

"God"

Acts 17:24-29

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Madison, Wisconsin
January 24, 2010



Introduction:

This morning, I would invite you to turn with me again to the book of **Acts—Acts 17**—as we continue with the second in a series of three lessons based on a visit by the apostle Paul to the city of Athens. **▶PPT▶** If you were here with us last week, or if you caught up with the lesson on-line, then you might remember that Paul delivered his sermon on the Areopagus, a small hill with an amazing view of the Parthenon, the temple of Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom and war. We discovered that Paul was on his Second Missionary Journey, he was passing through on his way from Thessalonica to Corinth, he is waiting to meet up with Silas and Timothy (basically what we would refer to as a “layover”), and as he waits, he discovers that the city is quite literally full of idols. Last week, **▶PPT▶** we focused our attention on the fact that Paul was an example of evangelism—an example of how to reach out with the gospel. He was provoked when he saw the great need. He took advantage of the opportunity. And when he spoke, he spoke with the utmost of kindness and respect—he started with a compliment.

With this in mind, I would like for us to look back at **Acts 17** (in our pew Bibles on **page 1734**), and I would like for us to focus this morning on what Paul (in a city full of idols) has to say about the one true and living God. **▶PPT▶** Lord willing, we will conclude next week by looking at what Paul actually tells these people to do, but for now, let us please look at what happens once again, this time paying special attention to what Paul has to say about God. **Acts 17:16-34**...

¹⁶ Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him as he was observing the city full of idols. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is which you are proclaiming? ²⁰ "For you are bringing some strange things to our ears; so we want to know what these things mean." ²¹ (Now all the Athenians and the

strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new.)

²² So Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects. ²³ "For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, 'TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.' Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴ "The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; ²⁵ nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things; ²⁶ and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, ²⁷ that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; ²⁸ for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His children.' ²⁹ "Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man. ³⁰ "Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, ³¹ because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.

³² Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some began to sneer, but others said, "We shall hear you again concerning this." ³³ So Paul went out of their midst. ³⁴ But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

As we think about this passage once again this morning, I would like for us to focus today on verses 24-29 and what Paul has to say about the one true God. Next week I would like for us to conclude by looking at what Paul actually tells these people to do. But for this morning, let us please consider what Paul has to say about God. Last week, we noted that Paul started with a compliment, ***"Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects,"*** and yet this morning we notice that Paul did not stop there, but he went on to very firmly point out the differences between the one true God and the so-called gods that they were worshipping there in Athens. Today, we hear a lot of people telling us that it does not matter what we believe as long as we are sincere—as long as we are serious about it. I am reminded, however, of a statement made by Robert Hutchins, the former chancellor of the University of Chicago. Dr. Hutchins said, ***"It is not so important to be serious as it is to be serious about the important things. The monkey***

wears an expression of seriousness which would do credit to any college student, but the monkey is serious because he itches." It is important, then, to be serious in matters of faith, but let us be both serious and informed. Let us be serious with the knowledge of God—let us be serious and accurate.

I. With this in mind, we notice first of all that Paul starts introducing them to the *"Unknown God"* by describing God as our CREATOR.

»PPT»

In verse 24, Paul refers to God, *"...who made the world and all things in it."* From the smallest of particles, to the world itself, and even to the entire Universe, God made it all. This is where the Bible starts, *"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth"* (Genesis 1:1). And it has been said that if we reject that one verse, we might as well stop reading. If we fail to grasp the opening line, then nothing else in the Bible really matters. If God lied to us about creating the world, then He might as well have deceived us about everything else. But as it is, according to the writer of Hebrews in Hebrews 11:3, *"By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible."* And so with that one very basic and underlying belief, Paul begins his sermon to some of the world's greatest philosophers. He introduces God as being the creator of the world and of all things in it. This is something that they should have known. In fact, Paul would go on to write later, *"For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse"* (Romans 1:20). In other words, you do need to be a Christian to see God, but the evidence for God is abundant and is available to all people. And so Paul, therefore, starts his sermon on the Areopagus by identifying the Unknown God as the Creator.

II. Not only did Paul identify God as the Creator, but he also introduces God as being the LORD OF HEAVEN AND EARTH. »PPT»

Since He made it, He owns it, and since He owns it, He is the Lord of it. The word *"Lord"* refers to being the master or the ruler over something, and so Paul informs his audience that God is the Lord. This means that God rules over all of the other so-called gods of Greece and Rome. This, of course, would be very unpopular to say—especially in a city of more than 30,000 idols. In our society, people don't always like to admit that some people are better than other people, that some nations are better than other nations, that some employees are better than other employees, that some students are better than other students. As I was preparing this morning's lesson, I ran across a brief reference to something known as *"Tall Poppy Syndrome."* It is an idea going back to Aristotle, and it is referred to now in Australia as *"Tall Poppy Syndrome,"* because in order to avoid one or two poppies looking out of place by poking their heads up taller than the others, farmers will sometimes go through the field and simply lop them off. It is referred to as *"cutting the tall poppy,"* and the concept has many applications. One article pointed out that if a student gets a really

good grade on a test, some teachers will write that grade in very light pencil, so that other students will not get offended, so that other students will not feel bad for not doing as well. Those teachers have **“cut the tall poppy.”** Another article explained that many of those in other countries respect the United States, because we don’t do that here—we allow people to succeed in business and progress above and beyond their peers. Of course, that seems to be changing. Today, if you step out and take a huge risk and succeed in business, if you are a CEO and get a huge bonus, we might design a special tax just for you, and we will bring you down to size. Well, a lot of times people do this in religion. And so the idea is: You can’t say that your god is bigger my god, because we’re all on the same level. People will argue that all religions are equally valid, that we are all simply taking different paths to the same destination. And if someone arrogantly claims to have a corner on the truth, we as a society will **“cut the tall poppy,”** we will ridicule that claim and will bring that person down to size.

Paul, however, in this city full of idols, claimed (in **verse 24**) that the one true and living God was the Lord, the master, the ruler of heaven and earth—superior to all other so-called gods—He is the sovereign Lord, He calls the shots, He is the King of all kings, the Lord of all lords. And because He is the Lord, Paul says that He is unable to **“dwell in temples made with hands.”** Imagine Paul making this statement with the Parthenon, the pride of Athens, standing there in the background. In other words, Paul was saying, **“Your temples can’t handle the one true God. The God that is unknown to you cannot be contained.”** The Greek gods, of course, were not like this. The Greek gods were basically like humans, only they lived forever. They had special powers, and they could do some cool stuff, but none of them were truly omnipotent—they all had weaknesses. They were all subject to other gods, they had to play by the rules, and so it was rather bold for Paul to say that God was truly **“Lord.”** He could not be contained even in a building as beautiful as the Parthenon. As Jesus said in **John 4:24**, **“God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.”** When we bow our heads in prayer, when we approach God in worship, we are approaching the Lord and Master of the Universe. We do not need to be embarrassed by this, we do not need to apologize, we do not need to cut the tall poppy, because referring to Jesus, the Bible says in **Acts 4:12** that, **“...there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.”** God is the Lord of heaven and earth, and He cannot be contained in temples made with human hands.

III. But even beyond this, Paul continued and explained that this Unknown God is also the GIVER OF LIFE. »PPT»

As Paul said in **verse 25**, **“...He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things.”** And because of this, since He is the giver of life, Paul says that God does not need anything, that He is not served by human hands. Of course, the Athenians knew that all of their idols needed to be fed, they needed to be maintained. Sometimes they fell over or cracked and needed to be repaired. But instead of a god who needs to be fed, the one true and living God is the one who

feeds us. God is not like the guinea pigs in the basement who need to be fed and watered, who need to have their bedding changed every week. God is not like a dog who needs to be taken out for a walk every day. We do not give life to God, but God is the giver of life. God gives life to us. We depend on God—He does not depend on us. The meat on our plates at lunch came from an animal that God made. The wood on this floor came from a tree that God created. The water we drink came from the rain He provided. The gold in the rings that we wear came from the elements that God placed in the earth long ago. As Paul said, ***“...He himself gives to all people life and breath and all things.”*** In contrast to the gods of Greece, God is a giver.

IV. Not only is God the Giver of Life, but we also learn in this passage that GOD IS THE MAKER OF NATIONS. »PPT»

As Paul said in verse 26, ***“...He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation.”*** This, of course, would have been quite a revolutionary idea for the Greeks. Many of the ancient Greeks thought that they were the preferred race, that the gods favored them over any other nation. We remember that the Greeks had a word for those who were not Greeks—they referred to them as **“barbarians.”** The word **“barbarian”** is one of those words that is formed based on the sound of the definition. We think of words like buzz, or cuckoo, or boom—those words sound like what they describe. In the same way, the word **“barbarian”** was a derogatory word invented by the Greeks to describe the sound that non-Greeks made when they spoke, **“Bar, bar, bar, bar,”** and so on, or, as we might say today, **“Blah, blah, blah, blah...,”** as we make fun of those who do not speak our language. The Greeks thought that they were the superior race, that they were favored by the gods. Paul, though, says that God, ***“...made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation.”*** God is the maker of nations.

With this in mind, please also remember what had happened roughly a hundred years in the past—Greece had been conquered by the Romans. In a way, Paul seems to be explaining that—that perhaps God had something to do with it—that God was more powerful and more Universal than the local Greek gods. But the bottom line is that we are all equal in God’s eyes—all of us are descendants of Adam, the first man. God, therefore, is not tied to one particular race, or nation, or language—He is not the white, middle-class, American God, but He is the Universal God. He is the God who sent His only Son to die for every person in every nation—from the leaders of the most powerful nations on earth, to the weakest in the most remote villages—God knows and cares what happens to each person. As the apostle Peter finally came to understand in Acts 10:34-35, ***“...God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him.”*** He is the maker and manager of nations.

V. As we look back at Acts 17, we find that Paul continues to introduce the Unknown God by describing God as ONE WHO IS EAGER TO REVEAL HIMSELF. »PPT»

Unlike the Greek gods who ran around using and abusing the human race, the God of heaven has put Himself in a position where each one of us can reach out and find Him. He wants us to seek and find. And as Paul says, “...**He is not far from each one of us.**” He is the God of heaven, but He wants to be found—He wants to be involved—He is offering a relationship. And what I find so encouraging is that Paul is not even talking to Christians here. He is not even talking to Jews, but Paul is talking to Greeks, to pagan philosophers, to the Epicureans and the Stoics—and even to these people, Paul explains that God is not far and that He wants to be found. He is the God who reveals Himself.

Now, from a practical standpoint, this means that we as Christians have no right to be arrogant or to look down on those who have not yet obeyed the gospel. We are not saying, “**Ha, ha! We found God and you didn’t!**” But rather, we are simply trying to open the door or show the way. Someone has very accurately described our role as Christians as one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread. We are in this together, there is plenty of God to go around, and He wants the world to know. He wants to reveal Himself.

We remember the words of Christ in Matthew 11:28-30, “**Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.**” Unlike Zeus and the others, the one true and living God of heaven is not sitting on Mt. Olympus playing with people like toys and then tossing them aside, but He is revealing Himself and is patiently waiting for us to find Him.

VI. As we come to the end of our passage for this morning, the apostle Paul almost gets to a crescendo as he also describes God as our FATHER. »PPT»

In verse 28, Paul says, “...**for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we also are His children.’**” Or, as we will sing in just a few moments, “**There is a God, He is alive, in Him we live, and we survive.**” We are God’s children, and so instead of God being an object, we find here that God is our Father. Up at the beginning, Paul might have complimented these people for being religious, but he did not leave it there—he came back with a very powerful argument. Even their own pagan authors had some concept that we as human beings are someone’s children—we are the offspring of someone—and Paul here says that that someone is God. Therefore, since God is our Father, Paul starts bringing this lesson home as he says (in verse 29), “**Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man.**” In other words, Paul

starts to point out (in this city of more than 30,000 idols) how ridiculous it is to worship an object that we have made with our own hands!

And here Paul starts sounding like so many of the prophets from the Old Testament. We remember the words of Isaiah from **Isaiah 44**, where Isaiah slams the carpenter,

¹⁴ He cuts down cedars, or he chooses a cypress tree or an oak and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest. He plants a cedar and the rain nourishes it. ¹⁵ Then it becomes fuel for a man. He takes a part of it and warms himself; he kindles a fire and bakes bread. Also he makes a god and worships it; he makes it an idol and falls down before it. ¹⁶ Half of it he burns in the fire. Over the half he eats meat; he roasts it and is satisfied. Also he warms himself and says, "Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire!" ¹⁷ And the rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, and falls down to it and worships it. He prays to it and says, "Deliver me, for you are my god!"

We remember the words of God through the prophet Jeremiah in **Jeremiah 10**, ***"...A tree from the forest is cut down and worked with an axe by the hands of a craftsman. They decorate it with silver and gold; they fasten it with hammer and nails so that it cannot move. Their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field, and they cannot speak; they have to be carried, for they cannot walk. Do not be afraid of them, for they cannot do evil, neither is it in them to do good."*** Like scarecrows in a cucumber field!

Paul, therefore, also points out that God is our Father—He is not like an image of ***"...gold or silver or stone, an image formed through the art and thought of man."***

Conclusion:

This morning we have learned that God is our Creator, He is the Lord, He is the Giver of life and of all things, He is the Maker of nations, He is the God who reveals Himself, and He is our Father.

The question for us this morning is: Is He all of these things to us personally, or does He remain the Unknown God? Is there something that we are hiding from God? Is there something we are holding back? Based on what Paul has said to us this morning, the wisest move we can make at this point is to surrender ourselves to God—to honor Him for who He really is—not in ignorance, but in faithful, loving obedience. We must be serious, but we must be serious about the right things.

The main point this morning is that God has made Himself available—He has offered His only Son as a sacrifice for our sins, and we are to respond to that offer with humility. We must turn away from sin, and then we must allow ourselves to be briefly buried in water for the forgiveness of our past sins. At that point, our sins are

washed away, and we are born into God's family. If you are already a Christian but have turned away, or if you are facing some special struggle in your life right now, we hope you will write it down and bring your request to the front in just a moment so that we can pray about it as a congregation. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's all stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: church@fourlakescoc.org