

Acts: Seeing the Spirit at Work
Sunday Morning Bible Study
Lesson Thirteen – Acts 17:16-34
City of Idols

Idols are not limited to primitive societies; there are many sophisticated idols too. An idol is a God substitute. Any person or thing that occupies the place which God should occupy is an idol. Covetousness is idolatry. Ideologies can be idolatries. So can fame, wealth and power, sex food, alcohol and other drugs. People can be idols—parents, spouse, children and friends. The possibilities extend further to work, recreation, television and possessions. Even church, religion and Christian service can be idolized.

Idols seem particularly dominant in cities. Paul was deeply pained by the idolatrous city of Athens. It was a city of aesthetic magnificence and cultural sophistication, as well as being the world center of pagan philosophy and religion. How do we communicate Jesus Christ to such a city? Paul gave us a marvelous example when he visited Athens.

OPEN

- What philosophies and pagan religions do you encounter in your world?

STUDY

1. *Read Acts 17:16-34.* What caught Paul’s attention immediately about Athens?

The city was full of idols (v. 16), people in the marketplace would reason each day (v. 17), people are very religious (v. 22), there is an altar to the unknown god (v. 23)

What did he feel about what he saw?

He was grieved about the lostness of the people, and he was also angered by the Idolatry, and he was also perplexed by the fact that people worshipped an “unknown god”

The clue to interpreting the nature of Paul's emotion is that the verb that is translated "greatly distressed" is also used in the Greek version of the Old Testament to describe the reaction of the Holy One of Israel to idolatry. Thus, when the Israelites made the golden calf at Mount Sinai, and when later they were guilty of gross idolatry and immorality in relation to the Baal of Peor, they "provoked" the Lord God to anger. So Paul was "provoked" (RSV) by idolatry and provoked to anger, grief and indignation, just as God is himself, and for the same reason, namely for the honor and glory of his name.

2. Jesus wept over the impenitent city of Jerusalem. What are the idols in your city?

3. What did Paul do in response to what he saw and felt?

He began to reason with the people, proclaim the Gospel, and challenge the idolatry of Athens.

4. It is impressive that Paul was able to speak with equal ease to religious people in the synagogue, to casual passers-by in the city square and to highly sophisticated philosophers. How does Paul open his sermon at the meeting of the Areopagus (vv. 22-23)?

He first gives them a type of compliment, saying that they are "very religious," but then just as they are patting themselves on the back, Paul offers a challenge to their "unknown god."

5. What does his approach to the men and women of the Aeropagus model to us as we consider influencing those in our culture with the message about Jesus?

A lot of people just want to start "blasting" the pagans with the Gospel, calling out all the wrong things they do and how they are bound for Hell. Paul gives us a different model. He starts with commonalities (religion) and then provides the alternative, the Gospel. A little kindness and respect goes a long way toward dialogue and openness to Gospel proclamation.

6. What five things does Paul say about God?

1) God made everything, 2) He is Lord of heaven and earth, 3) He does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, 4) He doesn't need anything because He is the giver of everything, 5) He made all nations to come from one man

7. What is the significance to the people of Athens that God is the Creator of the universe (vv. 24-27)?

He doesn't need manmade temples to live in, and he gives everything: food, drink, shelter, etc. Because He created the universe, He is close to the people in that universe.

8. Why was it important for Paul to tell the people that God is the Sustainer of life (v. 28)?

Often times the idolatrous religions taught that the gods needed the food sacrifices of the people in order to survive and not be hungry. But God is the Sustainer of all life. He doesn't need empty sacrifices. He is the source of life.

9. How did Paul call them to repentance (vv. 29-31)?

He tells them that God has overlooked times of ignorance in the past, but now all people must repent and believe. God is going to judge the world through a man he has appointed, the man Jesus whom he raised from the dead. So, Paul basically gave them the threat of judgment. Repent now, or be judged later.

10. What different responses to Paul's message do you see throughout this passage?

Some people are interested in the message and want to hear more (v. 32). Some people mocked him (v. 32). Some men believed and joined him (v. 33).

11. Compare and contrast the responses to Paul's message about Jesus to the responses you see today.

They're identical. Some people are interested enough in Christianity to hear more about it. Others just mock it and won't listen to anything seriously. Others believe and repent.

Summary: The Areopagus address reveals the comprehensiveness of Paul’s message. He proclaimed God in his fullness as Creator, Sustainer, Ruler, Father and Judge. He took in the whole of nature and of history. He passed the whole of time in review, from the creation to the consummation. He emphasized the greatness of God, not only as the beginning and the end of all things, but as the One to whom we owe our being and to whom we must give account. He argued that human beings already know these things by natural or general revelation, and that their ignorance and idolatry are therefore inexcusable. So he called on them with great solemnity, before it was too late, to repent.

APPLY

- When have you been provoked by the idolatrous cities of the contemporary world?

It is not only the comprehensiveness of Paul’s message in Athens which is impressive, however, but also the depth and power of his motivation. Why is it that, in spite of the great needs and opportunities of our day, the church slumbers peacefully on, and that so many Christians are deaf and dumb, deaf to Christ’s commission and tongue-tied in testimony? I think the major reason is this: we do not speak as Paul spoke because we do not feel as Paul felt. And this is because we do not see like Paul. When Paul walked around Athens, he did not just “notice” the idols. He looked and looked, and thought and thought, until the fires of holy indignation were kindled within him. For he saw men and women, created by God in the image of God, giving to idols the homage which was due to God alone. We constantly pray “Hallowed be your Name,” but we do not seem to mean it, or to care that his name is so widely profaned.

What might it take for the church of Jesus Christ to wake up today?

PRAY

- Ask God to give you eyes to see where he is being replaced by things and philosophies and to respond to what you see with a passion to proclaim truth and to honor his name.

All material taken from:

John Stott, *Acts: Seeing the Spirit at Work*. Downers Grove, IL: IV Press, USA, 1998.