked...” So, why is Paul provoked when he writes, later, to the Corinthians, you should not be provoked in love? How to reconcile this... And, I think, it’s pretty simple when we look at what he did when he became provoked. What he did was not speaking of an anger that he had toward anybody.

You look at Jesus when Jesus saw things that He was disappointed in. In Matthew 9:35, Jesus was going down the cities teaching, healing, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and seeing the multitudes, these people that weren’t worshipping the true God. What did He do? He said, “Seeing the people, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd. Then He said to His disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest.” His

response (Paul speaking), his response was not to get mad at people. When we see worship which is not directed to God (and that's pretty evident - we have lots of people who are not worshipping God), when we see people not worshipping God and even in some form of idolatry, we should be moved, provoked internally, because God is not being honored, but not at the people and not to harm them. They are the sheep without the shepherd. We should love them. We should be responding in care. So, if this provocation of Paul resulted in a ministry to people, our provocation is for God's glory, then He would be exalted and praised and honored, and the way we respond to this provocation, this sense that God is not honored as he should, is to serve the people in idolatry through the gospel.

And that is exactly what Paul did. He sought to serve people through the teaching about Jesus Christ. And that's what he did in Athens, and we have a whole sermon that He gives at the end of this chapter to these people in Athens to try to help them, to try to serve them, to try to rescue them. Verse 17 - so, he starts out in verse 17 - so, because he's provoked beholding a "...city full of idols. So he was reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and in the market place every day with those who happened to be present." So, once again, we see this over and over again. He goes to the Jews. He goes to the synagogue. He starts with them - there's other Gentiles there who had not fully converted to Judaism but that were there listening - and talks with them. But he doesn't stop with the Jews. He moves to the Gentiles of Athens, and he goes to the market place. Every day he goes there, over and over again, and, if there's people there that happened to be there that day, he encountered them, and he began to try to help them be rescued from idolatry and idolatrous worship, to know the true God, Jesus Christ, who rose from the dead on their behalf so they could overcome sin and no longer suffer the punishment of that... be forgiven - the blessing of forgiveness.

So, this brings us to the analysis of idolatry. He talked to them in the market place. The market place (Greek term is agora) was the center of civic life in Athens. It was where public buildings were. It was where commerce incurred. (That's why it's called market place or the translation is) It's where temples were. It's where statues were. It's a center of idolatrous worship as well. It's the common area. This is close to where he moves to give the speech to the people of Athens. It's close to the Parthenon and the Acropolis. It is a central area in Athens for a commerce, public buildings, that sort of

thing. So, it was a logical place to go. It was also a common gathering place for the Greek philosophers who he encountered, the Epicureans, the Stoics. So, what he did, in essence, was he used the social system of Athens to leverage the message to the people about Jesus Christ. He used the way that they connected to each other and communicated to each other, and he gauged that. And so should we. When we are relating to people, we have social networks. We have ways that we interact with people. We should serve people in that and love people in that and help them to know the Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, as we come to know in the appropriate fashion as what Paul did with the people of his day. He used the existing social system to spread the good news of Jesus Christ. That's what he did, and that's why he went to the market place, to serve the people there.

Now, what he encounters is some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers who respond "What would this idle babbling wish to say?" You know, they're not thinking that he's going to instruct them. They kind of think well of themselves, and they accuse him of just being an idle babbling. When we look at these Epicurean and Stoic philosophers that we find in verse 18, that were conversing with him and saying these things about him, calling him an "...idle babbling...", we have to understand who these people were - followers of Epicurus, and he lived like three hundred years before this time. They considered the chief end of man, the goal of life was individual pleasure and, largely, through the avoidance of pain. You know, we go through, in life, difficulties and some of the difficulties we encounter are really difficult. It's health issues. It's relationship issues. It's, maybe, economic issues, various things that we encounter that bring pain and suffering, and people of the world try to figure out a solution to that.

And the Epicureans way of solving that was to pursue pleasure. So, if something bad happens, you seek to escape that, whatever that that is, and you move to try to make yourself happier by pursuing pleasure. You see a lot of that today. Right? A lot of people pursuing pleasure, so they can kind of put aside the things they kind of don't wish to think about or there's some problems they have, and they will pursue things that will make them happy. Pleasure, that was the core of Epicurean philosophy. They were materialistic. They didn't believe in an afterlife. They didn't really have a hope for the future. They were just trying to get away from pain by pursuing pleasure.

The Stoics on the other hand, they followed teachings of a guy named Zeno, the Cypriot, also another three hundred years earlier than this time, and they emphasized an individual self-sufficiency and an overcoming pain through the self-mastery of a difference. The self-mastery - they kind of dealt with it by overcoming it, by gaining control of their own being and be able to kind of get through it. And in some ways this might feel like a little closer to what we might think we ought to do. You know, there's a lot of people that just pursue pleasure, and, yeah, it kind of is fleeting, but when you deal with life and things aren't going well for you, there's a part of this that we kind of see, maybe, in the Scripture. There's suffering, and there's an overcoming, and there's a dealing with this without escaping it. But the big difference with the Stoics were that they weren't trying to do this in any kind of relationship to God and serving God in this. It was a more pulling-yourself-up-by-your-own-bootstraps approach. This was to believe that this pain and suffering that you're encountering was not going to overcome you, and you're going to defeat it by the sheer power of your will, to overcome it through yourself.

That is not the teaching of the New Testament. We are not overcoming anything by the power of our self. We are overcoming by the power of God, and the power of God has a hope for the future; that there's a better day ahead. So, "...the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us." Paul says that in the book of Romans. That this approach is not Christianity. But it's so common. In fact, in some ways, you kind of even might respect it, that they kind of hunker down and push through. That's not the teaching of the Bible to just hunker down and push through. It's to trust the Lord that He has a plan that is the best plan, and He is able to deliver us and will because He's promised it in the kingdom to come.

Now, to not get too confused, I want to help you in this to understand the difference between the Epicureans and the Stoics. So, the Stoics would be keep calm and carry on. The Epicureans would be time flies when you're having fun. Or, if you need a cartoon, we've got the Epicureans would be more like Tigger, where the Stoics would be more like Eeyore, or my bitmoji. The Epicureans are party time, and the Stoics are it is what it is. So, there you have it in a little bit of analysis of the philosophy of two thousand years ago in Athens.

The problem of living to serve ourselves is embedded in both these philosophies. When we live to serve ourselves through personal enjoyment, that's like what the Epicureans were doing. So, if you just come to Valley Bible Church and your looking to see what you can get out of it and how it suits you and how you can enjoy yourself better than sitting at home alone, that's not very different then the Epicureans. You know, yeah, you can have maybe some fun here, but that's not the point. And like the Stoics, when we live to serve ourselves through personal sacrifice, just kind of giving up that because that's how it is, and we're going to be indifferent to that by pushing through, we're modern day Stoics. If you're going to be involved in our church because it's your duty, and you're just going to be here because, hey, I ought to. It's kind of what we do. We need some religion to kind of balance our life out, and there's some obligations that we have because we don't want to just... we need some help to get through with life's difficulties, and to hear some things about God that might help me get through with life's difficulties. That's not the point either. This has got the same problem; it's all about you.

This whole book is not to just help you. It's to cause you to worship God and to know Him. Yes, it will greatly help you, but not, maybe, even, so much in this life. I mean, look at Paul. He went from place to place being persecuted, run out, beaten, stoned, left for dead. He wasn't having a lot of fun. It's about the worship of God, and God has a better place for you in the future as a believer in Jesus Christ. That's what it's about, not the modern day Epicurean or Stoic philosophies. Now, they call him this "...idle babbler..." "What would this idle babbler wish to say?" "...idle babbler..." The word for "...idle babbler..." literally means seed tick, kind of odd, but it is akin to people that go around picking up ideas; this is what it came to mean colloquially in the day. It was a derogatory figure of speech used of second-rate philosophers who picked up information, bits of information, hearing them, passed them off as if they knew what they were talking about. It was an insult; so, they weren't viewing Paul well. They were insulting him by calling him an "...idle babbler..." Just kind of being second-rate, passing off ideas he didn't know what he was talking about.

Also, he was called "...a proclaimer of strange deities..." You know who was also called "...a proclaimer of strange deities...?" Socrates - Greek philosopher, much earlier in time - he was executed for proclaiming new and strange Gods - poisoned. So, this comment, he seems to be "...a proclaimer

of strange deities...” isn’t, oh, here’s some new ideas. It’s kind of a dangerous charge actually. Paul did more; this is evident. Paul did more than just exchange with their philosophies. He preached the resurrected Jesus. This was not - they had some philosophical ideas and he had some philosophical ideas - and they had this kind of back and forth exchange. That’s the way, kind of, they functioned. Oh, you have ideas - we have ideas - let’s chat.

What he was doing was to proclaim Jesus, the resurrected Jesus, the Jesus who rose from the dead; that trumps every philosophy. There is no other philosophy, there is no other religion, there’s nothing, anywhere, that compares to Jesus Christ having risen from the dead. After doing many miracles, He did the greatest miracle where He rose from the dead never to die again, appeared to hundreds and hundreds of people, and in the book of Acts in the first chapter, ascended into heaven and lives forever. That is the message. He overcame death so that we could overcome death and also live forever with God. That is not just a philosophy. That is not just a religion. That is life and life abundantly. That is what God has made us for, to worship Him and be with Him forever, be united and have a love relationship with Him. So, the resurrected Jesus was at the core of his interaction with the Athenians.

So, then what did they do? Well, because of this strange deity thing, “...they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is which you are proclaiming? For you are bringing some strange things to our ears; so we want to know what these things mean.” So, then there’s this attack on the idols where he gets the opportunity to address people, and then we’ll find more about what he says in the next place. Now, when you read Areopagus, it’s an area. It’s commonly known, when we talk about this, as Mars Hill, and the only reason it’s called Mars Hill is because the King James version four hundred years ago made a translation of the Latin, Mars, and called it Mars Hill. Your translations... I believe most of you would have a more modern translation, and it says, Paul was “...brought... to the Areopagus,” and when he gives this message in verse 22 onward, he is in the midst of the Areopagus. Okay, what’s the Areopagus? The Areopagus was both a location and a group of people. A group of people, around thirty city administrators - they were sort of the ruling governing officials, as well as in a place that they did this from. It is actually elevated. You can go there today, and you can see that, and if you

went up to the top of this hill, the Areopagus, you can look down on Athens, and you get a really nice view of the city from there.

And this group, these thirty city administrators, would decide whether Paul would be able to continue to participate in the philosophical exchanges in the market place, whether he would be able to continue what he was doing. It was not an official jury, per se, but it's a question of whether this exchange with the philosophers was something worthy to continue. Or was it like Socrates; we have new deities, and we don't like this, and we are going to stop this. So, this address that you will read about in the rest of the chapter is not, so much, oh, come and teach us. It was more of a defense, if you will, whether he would be able to continue this. He was "...bringing some strange things to our ears; so we want to know what these things mean." So that they could then decide whether this is going to be allowed to continue or not.

But there's an interesting end to this in verse 21, a phrase, a sentence that you kind of wonder, why is that? In fact, like in many translations, it's, like, put in parenthesis, sort of like an aside comment that says, "(Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new.)" This is these idle Athenians who were sitting around not doing much of anything. In fact, there's a guy named Demosthenes who said this three hundred years earlier. He said, "We Athenians stay at home doing nothing, always delaying and asking in the market if there is anything new." That was his comment on his people, and that's what Luke writes in verse 21; they just do nothing other than they just tell and hear "...something new." So, why is this there? What is the point of including this? Well, what happens in Athens is different than what happened in Philippi, what happened in Thessalonica, what happened to Berea. Athens is a different place, and this is telling us why things are different in Athens. The verse is included to explain why Paul's treatment in Athens was different than the other cities he went to in Macedonia because they did not rise up and attack him.

They wanted to listen to him and wonder whether to add this to the many philosophies, add Jesus to the many idols. Maybe they can make a statue to Jesus along with Zeus, along with Hermes, along with all these others, because you can add another. And as we will learn, one of the statues that Paul ran into was just to "the unknown god" because better safe than sorry, and since we might not know, we'll stick one to "the unknown god" because

we don't want to leave somebody out. So, they're not looking to leave Jesus out. So, they're going to look at this and consider this; maybe we need to add Jesus to the idols, and so, people can worship Him, too. You see how confused this is? The Creator of the world, the One sustaining all, the One who gave Himself for us, to redeem us and deliver us from death to life, they're considering whether they should add Him to the list of idols. That's what they're doing. Paul has to then take a different approach. When we will look at what he teaches, it will be different than what he teaches, say, to the Jews in Jerusalem, very different, because he has to meet them where they are. So, Paul received a hearing because of this natural desire that happened in Athens of let's hear something new. Let's consider this and whether we want to continue this or cut it off.

These people who have this desire to learn something new kind of exist today. In fact, there might be people here that - they're here - they might be looking to learn something new. In fact, you may study the Bible just to learn something new; maybe there's more here that you can know about, that you don't know. There's people that made their life about learning things new in religion and even in Christianity. In fact, if you go to, you know, some theological institutions, almost, maybe, I could say most theological institutions, you get advanced by learning something new and coming up with something new. Hey, that works great in science. That works kind of lousy when we're talking about the Bible. Oh, let's come up with something new, something different, something nobody's ever thought of before. Well, it's probably not Biblical when you're coming up with something that's new and never thought of before, but a lot of theologians advance themselves by coming up with something new.

These people in Athens liked the discussions of things new. Hopefully, that's not just you, that it doesn't just go in your head, but that it moves to your feet and to your hands and you do something; so, as you learn, as you encounter the Word of God, as you think, it doesn't stop there. It can't stop there. It has to change your life. It has to change your value. It has to change your priorities. It has to change the way you function. It has to totally affect who you are so that you do things differently. You don't just do things the same way you've always done things because, gee, you're not learning anything; it's just head knowledge. May we desire to learn to... that our desire to learn be accompanied with our desire to obey because when we desire to obey, then we truly know the Lord Jesus Christ. It's not just

information. It is obedience, and we can truly know the one true God. Let's be like that, not just like the Athenians who just like to talk.

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