

Faithful Evangelism, Part 2

Acts 17:16-23

Let's start by looking at 1 Peter, chapter 3, verse 14. You can turn there in your Bibles. While you're turning there, just to remind you, our Lord has commanded us in Matthew 28, verse 19. He said, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Making disciples. That's the task. That is the key command in that text, making disciples. And it involves both baptizing and teaching, both evangelism and edification. We evangelize the lost, bringing them to the waters of baptism. And then we edify those who are saved, teaching them to obey Christ. We go out to proclaim the saving Gospel, calling unbelievers to repent and to embrace Jesus Christ by faith. When God saves some, then we bring them in. And we teach them the Bible and its doctrines. We teach them how to obey God, to obey what Jesus said,

“Everything, to observe everything that I’ve commanded you.” As those new converts, as those new Christians grow in maturity, as they grow healthy and strong, the Lord uses them as maturing Christians, to go out and save others, to bring others to Christ, to bring them into the fold. So we gather for edification. We scatter for evangelism. That’s the biblical model.

Now Peter tells these Christians, and remember he was writing to Christians who were on the margins of society. They were despised and ostracized. Some of them were even enduring persecution for the sake of Christ, and, folks, we’re heading there. We’re going in that direction. And Peter tells these Christians, 1 Peter 3:14-16, he tells them to evangelize, even in the midst of a hostile culture. Even in the midst of hostility, persecution, marginalization, he says, “Tell them the truth. If you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you will be blessed.” But this, “Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do this with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.”

Paul's example, Acts 17:16-33, it's so helpful. And as we work through the text here, I want to expose the theology behind his evangelistic example, okay. I want to bring some of that to the surface. Faithful evangelism starts with the proper motivation. Faithful evangelism starts with the proper motivation.

Look, as Christians, we need to hear that, don't we? We need to preach the Gospel to all people. It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter what their cultural background is. It doesn't matter what their ethnic or religious background, it doesn't matter their particular flavor of sin. It doesn't matter what circumstances or situation they're in. We don't hold onto prejudices. I'd like nothing more than to preach the Gospel to Caitlyn Jenner. I'd love to. I'd love to because that man is confused. And he's destroying himself.

No matter what a person looks like on the outside, that person may prove to be an eternal brother or sister for whom Christ died. Treat everyone, no matter what they look like, no matter how they present themselves, treat everyone with dignity and respect. Love them by sharing the Gospel, as Paul did. So we need to cultivate a zeal for the glory of God. We need to cultivate a love for lost people. We need to be bold and

obedient to tell people the truth, that's the internal motivation, the first thing that we need to understand for faithful evangelism.

Let's consider a second thing, a second thing: The impossible task. The impossible task. When you start sharing the Gospel with sinners, you know what, it draws interest, but it also draws fire. It brings conflict and you quickly become aware of the impossibility of the task, especially when you endeavor to be biblically accurate, theologically precise in sharing the Gospel. You know what? Anyone can preach and inaccurate, shallow, barebones message, gain followers. Anybody can build big numbers in a church, gain a following.

The real challenge, where you need to see evangelism as an impossible task, something only God can accomplish by his Spirit, the real challenge is in seeing the dead raised to life. That's what's going on in evangelism. That's something only God can do. We can't do it. Notice verse 18, Paul's preaching drew some attention, created some stir. "Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, 'What does this babbling wish to say?' Others said, 'He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities or deities—' because he's preaching Jesus and the resurrection."

These Epicureans and Stoics are two opposite schools of thought, really, engaging Paul in conversation. Both of them dualist, philosophical dualist. They radically divided spirit and flesh. They believed that the spirit, the spiritual is pure good, the material is evil. So flesh is evil. Salvation from, salvation for them, they'd talk in terms of salvation, but salvation for them was to escape the flesh, to be absorbed in pure spirit. So Stoics thought while you're living on this earth and encased in flesh, your pure good inside of you is encased in evil. The Stoics said, deny fleshly impulses. Stifle. Live an ascetic lifestyle. Epicureans believed, ah, since the flesh doesn't matter anyway, indulge it. Who cares? Live however you want to. What do you think was more popular? Just like today, right?

Well, the philosophers from these two opposite schools of thought, they engaged Paul and immediately you can see their spiritual condition in what Luke describes here. These people were spiritually blind. They were spiritually proud, as well. Just like all the unbelieving people you're going to encounter; doesn't matter how many degrees they hold; doesn't matter how many letters behind their name; doesn't matter what job they

hold or don't hold, what path they're on, what, what they've experienced in life, apart from the regenerating grace of God, unbelievers are dead in trespasses and sins. Unbelievers are spiritually blind, and yet, at the same time, they're proud of it. They think they see clearly. They think they know and understand.

They think their own reason is a trustworthy and reliable guide. I'm going to listen to this voice and not that voice. I'm going to trust science and what I've been taught in school against what God reveals in the Bible. I don't know. I kind of met this one philosopher from the East. He was kind of a Buddha Hindu thing, Hindu thing and I'm just, I'm going to take a little bit of that and I'm going to mix it with a little bit of this and I've come up with a different thing." They trust that. They believe their judgment is impeccable. And their reason and logic is unassailable. Just like these guys.

Here's how they approached Paul, verse 18, "Some of the philosophers said, 'What does this babbler wish to say?'" Paul came preaching. He came preaching the objective, revealed truth of God the Creator to these creatures and all they could hear was babbling. Clear evidence of blindness. The term translated babbling is literally seed-picker. To them Paul is just an idle

babbler, a seed-picker, like a scavenging bird that indiscriminately picks up each and every seed off the street, eating it, digesting it and the digested mishmash that comes out is what Paul's saying. That's the result. It's kind of an insult.

So they hear him mixing truths together. They think they do. They think they've heard these things before, so they have no understanding and they've got a scoffing and mocking attitude. Not only that, but the others said, look there, "He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities. That's because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection." Why do they accuse Paul of preaching foreign divinities, plural? Jesus is God, yeah, but where's the other deity? The Greek word for resurrection is *anastasis*. So they thought Paul was introducing them to two gods: the male god, Jesus, and his female consort, Anastasis. Jesus and Anastasis like Apollo and Eros, like Aries and Aphrodite. They interpreted Paul's clear message through their own pluralistic idolatrous grid. Clueless.

It's an impossible task. How're you going to get through? How are you going to reason through that? Spiritually blind. You know at the same time they possessed a tremendous spiritual pride. You say, well it doesn't seem like that if you look in

verse 19 and 20, it looks like they're kind of sincere seekers of the truth. They took Paul, brought him to the Areopagus, saying, 'May we know this new teaching that you're presenting. For you're bringing some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.'" I'll admit these guys appear humble. They seem sincere, but that's not their heart.

Deep down inside they are morally aggressively committed to their biases. They are committed to their presuppositions. They're committed to their own judgments, their own worldview. What you're seeing in verse 19 and 20, it's only a pretended neutrality, a pretended objectivity. As philosophers, and you understand philosophy, it's *philos*, love, *sophia*, wisdom, so it's the love of wisdom. They have love, really, human wisdom. And they seem like lovers of wisdom. They needed to appear unbiased. They needed to appear open-minded, objective, undecided, willing to consider all viewpoints. But guess who's still on the throne of their thinking? They are. They're going to be the arbiter between truth and falsehood, between truth and error, between what they'll accept and what they'll object to.

But apparent neutrality, objectivity, that's just apparent. It's really just a mask that covers over their, their commitment to their autonomy, their commitment to their moral rebellion



against God, commitment to their spiritual pride. Luke has already revealed this. He's revealed their true heart attitude. They've already judged Paul's teaching, scorning him as a seed-picker, as a babblers. Even in what they say, "May we know, may we know." It sounds open-minded, but the verb they used indicates they're merely interested in scratching an intellectual itch. They, they just, they just want to satisfy a desire for intellectual stimulation.

That's what Luke says in verse 21, "Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing," that means they're not even working. "In nothing except telling or hearing something new." Boy, we get that, don't we? We see people like that all through our culture. Their true motive is to satisfy their craving for news. This is talk radio before talk radio. This is CNN, Fox News, BBC, whatever your flavor. They were addicted to novelty, addicted to news, devoted to distraction. Just like our culture today. There's really nothing new under the sun, the heart is the same. We've just technology to enable us to do it better than they did.

Make no mistake, they were not open-minded seekers of the truth. Romans 3:11 says, "There's no one who seeks for God." These philosophers, they were committed to their thinking. They

were committed to their idolatry, their self-worship, their independent thinking, self-centered autonomy, intellectual freedom. We face the same kind of sinners today, don't we? Our task of evangelism is as impossible as Paul's was. We want people converted who have no interest in being converted. They see no need. They're satisfied, they're dead to spiritual realities. Nothing compels them. They simply want to distract themselves with nothing new.

But get this, the impossibility of raising a spiritually dead sinner to life, to new life, it didn't deter Paul for one moment. Why? Because he knew God has the power to raise the dead. God unleashes his power through the faithful proclamation of his word. Listen, it's because of the impossibility of the task when we know the utter deadness of the fallen human condition. When we give up trying to convert people by our cleverness, by our niceness, by our gimmicks, our enticements, we don't flatter rebellious sinners, we don't soft-pedal the hard truths of the Gospel, we don't hold back difficult things, waiting until they're attending our church regularly before we start to say the hard things; in kindness and love we confront them up front, don't we? We tell them the truth. And we trust an all-powerful God to send his Spirit to regenerate them to bring them to life. We tell the truth; God does the rest.

And not only does faithful evangelism involve the right motivation, not only do we need to be fully aware of the impossible challenge that we face in preaching the Gospel to dead sinners, third principle, just quickly. Third principle we need to understand about faithful evangelism: A gracious manner. A gracious manner. Short point. I just want you to see how honest Paul was in speaking to these arrogant self-satisfied philosophers, but he was also gracious. His introduction there in verses 22 to 23, this is what the late apologist Greg Bahnsen calls, "Humble boldness."

"Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said, 'Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, "To the unknown god." What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.'" When Paul stood to address the intellectual elite of Athens, and he said, "I perceive that in every way you are very religious," some people think he's commending them as religious, that he's complimenting them as fellow worshipers. Not quite. We already saw in verse 16 Paul's provoked by their idolatry, so he's, so we know he's not commending them. He's not giving them

a compliment. He's not affirming great strides they've taken in philosophical thought, development, how they've done the best that they can with what they've seen around them.

But he is acknowledging that they worship. That's the common ground that he has with them. Both are fellow creatures. Both are designed to worship. So Paul calls these Epicureans, Stoic philosophers, all the Christ-rejecting Jews, all the fickle superstitious masses, all of them are designed by God, created by him with a heart to worship. You cannot find anybody who does not worship. Everyone worships something. It doesn't matter how emphatically someone declared himself to be an atheist, agnostic, secular, scientific, whatever, in the heart, every man, every woman, worshiper.

Paul says in Romans 1:21, "All men know God." All men have a sense of the divine inscribed on their hearts, imbedded on their minds. John Calvin called it the *Senses Divinitatis*. It's the sense of divinity that is resident within each one of us. God has created us all in his image after his image, after his pattern. And no one can escape that innate knowledge they have of God. It's one of the aspects of our creatureliness.

Our innate programming, it's, it's frustrated the modern thinker, the modern secularist, the atheist. There's a recent

interview with author Wendy Thomas-Russell. She's author of the book, *Relax, It's Just God: How and Why to Talk to Your Kids About Religion When You're Not Religious*. Okay, so she's written a book to help you secular, atheistic parents to undo their sense of God. And she describes her perplexity in dealing with her daughter's sense of God. She said, "I was in the car and my daughter announced to me that God had made her, and that God had in fact made all children and all people. And I was so, you know, she was just so incredulous because she just thought, 'This seems like really big news. And how you don't know it, Mommy, is really beyond me.'" Out of the mouth of babes, right!

We are all born with that same sense. We naturally assume the existence of God our Creator and the atheists and the secularists who run our primary schools, our secondary schools, our colleges, our universities, they are constantly and continuously hammering their heads against that innate God-given sense within every single child, every single person. They try to undo it. We're going to one day face him, we know that. They battle to undo what God hardwired into our DNA. And again, it just demonstrates that willful commitment to sin, what Paul refers to in Romans 1:18, as suppressing the truth in unrighteousness, denying what God did, what is true about God, what's revealed in nature, his eternal power, his divine nature.

And that denial leads directly and hastily, inevitably to idolatry. Romans 1:22-23, "Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds, animals and creeping things." Atheism, secularism the cult of scientific technological progress, those are simply the gods of the Modern Age; false god of human reason is an image resembling mortal man. Nothing new.

Paul's exposing the Athenian philosophers here to the fact that all are worshipers, all are creatures, created by God. That's the common ground that we share with unbelievers. But notice he's not neutral in acknowledging their worship. He's confronting their ignorance. He says, you Athenians are religious, yes, but you're confused. The multiplicity of idols shows you can't make up your mind. You cannot make your mind. You've even got a catch-all idol, a bucket idol for the unknown god. He's not affirming them as legitimately religious. He's confronting them as sinfully idolatrous. He's just exposed their, their ignorance and he doesn't excuse it.

He is gentle about it. But he's also very clear to confront their spiritual ignorance to tell them that its' not okay. End of verse 23, look at it there. "What you therefore worship as

unknown, this I proclaim to you.” Basically he’s saying, you’ve admitted, and you’ve demonstrated your ignorant. I agree. So let me inform you about the God you don’t yet know. Here we go.

Again, don’t miss, Paul’s been very gracious in his manner. He’s been very gentle. He’s been respectful. He’s been bold. He’s also been meek and humble. He’s, he’s honored Christ as Lord in his heart. He’s told the truth. He’s confronted error. He hasn’t flattered any of these guys affirming their religiosity. He’s been bold in confronting it, clear in exposing it. At the same time, he’s been gentle. He’s entered into their thinking. He’s not immersed himself in their false philosophies. He’s not sympathized with their rebellion in one bit, but he has empathized for their condition. He gets it. He’s entered into their thinking long enough to lead them out of it. You know what? That’s our task, too. That’s what we’ve got to do.

If we’re going to be faithful in our evangelism, we have to start with proper motivation. We’ve got to see, long to see God glorified in the salvation of lost sinners. We want to long to see people abandon idolatry and sin and worship God and Christ. Driven by that motivation, we have to recognize our task is impossible. We’ve got no power. We don’t rely on our cleverness,

our personality, as charming as it may, development of relationship to win people over. These people are dead in their sins. They're spiritually ignorant. They're spiritually proud.

So we give up flattery. We don't hold back. We tell them the whole truth. We rely on God, rely on his Spirit to save. Because we rely wholly on God, our next concern is to be completely accurate with the Gospel, winsome and gentle in how we deliver it, but accurate in the Gospel. Pressure's off. Pressure is off. God is sovereign. We just need to tell the truth. All that in mind, none of what I've said matters if we don't get the Gospel right, right? That's what we'll get next time.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, thank you so much for giving us this amazing task of being your ambassadors, the ambassadors of Jesus Christ, to be his representatives here on earth, your representatives here on earth, to speak a saving Gospel to a lost people. We love you. And we want to see your name honored and glorified. We want to see it lifted up, exalted. We want to see people acknowledge you as mighty and holy, gracious and saving. So please give us the mentality we need, the right motivation, an understanding of the task we face, a commitment to be gracious, bold, humble. Help us to get the message right,



too. Help us to take that into our week and our month and our year because we fear you. We set apart Christ as Lord in our hearts, wanting to bring him honor and glory. It's in his name we pray, Amen.