

Scripture Reading:

Acts 17:15 “So those who conducted Paul brought him to Athens; and receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him with all speed, they departed. **16** Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols. **17** Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshipers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there. **18** Then certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him. And some said, "What does this babbler want to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods," because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection. **19** And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new doctrine is of which you speak? **20** For you are bringing some strange things to our ears. Therefore we want to know what these things mean." **21** For all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing. “

"When Wise Men Are Fools"

I think it is very appropriate that we consider the Apostle Paul's arrival at Athens on the Sunday where we remember the ascension of Jesus to the Father's right hand of power. Ascension Sunday is followed by Pentecost Sunday where we remember the outpouring of the promised comforter, the Holy Spirit and then comes normal or ordinary time in the church calendar, beginning with Trinity Sunday and ending at Advent.

- Linda and I will be off to the Oregon family camp for the next two weeks and Mike will bring two important messages.
- Lord willing, our missionary Blake Purcell will be in our pulpit the following week to challenge us regarding the Great Commission

So, I want to use my time today to show how the confrontation that Paul will have here in Athens should remind us of how the coming of Jesus has changed everything. As I mentioned a few weeks ago, the message that Paul will deliver on Mars Hill is very near and dear to me! *[explain how I came to read Therefore Stand]*

When I return we will consider that message in detail following the outline that Mr. Smith uses in his book:

- We will consider...
The futility of unbelief; The glory of God as creator; And the power of the Resurrection!

I want to make the case this morning that Paul confronted the wisdom of the world here in Athens with the truth that Jesus was now King of Kings...

- And it is a confrontation that continues down to our day.

Political power at this time had shifted to Rome, but Athens was still considered the cultural and intellectual center of the world: Like someone approaching Stanford or Harvard or Oxford universities today. John Calvin describes the Athens of Paul's day as, "the mansion house of wisdom, the fountain of all arts, the mother of humanity" but then quickly adds that they "did exceed all others in blindness and madness." As Paul would later write to the Romans, professing to be wise they became fools.

- This strikes Paul immediately as he waits for his companions with Luke telling us that, "his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols."

There was a reason that this city was filled with idols but I want us to notice that Paul is provoked by what he sees: He is moved in a passionate way, similar to how Jesus wept over Jerusalem or longed to have more workers for the great harvest of lost souls.

There is a place for us to check our spirit or attitude here: When and where are we provoked in this way?

- Can we go to a stadium packed with tens of thousands of people and only enjoy the ball game?

There is no prohibition against sports in the Bible and we can certainly enjoy a day at the game, but if we do not at some point groan over the lost state of many in attendance, then perhaps our hearts have grown a little cold.

- In the same manner, there is no prohibition against enjoying a fine dinner out or even meeting some friends for coffee or a drink...

BUT if our hearts do not go out to those we will see in such settings, who are very lost, then again we need to consider our priorities. And this should apply to not just sports or entertainment: We have a tradition of watching the performance of Handel's Messiah each year at the Mondovi center: It is always moving and it is stunning to see those who attend rise for the Hallelujah chorus...

BUT again, we need to be properly provoked by those who are not reacting in faith, even some or most of the performers who sing those glorious passages! And I know it can be done wrongly because I loved to have the choir I was part of sing the Hallelujah chorus at the liberal church which I grew up in, not understanding or meaning a word that I was singing. While it is important that we share Paul's passion and heart that could be provoked, we need to understand that the idols of our day may be much more subtle than those he confronted.

- Athens was the intellectual high point of the nations that were deceived by Satan...

As Pastor Wilkins rightly points out in his lectures on Church history, the demons who were worshipped in Babylon and Chaldea were the same ones that made up the Greek and Roman pantheons... Only the names had been changed.

- We should remember the great humanist statue from the King's dream that Daniel interpreted...

It was a stunning sight to see with a head of gold and chest of silver standing on thighs of bronze and legs of iron.

- But in the end this grand statue was crushed by the stone cut without hands: Our Lord Jesus!

What did Daniel say happened to the great statue? It became as dust or chaff that would blow away in the wind.

- Luke is here reminding us that the Kingdom of Jesus has confronted and defeated the Kingdom of Satan.

Over the next thousand years, the glory of Greece and Rome would be nearly forgotten and Christendom would rule the civilized world. It is NOT an exaggeration to point out that had the Church not preserved the writings of the Greek and Roman scholars & reintroduced them through the work of Thomas Aquinas & others, we would know little about them today! Of course that is a blasphemous statement in intellectual circles today because they consider themselves to be the great thinkers and wise men of our day like those here at Athens: Christians are just ignorant people who can be easily manipulated! **BUT** no matter what modern intellectuals may think, this is the picture of history that the Bible has given us:

- Satan has been defeated!
- His demonic influence over the nations is waning.
- It is now the Kingdom of Jesus that will fill the earth.

Is that hard for us to believe?

Have there been set-backs along the way as the Spirit of God uses vessels of clay to accomplish His great work?

Do we get discouraged not only about the revival of Greek and Roman thought but also the physical advance of Islam in formerly Christian lands or the fact that Mormonism is one of the fastest growing religions in the world today?

- Sure it is hard to believe and we can be a bit depressed at times...

BUT consider those one hundred and twenty gathered in the upper room after Jesus had left, giving them simple instructions to disciple ALL the nations of the earth or even Paul who comes alone to the great center of pagan thought: Athens.

- **BUT**, Paul knew where history was going and so should we!

With that in mind let's see how Dr. Luke sets the stage here at Athens. As we saw last week, Paul has been escorted from Berea by faithful Saints and he has sent them back with instructions to have Timothy and Silas join him as soon as possible. Paul continues his usual pattern of going to reason with the Jews first in the Synagogue. Luke gives us no details about the response of the Jews here in Athens.

However he does mention that Paul then reasons daily in the marketplace which seems a little different. I suspect this has something to do with his being alone and not doing any tent-making as he would have done in the other cities along the way [explain]

Paul encounters two major groups of philosophers which are very similar to what we might face today... There is nothing new under the sun! The Epicureans were like the material or secular humanists of our day:

- To them atoms were the building blocks of everything material.
- Man was just a part of the machine and for them death was the end of both the body and the soul.
- They tolerated talk of gods but they did not relate to real life.

The highest calling in life was pleasure: Those in the know practiced what we see on that sad bumper sticker today: *'He who dies with the most toys wins.'*

The Stoics were like the mystics of our day believing God was in everything and that to be one with nature and others was to be one with God. This oneness was the high calling of life & at death we are just reabsorbed into the life force... If this sounds like being in touch with the force and avoiding the dark side in Star Wars Movies... IT IS!

I hope you can see how similar Paul's confrontation with these Epicureans and Stoics is to what we might face: Today's evolutionist believes that matter is eternal and that we are just a more complex arrangement of the atoms that surround us.

- At bottom they believe that we should eat, drink and be merry while we can because tomorrow we will die and that is all there is.

The pantheists of our day are seen in the eastern religions which have flooded into the west with Yoga classes and meditations. Much of this comes out of a reaction against the coldness of materialism, knowing there has to be some meaning to love & relationships. However, in the end, they again have no way to place any value on the individual with striving to be one with everything as the final goal.

- If you think of a drop of water that rejoins the Pacific Ocean you can see how very difficult it is to see the importance of the individual in the end.

Not that the humanists or pantheists of our day let all of this bother them any more than it did those Epicureans and Stoics.

- As Paul explains in the first chapter of Romans, professing themselves to be wise...They became fools.

They had rejected the glory of God revealed in His creation that surrounds them and suppressed the conscience that God had placed within them.

- When people do such foolish things, their hearts and minds become so hardened that they cannot see their own foolishness.

The reaction to Paul was also very similar to the way Christians are treated today: They referred to him as a “seed-picker” or babbler in many of our modern translations. The inference is that they are the wise men who understand how the world works and this man is like a sparrow that flits around picking up just the crumbs that fall from their grand table!

There is another difference that we should notice with these proud philosophers: So far in the missionary journeys we have seen faith or conflict:

- Clear outward demonstrations of the sheep or goats.
- Those who believe the Gospel and those who reject the good news.
- Those who come to faith and were baptized and those who rejected the faith and tried to drive Paul and his companions from their midst.

These proud Epicureans and Stoics believe they are above all of this:

Luke tells us that “all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing.”

- They sincerely believed that they were the determiners of all truth!
- They were the grand judges of all that OTHERS believed allowing of course that there were many paths to God.

As we study the message Paul will deliver on Mars Hill, we will see how he not only presents the Gospel, but also tears down these walls of pride they have erected. We must do the same today and so I want to take just a moment to review that first chapter of Romans that we have been studying on Wednesday nights. There Paul explains how these professing wise men became fools!

- And it will help us to better understand why we must have the same confidence to confront modern man with the Gospel, just as Paul did here in Athens.

In Romans Paul is presenting the Gospel: He clearly shows...

- The need for the Gospel,
- The power of the Gospel,
- The reach of the Gospel
- And the results of the Gospel as lives are changed.

In chapter one, after stating that he is not ashamed of the Gospel, Paul begins by declaring that all are under the condemnation of sin and in need of the Gospel. He will expose the Jews as hypocrites, which is something we must do today with some proud religious liberals. However, Paul begins by focusing on the philosophers of the world like these Epicureans and Stoics in Athens, or the humanists and mystics of our day.

Romans 1:16 “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. 17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, “The just shall live by faith.” 18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness,

- It is VERY important that we see the point Paul is making here: These men do not lack faith because of ignorance.
- God has given them truth that they are suppressing. They are suppressing the truth in unrighteousness, in other words because of sin!
- Paul is going to go on to declare that God is revealed in two important AND universal ways:

18 “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, 19 because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them.” 20 “For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, 21 because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened.”

- As I have often stated: ALL men and women, boys and girls who are alive must get up each and every morning and live in God’s universe!
- And ALL of them have a conscience within them!
- BOTH of which should bring forth thankful worship of God and yet Paul says they refused to give God any glory and were unthankful...
- If you want to understand the critical importance of thanksgiving, then you need to understand the progression that Paul shows here.
- When we are not thankful, our thoughts become darkened and futile and some very bad actions will follow, even in the lives of Christians

It is certainly the true state of these proud Epicureans and Stoics and our modern skeptics as well...

- Claiming to be wise, they have become fools!

Paul’s heart was provoked by all the idols that he saw there in Athens and it was because he could see first hand the truth about what happens when men become fools:

- They changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man-- and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things.”

Now we don’t have the same idols adorning our cities these days, but we have become very foolish none the less. Our idols are in the classrooms where the evolutionary charts prove that man was never made in the image of God but is just another animal:

- A four footed beast that figured out how to stand on two legs.

And when you consider the modern environmental movement we can clearly see the truth that Paul goes on to proclaim being worked out in our day...

24 “Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, 25 who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.”

Paul will go on in this chapter so show how God gives such foolish people over to vile passions and a whole list of sins. *[I will leave that as some homework]*

There are two things that I want us to ponder this morning...

- The first is whether are hearts are provoked by what we see around us today
- And the second is whether we are prepared to properly confront the foolishness of our day.

Are we truly provoked by the fact that humanistic evolution is taught in our schools, proclaimed as truth in our universities, accepted without question on television and in the movies?

- Or do we just go along because we don’t want to make waves?

We need to have the heart of Jesus who wept over those who refused to be thankful in Jerusalem...

And we need to remember Paul's warning at the end of chapter one, "Though they know God's decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them."

They know they are going to hell, and they want to take others with them!

Finally, if we get to the point what we are truly provoked and want to reach out to the lost, we need to evaluate whether we are fighting the right battles in the right order.

- **Do we ignore this fundamental crisis of having the truth suppressed in unrighteousness, because we would rather deal with the sins of passion or others on the list that Paul gives?**
- **Do we confront the abortionist who is killing children while giving the philosophers of our day who declare that the child has no ultimate worth a pass?**
- **Do we preach the Gospel of forgiveness to a needy sinner, but then allow them to think that whether Adam and Eve were real people is not important?**

These are not either/or situations: It should be part of the much-needed balance in our Christian witness

We must oppose abortion because they are killing those made in the image of God, but we must not pull back from getting at the root of the problem!

We must share the Gospel with those in need, but we need to remember that if Adam and Eve did not really live, then the fall and sin are not real either:

- **In that case, just what is it that we need to be saved from?**

The contrast for Paul there at Athens was very stark as he was surrounded by all those idols to the various gods.

It is just as stark today and we need to pray that God would give us the eyes to see the truth: We should be provoked...

- **Each time we gaze upon a National Geographic, watch a secular TV show or movie or hear a park ranger talk about millions or billions of years.**
- **Or when a Buddhist friend gently says there are many paths to God or that God is in everything.**

These are the things that should provoke us today and cause us to be ready to reason with those in the market place!

Lord willing in a few weeks we will consider in detail how Paul appealed to these foolish men of his day and I trust we will learn that the debate has not changed much in two thousand years!

- **We are still called on to confront the same foolishness with the same truth about the Good News!**

Communion Meditation:

I Corinthians 1:17 "For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect. 18 For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 19 For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, And bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent." 20 Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? 21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe."