

Serving God in a Land Filled with Idols

- Acts 17:16-21
- Or, I could have titled this sermon, “A Landfill of Idols.” And though we are talking about Paul’s visit to Athens, we can all see clearly, I hope, that the truths of this passage are readily transferable to our own lives. Because we too live in a land filled with idols. We too are surrounded by Epicureans and Stoics. We too are the babblers of this age, if we are teaching Jesus and the resurrection. Wade Cox said to me this week that we Christians think sometimes that we are living in first century Jerusalem, but we’re not. We are in Athens. Athens was the foremost Greek city-state since the fifth century BC. It was made famous by people like Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. It was a small city by today’s standards but was the Roman empire’s intellectual metropolis.
- I want to explore three things with you this morning as we enter Athens with the Apostle Paul, and I am going to borrow from John Stott for the outline. Let’s talk about what Paul saw, what he felt, and what he did. Next week, Lord willing, we will take a look at what Paul said.
- **What Paul saw**
- What do we normally do when we visit a place we have never been, especially a place that has historical significance, magnificent artwork, and amazing sites? We take pictures! When Cindy and I made plans to see London and Paris last summer, we looked at travel guides and read hundreds of pages about the sights to visit in each place. There was no way to do it all, and so we made a plan and tried to stick to it. That’s what we do, right? We make a plan, and then go with our cameras, our comfortable walking shoes, our water bottles, and we DO the city. Or the Grand Canyon. And if our kids are along, we COUNT it as a unit study. I am not suggesting there’s anything wrong with that. And Paul could have entered Athens the same way. Without the camera, of course. He could have visited the Parthenon, in all its splendor on the Acropolis, which was the city’s ancient citadel, sitting on top of a hill and visible for miles around. Or Paul could have strolled through the Agora, the ancient marketplace and hangout, famous for its porticoes painted by well-known artists. Paul didn’t do that. He didn’t pay the fare for a hop-on, hop-off chariot and take the tour, complete with an authentic Athenian guide. What did the Apostle see?
- “He saw that the city was full of idols.” (vs. 16b) One rendering of the adjective he used here would be smothered. The city was smothered with idols, or swamped with idols. One Roman writer of the day said it was easier to find a god there than a man. All the Greek pantheon of gods was represented in Athens, as were the gods of Olympus. And all of the paintings and the statues and the sculptures were beautiful, of the finest craftsmanship. But Paul did not see it. Stott says, “Beauty did not impress him if it did not honor God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Ponder that statement for a moment.
- I remember the one time Cindy and I took the family to Niagara Falls. The falls themselves are breathtaking and beautiful, and we took the Maid of the Mist boat ride and all of that. But I will never forget how shocked we were by the town of Niagara Falls. As we walked through it, we had to hold the hands of younger children, and tell our older boys to look straight ahead, because I felt like we were walking through Sodom and Gomorrah two days before fire fell and destroyed them. It was a cesspool of idolatry.
- **What Paul felt**
- Imagine that you are out to eat with your wife and you see a very good friend of yours at another table across the room, in the back, in a dark part of the restaurant. You know him and his wife well, you love them both very much and have prayed for them many times, and they for you. You have even gone on vacations together, and his wife is your wife’s best friend. But as you get ready to wave and get his attention, you are horrified to see that the woman he is

holding hands with across the table is not his wife. Maybe it's his sister, and they are VERY close? Could that be it? Then they lean across the table and give each other a kiss. On the lips. Clearly your best friend is having an affair. How would you feel?

- How did Paul feel when he saw the city of Athens? His spirit was provoked. He was agitated and grieved. He was angry and jealous. He was anything but indifferent. It is the same word that is used in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the OT, when describing the reaction GOD had to the idolatry of His people. "Remember and do not forget how you provoked the LORD your God to wrath in the wilderness. From the day you came out of the land of Egypt until you came to this place, you have been rebellious against the LORD." Deut. 9:7
- "Then they yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor, and ate sacrifices offered to the dead; they provoked the LORD to anger with their deeds, and a plague broke out among them." (Psalm 106:28-29)
- And God has every right to exclusive allegiance. He said, "I am the LORD; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols." (Is. 42:8)
- That's why Elijah said in 1 Kings 19:10, "I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of Hosts." That's why Paul said to the backsliders in Corinth, "I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband."
- Back to the restaurant, where you see your best friend cheating on your wife's best friend. What would you feel? Besides shock and anger, you would feel jealous for his wife. What belongs to her, and to her alone, is being stolen right there in front of you. You would be right to be outraged for her sake. How much more so for our God?
- Paul was fired up as he walked through the ancient city, and not because he was just having a bad day. He was jealous for the name of the Lord. He was provoked. JB Phillips said Paul's soul was exasperated at the sight of a city so completely idolatrous. And listen. That's what moved him to share the good news about Jesus with the people of Athens. Because he was jealous for God's glory! He did not want even one person to bring shame to God's name by not living for Him. That surprised me as I studied this passage, and it provoked me to pray that God would make me jealous for His glory, that I would want others to know Him for that reason, because He is a great God, worthy to be praised and known by everyone.
- **What Paul did**
- Did Paul stomp out of Athens because he didn't like idols? Did he go to the center of town and hold up a sign that said, "God hates Athens" and start yelling at them? No! Walking out or holding hateful signs would have been a self-righteous response, rather than a "God is righteous" response. Instead, Paul reasoned with them. With all of them. Look at the three places he reasoned with them.
- First, he went into the synagogue and reasoned there with the Jews and the devout persons. The equivalent today would be the church. This was and is the first and best place to reason with people. The decay of our culture is largely a product of the impotence of the church, the compromise of the message of the Gospel, and the push for numbers and making people happy rather than followers of Jesus. Paul preached "Jesus and the resurrection" to the God-fearers. That's what we do here every Sunday. But that's not enough.
- Second, he went into the city square and spoke with "those who happened to be there." Paul was as comfortable in church as he was in the marketplace. Not everybody is, but we need people who can make friends and meet people in the park, at the mall, at Aldi's, at the Y, in the movie theater, in the Laundromat, at Starbucks and every place life happens. Do you know what Howard Schultz said his goal was in creating Starbucks? Besides convincing people to pay ridiculous amounts for a cup of coffee, he said he was trying to restore the street corner. He wanted to create a situation where people would be forced into community with each other so they would talk. Cindy and I were in the Sherlock Holmes tavern in London last July, enjoying a fish and chips, and the couple right next to us were speaking American. So we struck up a

conversation with them and had fellowship for a half hour or so. It's amazing what people will tell you about themselves if you just ask them a question. And then you have an open door to "gossip the Gospel" with someone who just five minutes earlier was a stranger. I met a Vietnam vet in the Y this week who told me about having two strokes in the past 18 mos. He was lifting weights, and I told him he looked to be doing pretty well for a man who had suffered two strokes. He said, yes, I guess I am. I said, "Yes, thanks be to God!" He smiled and agreed, and then he started talking about his experiences in Vietnam, and coming back to California after being shot at for a year and seeing the protesters yelling at him. I told him I was sorry for how he was treated, but we made a connection and he wanted to tell me about one of his deepest hurts. As you do life, gossip the Gospel. Paul went to the marketplace.

- Third, he went to the Areopagus to speak to the intelligentsia. There are two groups mentioned here by Luke, the Epicureans and the Stoics, and you couldn't ask for more different worldviews. These ancient worldviews were started by men who died in the 270 or 265BC range. Epicureans, "philosophers of the garden" believed the gods were distant and had no interest in human affairs. Everything is random and nothing happens by design, and we are all headed to worm food, so you better live it up here, while you can! Sound familiar? It is one of the dominant worldviews in our nation. Motto? Pursue pleasure, avoid pain! Stoics, "philosophers of the porch" (colonnade, where they taught) believed in a supreme god but in a pantheistic way, and considered him to be a 'world soul.' Everything is determined by fate, but we as humans need to embrace our duty to live in harmony with nature and reason. Their motto? Embrace fatalism, endure suffering. Sound familiar?
- The idea of a personal God who sent His Son to make a way for us to know Him and love Him and follow Him would be a foreign idea to these two groups. And that's why they call Paul a babbler. The word literally meant "seed picker," like the sparrows that sit by you at the park and will take anything that falls from your mouth. The word evolved to paint a picture of a vagrant or beggar who lives off scraps they pick up in the gutters. Then it became a term to describe a teacher who had no real thoughts in his head but just spouted off what he had heard, and was a rag-bag of other people's ideas or sayings.
- These Athenian philosophers brought Paul to the Areopagus to speak. That was the place where the council of Athens met to deliberate the religion, morals, and education of the city-state. The closest equivalent to the Areopagus in today's society would be the university. They are approached in a different way than the God-fearers in the synagogue or church, or the people in the marketplace. In fact many will never respond at all because their "great learning has driven them out of their minds," to borrow a phrase. Festus said that of Paul in Acts 26, but it wasn't true. But it is true of many in academia. They have been educated beyond their intelligence. Aldous Huxley wrote, "I had motives for not wanting the world to have a meaning; and consequently assumed that it had none, and was able without any difficulty to find satisfying reasons for this assumption. The philosopher who finds no meaning in the world is not concerned exclusively with a problem in pure metaphysics. He is also concerned to prove that there is no valid reason why he personally should not do as he wants to do. For myself, as no doubt for most of my friends, the philosophy of meaninglessness was essentially an instrument of liberation from a certain system of morality. We objected to the morality because it interfered with our sexual freedom."
- What are needed are men and women who also have great intellect and are not afraid to engage the Aldous Huxleys of our day in discussion about matters of faith. Alistair Begg calls it, those who have a size 12 brain. Don't pretend you have a size 12 brain when you really are a size 8, he said. That's just embarrassing. But if you do have a size 12 brain, then you have a tremendous opportunity and a tremendous responsibility to engage the culture with it for the cause of Christ. But more than that. Stott wrote, "There is an urgent need for more Christian thinkers who will dedicate their minds to Christ, not only as lecturers, but also as authors, journalists, dramatists and broadcasters, as television script-writers, and as artists and actors

who use a variety of contemporary art forms in which to communicate the Gospel...Christ calls human beings to humble, but not to stifle, their intellect.”

- It is no accident that today we are recognizing 6 of our own young people who have graduated either from high school or college this year. I would challenge each of you to consider how you can use your mind and your gifts and abilities for the sake of His name. How can you use what He has put in your hands to serve Him and make His name great on the earth? That doesn't mean it has to be big or important or even public. You don't have to be famous or rich or powerful to accomplish God's will for your life! But you do have to use what talent and ability and intellect He has given you.
- That's the calling of God on EACH of our lives. To use what He has given us to make His name great in the church, in the marketplace, and in every sphere of influence He allows us to touch.