

Recently, someone gave my kids a bunch of silly puddy, and they absolutely love playing with it. Growing up, I never played with playdough or silly puddy, but my kids do, and they love twisting, shaping those things, and creating something out of them. They create shapes, people, and other things. They try to make it into what they want it to be. Do you ever do that that when it comes to God? That you take him and try to twist, shape, and mold God – not necessarily to be who he is and who he reveals himself to be – but you shape and fashion him to fit with what you want him to be.

That's what people do. We try to shape and fashion God into who I want him to be, one who matches up with my experiences in life, my feelings, and my reason. That's exactly what the folks in Athens were doing in our sermon lesson today. Silas and Timothy are back at Berea, and Paul now has gone to Athens: **16 While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. 17 So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there.** Paul went to Athens and saw a bunch of idols – statues which were fashioned, twisted, created to be gods. But we shouldn't think that their idol worship was simply bowing down to these man-made statues. A large part of their idol worship was also bowing down to man-made philosophies and ideas: **A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbler trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. 19 Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting.**

We don't have time to get into the specifics of these different groups of people, but basically Epicurus taught the goal in life is finding pleasure and happiness. By the time that Paul had visited Athens, many followers of this philosophy believed in this motto: Eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we day. The Stoics believed the opposite – that the purpose and goal of life is to align your mind with God (Divine Reason), and that you do that by seeking knowledge and especially getting rid of emotion and feeling. They searched for purpose and meaning as well as for God by their philosophies. Certainly, there are elements of truth in philosophies, but these Athenians did not know the true God and how to be right with him. Now here comes Paul talking about this God, this man named Jesus, and the resurrection of the dead, and it went against their philosophies, ideas, and reason.

When you read through these verses, it sounds innocent. They simply wanted to talk to Paul about what he was teaching. But it was more forceful than that. They put Paul on trial in a sense before the Areopagus which was a court that passed judgment on new ideas, new philosophies, new religions. Even though they weren't the highest ranking court in Athens, this was the court that sentenced Socrates to death 400 years earlier. The charge against him was the exact charge they were talking about with Paul. **"He seems to be advocating foreign gods."** The God Paul was preaching did not line up with their reason or the gods they had fashioned and made.

Do we ever try to shape and fashion God into something that he isn't? As I was studying these verses and the idol worship in Athens, my first question was to ask: "What gods do we worship in our society?" And usually I answer that by saying things like money. We worship popularity and body image. We worship our kids when we refuse to parent them and discipline them when they misbehave. We worship entertainment and materialism. But there's one idol that many of us struggle with that has been on my mind lately, and I don't know we always recognize it. That's the idol of feelings.

Let me explain. Our feelings and especially are emotions are important. We experience things like joy, sorrow, and many more emotions. But more and more I see among even life-long followers of Jesus an overemphasis on my feelings about who God is and what he's like. Then I base my views of God and who he is on how I feel like God should be and act. I think lately part of that has come from the postmodern world that we live in, but also the overabundance of differing viewpoints that you see in the news and social media. It leads many people to ask the question: "What is true? Who can I trust?" Instead of turning to facts, we tend to turn to our own feelings. That spills over into my belief about God. Where can I find truth about who God is and what he's like?

That leads us to try to shape, mold, and fashion God into what we want him to be. Like my kids playing with silly puddy or play dough. I don't like hearing about hell, and it doesn't match up with my reason that a loving god would condemn someone to hell, and so I'm going to reject that thought. I know that my son is living together with his girlfriend, but they're nice people, and certainly God can't have a problem with them, and so I won't say anything about their sin. But it also comes out when we struggle with whether we're forgiven or not. There are days when I feel rotten, when I don't feel forgiven, when my own heart says, "How could God love someone like you?" Sometimes, the temptation is to run to our feelings for assurance that our sins are forgiven. When I'm happy, I say my faith is doing great. When I'm sad or don't feel it, then I question the objective truth that God says in

his Word. But when we do those things, we're pushing God off his throne, and in his place, we place our feelings, and then we bow down to them.

What is Paul's message then to these Athenians and to us? You'll notice that he doesn't start with the Bible because these are Gentiles who did not believe the Bible. Instead, he starts with what we call the natural knowledge of God. Why do people search for God? Why do people create idols? Why do people believe in God? It's because we look at the world around us, we look at the marvelous bodies we have, we look at our conscience and this idea of right/wrong inside each person and we conclude: There's got to be something bigger than me out there. Paul is taking the Athenians from what they know (there is a God) to what they don't know yet (who this God is). That's why he talks about that altar to the unknown God – he wants them to know who the true God is.

What we learn from Paul here is that man-made attempts to shape, fashion, and twist God into what we want God to be does not really show us who God. We need God to reveal himself to us. That's what Paul is saying when he says this: **29 "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 human design and skill. 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. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead."**

Amazingly, a famous Greek philosopher recognized that about God. God isn't a statue that people have made. God isn't man-made philosophies that people have developed. God isn't my own feelings and my opinions about who he should be. Even though God is present everywhere, God a separate entity outside of us. This is what Socrates reportedly said near the end of his life: "All of the wisdom of this world is but a tiny raft upon which we must set sail when we leave this earth. If only there was a firmer foundation upon which to sail—perhaps some divine word."

There is a firmer foundation. Paul was trying to share that divine word with the Athenians, but when he started to and specifically started to talk about the resurrection of Christ, they cut him off. They tried to silence him. Who is that divine Word? **"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us."** That Word is Christ who as true God came into this world to reveal who God is. In the person of Jesus, we see that God is entirely different than man-made idols, human philosophies, and even what we make God to be from our own feelings.

In Jesus we have a firmer foundation upon which to sail in this life and when we leave this life. In Jesus, we see who God is and how to be right with him. In Jesus, we see a God willing to leave his home in heaven and exchange it for a feeding trough. A God willing to leave the light of heaven and exchange it for life in a dark, broken world. A God willing to set aside his glorious crown for a crown of thorns. A God whose hands shaped this universe would be nailed to a cross. A God willing to lay down his own life for those who would reject him. A God willing to leave his throne and exchange it for tomb. A God who knows all things yet knows you personally by name. So that through faith, we would know this God and who he is.

God may not give us every answer we're looking for when we struggle with living in this dark world, but in Jesus, we gives us answers to our greatest problems. Paul says there's one event that shows this: the resurrection of Christ. I don't know what he would have said if they let him keep talking, but I would imagine Paul would have said that this Savior lives and rose, that there were over 500 eyewitnesses who saw him alive, that he himself had been changed by Jesus, that Jesus is a firm foundation on which to hold onto in this life and in the life to come.

In this life, we face many storms and attacks on our faith. The solution isn't to turn to my own feelings. The solution isn't to jump off the boat. The solution is to hold on to tight to that sure foundation we have in Jesus. Because Jesus faced the same hardships we face. Jesus battled against sin, and he won the victory for us. Jesus faced the punishment of what our sin before God deserved, and he do so willingly so that we would be at peace with God. Jesus faced our greatest enemy death itself, and he came out triumphant on the other side.

Because of that, the same is true for you. Because Jesus has won the victory for you. Sin can't condemn you anymore because Jesus paid for it. Satan cannot accuse you anymore because Jesus crushed his head. Death cannot hold you anymore because Jesus lives. You know what? We don't need to try to shape and change God into being who we want him to be because we see Jesus being the God we need. The God who came not to condemn us but to save us. The God who did the unimaginable and stepped and rescued us from sin and death. The God who will one day more than we can ever ask for when he brings us safely home to heaven. If you want to know who God is and what he's like, look at Jesus and look at his Word. Amen.