

SHARE THE MESSAGE

Leader pages on pp. 152-155

THE POINT:
OUR DAILY CONVERSATIONS ARE OPPORTUNITIES TO SHARE CHRIST.

ACTS 17:16-18, 22-23, 30-31

¹⁶ While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed when he saw that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷ So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with those who worshiped God, as well as in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸ Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also debated with him. Some said, "What is this ignorant show-off trying to say?" Others replied, "He seems to be a preacher of foreign deities"—because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.

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²² Paul stood in the middle of the Areopagus and said: "People of Athens! I see that you are extremely religious in every respect. ²³ For as I was passing through and observing the objects of your worship, I even found an altar on which was inscribed: 'To an Unknown God.' Therefore, what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you.

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MEMORY VERSE

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³⁰ **"Therefore, having overlooked the times of ignorance, God now commands all people everywhere to repent,** ³¹ because he has set a day when he is going to judge the world in righteousness by the man he has appointed. He has provided proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead."

KEYWORDS

Epicurean (v. 18)—A philosophical school which held that life's chief purpose was to indulge in pleasure and happiness, while avoiding pain, passions, superstition, and anxiety.

Stoic (v. 18)—Philosophical school which emphasized rational thought, self-reliance, and living in harmony with the natural world.

The Areopagus (v. 22)—The name of both a hill and a formal court which met on the hill where philosophers judged ideas.

Extremely religious (v. 22)—The Athenians probably heard this as a commendation of their piety, but Paul likely also meant that their religion was built on superstition.

HOW CAN DAILY CONVERSATIONS BE USED TO SHARE CHRIST?

I used to ride a commuter train to school. I was also a new Christian, and I looked forward to that 45-minute ride as a time to read and study my Bible. A woman sat down next to me while my Bible was open on my lap, and she kept peering over at what I was doing.

This irritated me. My Bible study time was being interrupted by this nosey woman. I shifted slightly away from her, but she only leaned in even further. Finally, I stopped reading, placed my hand over the open Bible, and looked directly at her. She certainly noticed that!

After an awkward moment, I was convicted to engage in conversation. I remembered that my morning prayer had been for God to give me an opportunity to share Jesus with someone. I almost missed it because I was so focused on my own time with the Lord!

We have “windows of opportunity” every day to share Jesus, but we can easily miss them. Jesus wants to tell His story through us. We need to be ready to share.

Be Sensitive to Opportunities //

Acts 17:16-18

Paul had a “window of opportunity” in Athens. Paul noticed an air of spiritualism that had nothing to do with God. Paul wisely handled this opportunity by first engaging those he was most familiar with first, the Jews who worshiped God. Whenever Paul entered a new city, he began by reaching out to the Jews and the worshipping Gentiles. Every Sabbath he sought them out at the local synagogue. Both Jews and God-fearing Gentiles already had a sincere interest in God, and Paul could tap into that as he shared the gospel of Jesus Christ.

WHEN HAVE YOU LOOKED AT YOUR COMMUNITY AND BEEN DEEPLY DISTRESSED?

Between Sabbaths, Paul could be found out among the people in the city. In Athens, he walked into the Agora—the marketplace—and sparked conversations. In this marketplace, he met two types of thinkers:



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- Epicurean philosophers thought that God, if He existed at all, was not involved in our lives. Furthermore, they did not believe in life after death.
- Stoic philosophers were pantheists, believing in an ultimate divine principle that exists throughout the universe and nature, including human beings. They believed the way to realize your fullest potential was to live by reason. They valued self-sufficiency.

Here in the cultural and intellectual center of the Roman Empire, where Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle had once taught, and where intellectuals still loved to debate, Paul dove right into the discussion with philosophers who were worlds apart from him in their beliefs. These philosophers labeled him a “pseudo-intellectual.” But Paul was not deterred. He still saw an opportunity before Him.

In our post-Christian culture, many people are not excited about discussing the gospel. Some may want to discuss philosophy, but not “outmoded religion.” Like Paul, we should not be deterred either. Moments like these can be still be opportunities to point to Jesus when we follow the principle Paul used. We see that principle in the next passage.

Find A Common Ground //

Acts 17:22-23

As Paul engaged the Athenians, he looked for an open door to draw them into conversation. They didn't even believe in one God, but the apostle was actively looking for some way to connect with the people around him. Notice some of the verbs in verses 22-23: “I see ... I was ... observing ... I even found.”

And he found the connection: they worshiped—and so did Paul. He found common ground in their spirituality. Granted, they were worshiping the wrong things, but at least they were spiritual seekers. So Paul used this to connect.

WHAT ARE WAYS WE CAN CONNECT WITH PEOPLE OF DIFFERENT CULTURES OR RELIGIONS?

The construction of an altar “To An Unknown God” was clearly the Athenians' attempt to make sure they didn't unintentionally forget, and thereby risk offending, one of the gods. Paul



DIGGING DEEPER BUILDING A BRIDGE

The Greek term for “extremely religious” (*deisidaimonesteros*) (v. 22) is a bit ambiguous in its meaning. Sometimes it was used to praise those who were passionate toward their religious beliefs and practices. However, it also could mean one was too concerned in his religion practices—to the point of being superstitious. Paul probably used the term most likely as a compliment, although he may have also implied an ironic critique of their religious beliefs and practices. Of course, Paul understood that the Greeks' religious practices were vain and meaningless. But Paul also knew he needed to build a bridge in order to gain a hearing, a bridge to carry his listeners from where they were (pagans) to where they needed to be (redeemed children of God).

What are some methods we can use to build a bridge for sharing our faith?



used their acknowledgement that there could be a god they didn't know as an opening to introduce them to "the God who made the world and everything in it" (v. 24).

WHAT STANDS OUT TO YOU ABOUT PAUL'S APPROACH TO SHARING THE GOSPEL?

Paul's engagement made an impact because he shared in a forum where he couldn't be ignored. Though most believers may not be called to be street preachers, we all have been plucked out of some culture in opposition to God, as we all were once sinners. When we're plucked from a culture whether it be a family with no lineage of faith, different belief systems, or a sin-ridden life, God takes us from there knowing we understand what it means to live within that culture and how to reach it.

The question is are we willing to use that common place of connection as a catalyst to share the gospel. Though we may think people aren't open to hear the gospel, often times they are because the point of commonality places you both on equal ground. Instead of believers appearing to be speaking from a place of superiority, we humble ourselves and seek those places of connection for an opening to share God's important message.

Guide in Understanding the Gospel // Acts 17:30-31

If someone was walking down the street and didn't see an oncoming truck about to hit them but you were able to see it, wouldn't you warn that person of the impending danger? It would be cruel and inhumane to refrain from doing so. It's cruel and inhumane when we refuse to share the gospel. The gospel is centered around the good news that Jesus came for all and was willing to be the sacrifice that restored our broken relationship with God. But if we only told listeners that Jesus came and did not tell them why, would our message hold the same weight or importance?

WHAT TRUTHS ARE INTEGRAL WHEN COMMUNICATING THE GOSPEL?

We need to be willing to share the benefits of receiving the gospel as well as the disadvantages of not accepting it. Believers should make the gospel clear to ensure the listeners have an opportunity to make an informed decision. We don't want to hear an unbeliever say, "No one ever told me I had a choice to make," we also should not want to carry the burden of failing to tell the entirety of the truth of the gospel and the separation

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from God experienced when it is rejected. Sugar coating an eternity without God does no good for the hearer or the believer who has a responsibility to be a purveyor of truth.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO YOU TO HAVE THE PRIVILEGE AND RESPONSIBILITY TO SHARE THE GOSPEL?

Paul made the truth very clear to the Athenians and explained to them that they were able to receive the gift of the gospel by acknowledgment and acceptance of Jesus Christ. Believers must be clear to explain it is only through Jesus we're able to receive the gift of the gospel. Each person is required to make their own decision. Believers must be diligent messengers of the entire gospel.

Helping others understand the truth of the gospel takes a commitment by believers to offer the same gift we have received to others. Heaven celebrates when people come to a saving faith. Believers have the responsibility and privilege to extend an invitation and join in the celebration of a redeemed life and another person reconciled with our heavenly Father.

DID YOU KNOW?

In the first century, a city's main marketplace, also known as the *agora*, was more than just a place to buy food and supplies. It was the community's social center. For Athens, it was also where the educated men came to argue philosophy and religion. This made the marketplace a perfect place for Paul to share the truth of the gospel with a Gentile audience. It was a different story for slaves in the marketplace where they themselves were the commodities on sale. The sale of slaves took place in various parts of the world. In the U.S., slave markets became a major activity by 1815 and lasted until the 1860s. By that time the slave population had reached an estimated four million. Historian Ira Berlin said, "In all, the slave trade, with its hubs and regional centers, its spurs and circuits, reached into every cranny of southern society. Few southerners, black or white, were untouched."²⁵

What can we do to make today's marketplace a center for hope and honor for God?

LIVE IT

How can we overcome the challenges of sharing the gospel message?

Without someone's willingness to share the message, how will those who need to hear ever know? Be willing to be the one that tells someone, so they will have the same opportunity you have had to know the One who saves. You may need to overcome fear and other obstacles. But like Paul, we should not give up, because souls are at stake. Focus on these steps to develop an expedient way to share the good news.

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- **Open your eyes.** Be diligent about seeking opportunities to share the gospel in your daily coming and going. Pray for spiritual eyes to see the harvest.
- **Open your heart.** As you seek those who need to hear the gospel message, pray the Lord reveals common areas that lead to open-hearted conversations.
- **Open your mouth.** When opportunities to share, be diligent about maximizing your window of opportunity. Pray for discerning words to share about the hope offered through the gospel.

DAILY READINGS

1. IDOL DISTRESS // ACTS 17:16

Double-mindedness is not a good characteristic for believers. It speaks of more than one focus or a devotion obscured by misplaced longings. Most often devotion to God becomes an unintentional low priority. We want to make God a priority but vacations, shopping, hobbies, and other personal events fill our schedules. There's nothing wrong with any of these things. The problem is making them a higher priority than our Father and His kingdom. Paul was distressed by the idols in Athens. He would be distressed by the idols in our lives as well. Avoid the distress of a life filled with idols.

Never compromise your devotion to God.

2. COMMON GROUND // 1 CORINTHIANS 9:22-23

Paul helps us understand establishing common ground may be helpful in sharing the gospel. People are not apt to listen to a know-it-all, which is the way we sometimes come across when we speak about the solid truths of the Word and the harsh realities of facing the wrath of God due to sin. We have to earn the right or have permission to speak about the love of God with someone else. People will open the door to their hearts and listen to what you have to say when they know more about you. So begin by talking about yourself.

Compassionately touch on something you have in common.

3. TRUE REPENTANCE // PSALM 51:1

When sharing the gospel, some to whom you speak will receive Christ and some will not. There is also a group that will receive Christ but not be sorry for their sin. This may be appalling to most of us who love God with all our hearts and seek to please Him. One who is truly repentant will express sorrow for his or her sins and a willingness to change so that sins do not reoccur in the future. God knows when we are saying we are sorry just for the sake of saying

we are sorry. Therefore, when seeking repentance for our wrongs or when praying for the repentance of those who have just received Christ, ask that God will help us to feel truly sorry for our sin and help us to want to turn away from our hurtful habits.

True repentance is what God requires.

4. PUT IT IN GOD'S HANDS // MATTHEW 15:28

Life is filled with overwhelming situations—sicknesses with no cures, relentless threats of creditors, harsh climatic weather, unsaved relatives and friends. Including unsaved relatives on this list is warranted, because we know their end if they don't receive Christ as Savior. Don't give up. The woman in this verse agreed to be considered a dog in her desire for her daughter to be healed. She did all she could, which included reaching out to Christ. We need to do all that we can, but in the end we need to place our needs in the hands of God, then rest in faith that the Lord is in control.

Today in prayer, ask Jesus to give you faith in all that you do and to rest in Him.

5. AN IMPORTANT REMINDER // 1 CORINTHIANS 16:13

We can all remember some of the words of our parents who often gave us reminders. Wash behind your ears, brush your teeth up and down, be kind, and so forth. These kind of parental reminders were spoken to encourage us to do what is best and not bring shame to the families. This was also what Paul did in his closing words to his spiritual children in Corinth. Paul had already instructed and corrected them on important issues. In closing, he emphasized they should continually be secure, mature, and steady in their faith.

We should also heed Paul's words so we will grow in our faith and honor our Father in heaven.