

# ***“Athens: A Call for Action”***

**Acts 17:30-34**

**Baxter T. Exum (#1052)  
Four Lakes Church of Christ  
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## **Introduction:**

This morning, I would invite you to turn with me again to the book of **Acts—Acts 17**—as we continue with the third and final lesson 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 two weeks ago, 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 is on his Second Missionary Journey, he is 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. Two weeks ago, **»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 starts with a compliment—the people were very religious; however, they were worshipping the Unknown God in ignorance.

Last week, therefore, we looked at **verses 24-29** and the fact that Paul lifts the veil of ignorance by introducing the Unknown God. **»PPT»** He introduces the one true and living God as being our Creator, He is the Lord, He is the giver of life and of all things, He is the maker of nations, He is a revealer (in that He wants us to find Him), and above all, He is our Father.

With all of this in mind, I would like for us to look back at **Acts 17** (in our pew Bibles on **page 1734**), **»PPT»** and I would like for us to focus this morning on what Paul tells them to do with all of this information. Paul closes his lesson with what we might refer to as a **“Call for Action.”** **»PPT»** His sermon was not just a college lecture, he was not just listing a bunch of facts, but his introduction to the one true and living God actually means something and has a very practical application. If you will, please look with me at what Paul tells these people to do. To put it in context, we will look at the entire passage again, but we will focus in on the last few verses.

## **Acts 17:16-34...**

***<sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is which you are proclaiming?" <sup>20</sup> "For you are bringing some strange things to our ears; so we want to know what these things mean." <sup>21</sup> (Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new.)

<sup>22</sup> So Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects. <sup>23</sup> "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. <sup>24</sup> "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; <sup>25</sup> 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; <sup>26</sup> 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, <sup>27</sup> 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; <sup>28</sup> for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His children.' <sup>29</sup> "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.

<sup>30</sup> "Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, <sup>31</sup> 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.

<sup>32</sup> Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some began to sneer, but others said, "We shall hear you again concerning this." <sup>33</sup> So Paul went out of their midst. <sup>34</sup> 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 30-34** and what Paul actually tells these people to do.

- I. And with this in mind, as we come to the conclusion of Paul's lesson, we notice first of all that Paul starts his final appeal by explaining that in times past, **GOD HAD OVERLOOKED THE TIMES OF IGNORANCE.**

»PPT»

And really, this is a comment on the grace and the mercy of God. It was not that people were not guilty in times past, but God chose to overlook certain things. God chose to be patient. The King James Version says that God *"winked"* at such ignorance. And so the idea is that God looked the other way, that God let some things slide. And again, people were still guilty, but God held back and allowed some things to happen that He normally would not have allowed. We remember how Paul said something very similar in his sermon in the city of Lystra in **Acts 14**. Paul told them to turn away from the vanity of idol worship, *"...to a living God, WHO MADE THE HEAVEN AND THE EARTH AND THE SEA AND ALL THAT IS IN THEM. In the generations gone by He permitted all the nations to go their own ways; and yet He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness."* God, therefore, had overlooked a lot of ignorance—not only in the Gentile world, but even in the Old Testament. We see several examples. We think, for example, about polygamy. Some of the great heroes of the Old Testament had several wives—men like Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob. God's original plan was for one man and one woman to be married to each other for life. And yet it appears that this is one area of ignorance that God decided to tolerate. We also think about divorce. Again, God's original plan was for one man and one woman to be joined together for life, and yet in **Matthew 19:8**, Jesus addressed the Pharisees and said, *"Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way."* The Lord then went on to reinforce God's original plan for marriage.

Perhaps in a similar way, then, the Lord also seems to have overlooked certain behaviors in the Gentile world. Before His death on the cross, you might remember Jesus praying, *"Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing"* (**Luke 23:34**)—a sin of ignorance. Not long after, in his sermon on Solomon's Porch, Peter referred back to the death of Christ and said, *"And now, brethren, I know that you acted in ignorance, just as your rulers did also"* (**Acts 3:17**). Years later, the apostle Paul would go on to refer to, *"...the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory"* (**1 Corinthians 2:8**). Paul would later refer to his own ignorance, the fact that he had been, *"...a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. Yet I was shown mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief"* (**1 Timothy 1:13**). And yet we know that in spite of his ignorance, in spite of his unbelief at the time (after the cross) he had to repent—he had to obey the gospel in order to have his sins forgiven.

First of all, then, Paul (in his sermon on the Areopagus) refers to the fact that before the time of Christ, God overlooked a lot of ignorance. Especially for those Gentiles who were living without a written law from God (as the Jews had), God was extremely patient.

**II. However, we also discover in verse 30 that GOD IS NOW DECLARING THAT ALL PEOPLE EVERYWHERE SHOULD REPENT. »PPT»**

And one perhaps minor thing that I do not want us to miss here is that God has declared something! Please remember, Paul was speaking in a city of more than 30,000 gods, none of whom had ever spoken a single word! And so it is significant that God has spoken, that God has declared something. Even today, we need to remember that God has spoken! God has spoken in His word, and when we read the Scriptures, God is speaking to us. When we forget to read the Scriptures, we forget that God has something to say to us.

Nevertheless, back in **Acts 17** Paul says that this Unknown God who speaks is now declaring that all people everywhere should repent. What a powerful message! God speaks, and He tells us that all people must repent. The word “*repent*,” of course, refers to a change of mind resulting in a change of direction. In other words, we are headed in a sinful direction, but God is encouraging us to make a u-turn. He is no longer being tolerant of sin, He is no longer turning a blind eye to sinful behavior, He is no longer overlooking ignorance, but He is demanding that all of us make a change.

I know that sometimes we may emphasize the turning away from sin, but repentance is just as much turning TO GOD. We know that when we are driving if we want to make a u-turn, we are not necessarily focusing on what is ahead, but we are focusing on what we have missed—we are looking back at what we have missed, longing for something better, perhaps even a little mad at ourselves that we have missed a turn, and so we turn around. That is the way it is with repentance. We may be headed in a bad direction, but God is inviting us to have a change of heart and turn back—to turn away from death and back to life.

As Peter wrote in **2 Peter 3:9**, “*The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.*” God’s desire is that all people would make a change, that all people would turn away from sin and back to Him, and that all people would honor Him as the one true and living God. As we laid a foundation for our study of Paul’s sermon here in Athens, we learned that Paul had just established a congregation in Thessalonica and was on his way to Corinth. Once he got to Corinth, he sat down and wrote a letter back to the new Christians in Thessalonica, and he praised them for making this u-turn. In **1 Thessalonians 1:9-10**, the apostle Paul referred to, “*...how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come.*” That is the kind of difference that repentance makes in a person’s life—it involves turning from things like the service of idols to the service of the living and true God. For most people, it is a huge change to get out of a sinful way of living.

III. As we look back at Acts 17, we find that Paul gives a reason for repentance as he points out that THIS UNKNOWN GOD HAS APPOINTED A DAY OF JUDGMENT. **»PPT»**

According to verse 31 in the NASB, this Day of Judgment has been *“fixed.”* In other words, the date has already been decided. God knows when it will happen, and that date cannot be moved. We make a lot of appointments here in this life. Just this week, we got a friendly reminder that one of us has an appointment with the dentist. It is an appointment that we made six months ago. The little postcard gives a number to call if that date will not work, if we need to change the appointment. If something comes up, we can change it, we can call to cancel it, but the appointment we have with God on the Day of Judgment is *“fixed.”* It cannot be moved. It cannot be canceled.

Everyone will be there, and no one can avoid it. These Greek philosophers will be there, along with everyone else who has ever lived—there will be no exceptions and no excuses. We will not be able to get a note from our parents to get us out of this one, but all of us, all people will face God in the Judgment.

We find in verse 31 that God will judge the world *“in righteousness.”* In other words, in God’s great mercy, He has warned us in advance, and He has given all of us more than enough time to study for the final exam. I know that in college I was thankful for those teachers who would give us some kind of study guide. Sometimes you would find a teacher who would basically just come right out and tell you what would be on the test. At least in some way, this is basically what God has done in the Bible. He has given us the standard of judgment beforehand—He tells us right here that we will be judged *“in righteousness.”*

Now for many people, this is a rather disturbing concept. We would rather be judged *“in love,”* or *“in mercy,”* or *“with tolerance”*—almost like a parent would judge a child’s artwork that is brought home from kindergarten, *“Oh, that is so cute!”* But the Bible says that on the last day we will be judged *“in righteousness.”* The love and the mercy is in the fact that God sent Jesus and that we have been warned. But the judgment itself will be carried out *“in righteousness.”* The judgment will be true and will be carried out based on the word of God.

And unlike courts here on this earth, there will be no appeal—there will be no need for appeal. Here on this earth, we make judgments based on the outward appearance of a case, but God will judge based on the heart. Can you imagine a judge today being able to read people’s hearts? That would be an amazing thing! And yet the Bible teaches that God knows the secrets of our hearts (Romans 2:16). Here on this earth, judges may be swayed by the clothes that we wear, or maybe by our wealth, or perhaps by a powerful attorney. But as we studied in our Wednesday evening class several weeks ago, all people will be judged by the words of Christ (John 12:48).

And just like courtrooms here in the United States, people do not need to believe in the Judge in order for the Judge to have the authority to make a decision. One thing

I like about watching COPS sometimes is that when a suspect gets all upset and argumentative, sometimes the officer will simply say, **“Tell it to the judge.”** In other words, **“I’m not the final authority here, and you may never agree with my reasons for arresting you, but that doesn’t really matter, because there’s a guy at the courthouse whose opinion matters, and you can explain it all to him. I’ve done my job here, but beyond that, you can tell it to the judge.”** In a similar way, our job is to pass along the word of God, but beyond that: Tell it to the judge.

Of course, in our society, the only wrong thing you can do these days is to tell someone that they are wrong. We are a society of tolerance, but Paul (under similar circumstances) says that a Day of Judgment has already been **“fixed.”** The kind and loving thing to do, therefore, is to warn people that the appointment is coming, and if they want to stand there shaking their fist in anger at the Judge, that is not our problem.

**IV. And to prove this, to prove that he is telling the truth, we discover here at the end that Paul calls up as evidence the fact that GOD HAS RAISED JESUS FROM THE DEAD. ▶PPT▶**

In fact, in verse 31, Paul uses the word **“proof.”** **“Proof”** is a strong word, but Paul used it. As proof that a Judgment Day is coming, God raised the Judge from the dead. The fact of the resurrection, therefore, is extremely important. This, by the way, is not the first time that the resurrection of Christ has been tied to the Judgment Day. Just a few weeks after His own resurrection, Jesus spoke to the apostles and said, **“Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things”** (Luke 24:46-48).

It is interesting that Paul started this short sermon by introducing these people to the Unknown God as a God who is their Creator (in verse 24), and he ends here in verse 31 by explaining that this same God will also be their Judge at a time that has already been appointed.

**Conclusion:**

We have now come to the end of Paul’s lesson, and it appears that Paul was interrupted. And at this point, we see several reactions to Paul’s message.

- When he speaks of the resurrection, we see first of all that some people interrupted the message and began to sneer. Their attitude was that Paul must be joking. And for this reason, no where in the New Testament do we ever read about the church in Athens. We read about other churches in Greece—Philippi, and Thessalonica, and Corinth, but we read nothing about the church in Athens—there are no letters written to Athens, we don’t read about any



preachers or elders from Athens, no mission work that they helped with, and as far as I can tell, the city of Athens is never mentioned again anywhere in the New Testament. And to many today, the Christian faith also seems to be a joke.

- Others, however, said, ***“We shall hear you again concerning this.”*** In other words, they put off making a decision. They were looking for more information. And for those who are not sure—for those who are not ready to make a decision, this is a pretty good option—to research, to dig in, to read, to investigate. The problem, of course, is when this turns into an excuse for doing nothing. But if you are in this category of those who would like to study it further, we would encourage you to do what these people wanted to do. Give us a call during the week, and we would be glad to meet with you to look into it even more.
- The third reaction, though, is the best. In **verse 34**, we discover that some people ***“joined him and believed.”*** In other words, some accepted the message—Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus (a member of the ruling class), along with a woman named Damaris, and several others with them. It is significant that the Greek women were also actively seeking for answers. Sometimes we hear that ancient women were completely repressed, that they never expressed themselves in public, that they were excluded from these public meetings, and yet that does not seem to be the case (at least in Athens). Damaris, along with at least several other people decided that Paul’s message was true, and so they acted on it immediately. If you are in this category, we would invite you to let us know right away. The Bible teaches that we accept God’s offer of salvation by turning away from sin and by allowing ourselves to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of our past sins.

Some have said that Paul’s preaching here in Athens was a failure, and yet I would disagree. With great respect for his audience, Paul introduced them to the Unknown God, he briefly but carefully explained who God really was, and then he challenged them to do something about it—he told them that the time for ignorance was over, that it was time for all people everywhere to repent, that there was a Day of Judgment coming, and that God had provided proof for all of this by raising His Son from the dead.

For those of us who believe in the resurrection, our challenge is this: What will we do about this information? Do we keep it to ourselves and hope no one notices what we believe, or do we pass it on? Deep down, do we believe that our atheist neighbors, and our friends who are Buddhists and Hindus, and our friends who are caught up in all of the latest denominations will really be okay in the end after all? Do we really believe that our friends will be okay if they ignorantly worship an Unknown God in their own made-up way (like the people of Athens), or do we believe that truth matters? Do we have the courage to let our friends know that we’re worried about them? Do we stand up and introduce our friends to the one true God (as Paul did), or do we keep quiet about it? As in Athens, many may think we’re joking, but there may be a few who accept the message and do something about it.

For those of you here this morning who have not yet been immersed in water for the forgiveness of sins, for those who have not yet accepted God's offer on His terms, how about it? For many, the idea of being dunked in water for the forgiveness of sins is rather quaint and outdated, almost silly. Truly, as Paul wrote in our Scripture reading for this morning, ***"...the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God"*** (**1 Corinthians 1:18**). If you are ready to obey the gospel, we would invite you to let us know about your decision as we sing this next song. Let's all stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: [church@fourlakescoc.org](mailto:church@fourlakescoc.org)