

“Sermon to the Unknown God”
(Part 2)
Acts 17:15-34
(Preached at Trinity, April 25, 2007)

I’m supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord’s Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I’ll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. Last time as we began looking at Paul’s famous sermon on Mars’ Hill.
After leaving Thessalonica and Berea Paul arrived at Athens.
2. Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea were all major cities, but Athens was the greatest of them all.
 - A. 500 years BC it was a city of great splendor. Athens had one of the first examples of democracy—their officials were elected and responsible to the citizens. It was an age of literature with many Greek plays written and performed. It was also an age of philosophy under the great influence of Aristotle and Plato.
 - B. Athens lost most of its independence to Macedonia in 338 BC and it was sacked by Rome in 86 BC. Many of its monuments were destroyed, although it continued as a major center of learning.
3. The philosophers and teachers of Paul’s day were of considerable less ability than the golden age of men such as Socrates and Plato but it was still the intellectual capital of the ancient world.
4. As Paul entered the city he was stirred over the blind idolatry in Athens.
Acts 17:16 – “Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry.”
5. He went to the synagogue where he disputed with the Jews but he also went to the market place to preach Christ. There he met a group of philosophers – Epicureans and Stoics. Although they dismissed him as foolish because he believed in the resurrection they were all too curious to hear more of his strange teaching.
6. They brought Paul before the Areopagus.
Paul stands and preaches the famous discourse known as Paul’s sermon on Mars Hill. (The word for “Mars Hill” in **Verse 22** is the same word Areopagus in **Verse 19**. The place and the group that met there was called by the same name just like the word “church” refers to both the people of God and the place where they meet.
7. Paul gives a brief introduction followed by five clear points. As we’ve often seen with Luke’s record of sermons, we are given just the highlights of the sermon. The actual message would have been much longer.
 - A. God is the Creator of all things
 - B. God is infinitely greater than His creation
 - C. God is the Sustainer of all things
 - D. God is the Ordainer of all things
 - E. We should seek Him and repent of our sins
8. I want to take us through this sermon.

I. Introduction – **Verses 22-23**

- A. Paul recalls the inscription he saw – “TO THE UNKNOWN GOD”
1. Paul knew his audience. The message of the Gospel never changes but how we deliver it is always customized to our audience.
1 Corinthians 9:22 – “To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all *men*, that I might by all means save some.”
 2. Paul was speaking to philosophers who did not believe in an all ruling deity. Paul begins here.
 3. Paul gives the identity of their “Unknown God”
 - a. Romans 1 tells us why God was unknown to them. The reason people don’t know God is because they don’t want to know Him.
Romans 1:28 – “And even as they did not like to retain God in *their* knowledge. . .”
Romans 1:21-22 – “Because that, when they knew God, they glorified *him* not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. ²² Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools,”
- B. The Gospel begins with God
1. To those who do not know God we have to start at the beginning
Acts 17:23 – “Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you.”
 2. God is not some theory or some mindless idol
He is our Creator who demands submission to Him.

II. God is the Creator of all things

Acts 17:24-25 – “God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands; ²⁵ Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing”

- A. The Gospel begins with God as Creator
1. God has clearly revealed Himself as Creator
Romans 1:19-20 – “Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed *it* unto them. ²⁰ For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, *even* his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse:”
 2. As Creator we find God’s infinite power and wisdom
 3. Paul describes the universal dominion of God
Acts 17:24 – “he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands;”
- B. As Creator God owns all things
1. All of humanity belongs to God
Romans 9:20-21 – “Shall the thing formed say to him that formed *it*, Why hast thou made me thus? Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour?”
 2. All resources belong to God - All that we own is borrowed
A man uses it for a period and then leaves it behind

- C. As Creator He has the rule over all things
Isaiah 46:10 – “Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times *the things* that are not *yet* done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and **I will do all my pleasure:**”
1. Jesus declared this authority
Matthew 28:18-19 – “And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. ¹⁹ Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost:”
 2. As Creator God had the right to make demands of man
“thou shalt have no other gods before Me.”
 - a. He has the right to give us His law and to demand obedience
 - b. He has the right to punish those who disobey
- D. As Creator God has the right to expect praise and worship from all creation
Revelation 4:11 – “Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.”
1. This is why God’s wrath is kindled upon all mankind – they have robbed Him of the worship due to Him alone.
Romans 1:21 – “Because that, when they knew God, they glorified *him* not as God, neither were thankful;”
 2. Salvation involves bowing before God in submission and worship

III. God is infinitely greater than His creation

Acts 17:24-25 – “God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands; ²⁵ Neither is worshipped with men’s hands, as though he needed any thing”

Acts 17:29 – “Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device.”

- A. God is not of this world
1. Although God is active in the care and rule of this world He is completely other than this world – He is holy
 2. God has infinite worth, infinite excellence
- B. All of the nations of the earth are insignificant compared to God – They are all irrelevant
Isaiah 40:15 – “Behold, the nations *are* as a drop of a bucket, and are counted as the small dust of the balance: behold, he taketh up the isles as a very little thing.”
1. As a drop from a bucket – insignificant
 2. As dust on a scale – irrelevant
 3. Whole continents are as a speck as viewed by God
Isaiah uses the word דַּקַּיִם {dak} which describes something of the smallest size – should God desire, He could lift them as though they were a grain of dust
 4. They are less than nothing
Isaiah 40:17 – “All nations before him *are* as nothing; and they are counted to him less than nothing, and vanity.”

- B. God is infinitely great
1. The problem with men is they fail to see the greatness of God
 2. We vainly see ourselves as great

God has no rivals

Daniel 4:35 – “And all the inhabitants of the earth *are* reputed as nothing: and he doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and *among* the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou?”

III. God is the Sustainer of all things

Acts 17:25 – “Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things;”

- A. Not only is God Creator – He also sustains all life
1. Remember the Epicureans and Stoics denied the existence of a God that was active in the affairs of men
 2. Paul says God gives life and breath – The Greek form is a present participle which show an ongoing action. He gives and keeps on giving life
 3. “and all things” – God sustains all things
- B. In Colossians 1 Paul stresses the ongoing work of God in Christ
- Colossians 1:16-17** – “For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether *they be* thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him: ¹⁷ And he is before all things, and by him all things consist.”
1. The word for “consist” literally means “to hold together.”
 2. God is very active in His world holding all things together. If He ceased to hold all things together all things would come apart
- C. Few understand just how fragile life upon the earth is
1. Few understand our absolute dependence upon God's sustaining grace
 - a. Our earth has to maintain a perfect rotation. The angle of tilt has to be right. It has to keep a perfect distance from the sun.
 - b. A perfect balance of gasses must be maintained in our atmosphere – oxygen, hydrogen, nitrogen, carbon dioxide
 - c. The water cycle of evaporation and precipitation must be in perfect balance.
About 10% of the earth's fresh water is held in the atmosphere
If the polar ice cap melted the seas would rise by 260 feet
 - d. Harvests must consistently brought in year after year. If we missed one harvest there would be shortages. If we missed two we would have a severe need – prices would skyrocket. If we missed the third harvest we would be in serious need and hunger would ensue.
 2. If God suspends His divine favor in sustaining us, we will all die
 3. In the Gospel we tell sinners that they owe their very existence to God
They are breathing because God is sustaining them

IV. God is the Ordainer of all things

Acts 17:26 – “And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation;”

- A. God is not only the Sustainer of all things, He orders the affairs of men.
 - 1. God determines our life, when we live, where we live
 - 2. God is the Ruler of this world – nothing is outside His control
- B. His decrees are not sudden decisions but they are eternal decrees
 - 1. They are based upon infinite wisdom
 - 2. God has appointed and determined all things
 - 3. Our times are in God’s hand – He determines the length of our lives
Ecclesiastes 3:1-2 – “To every *thing* *there is* a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: ² A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up *that which is* planted;”
- C. Paul summarizes it:

Acts 17:28 – “For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring.”

 - 1. We owe all things to God
 - 2. He is worthy of all praise, honor, and obedience

Conclusion:

- 1. This is the message we bring. God is our Creator and demands praise, worship, and obedience from all men. Paul didn’t have to preach of how wickedly they had disobeyed the Law of God, though he could have. He didn’t have to speak of their gross immorality, though he could have. They were guilty of breaking the first commandment.
- 2. He is ever present to receive those who turn to Him in worship and submission.
Acts 17:27 – “though he be not far from every one of us:”
- 3. Next time we will examine Paul’s final point—the end of the Gospel. God demands all men to repent and turn to Him in faith.