

Faithful Evangelism, Part 3

Acts 17:24-34

Go ahead and turn in your Bibles to Acts 17, we're getting back into our little message on evangelism. we have an opportunity, again, to remind ourselves of what we're here to do on earth. We're not here just to fellowship together, just to enjoy the time with each other, even though that is very, very precious. The church is a little slice of heaven on earth. But it is, you know, it's, it's filled with us, right? Sinners still in our bodies and we need to be redeemed fully and come into the full consummation of the sons of God. And we'll do that in heaven.

So everything we do here, singing, fellowship, learning, teaching, everything is going to be so much better in heaven without the presence of sin, right? Here on earth, we can do something that we cannot do in heaven and that's evangelize lost sinners. So we need to be about doing that. And just remind ourselves of what it is we're here to do and really, how to go about doing it.

So we got into Acts 17 to see Paul's example of evangelism lived out right there in Acts 17, and in a pretty hostile environment. I'd imagine that the world, in your world probably, is getting more and more hostile toward Christianity and hostile toward you. If you're faithful, people are not going to like that. They don't like the Christ you represent; they don't like the God you represent. And so hostility will come your way when you live out your Christian life and when you try to speak accurately about the things of Scripture. So we want to encourage you and strengthen you in the task of evangelism through just this little series on evangelism.

When Paul came to Athens, God gave him, as we see there, a pretty special witnessing opportunity up on Mars Hill, at the Areopagus, which was kind of like the intellectual center of the Greco-Roman world. Athens represented history, centuries of philosophical thought. We have a lot to learn from what Paul encountered there.

Faithful evangelism begins with the proper motivation, which is the first thing we saw in Paul's encounter with, in Athens there. We also understand the impossibility of the task. We cannot bring dead people to life. We can't do that. As we said, the Athenian philosophers, they were so spiritually blind

that they interpreted Paul's clear testimony about Jesus and the resurrection as Paul adding two separate gods to their pantheon, Jesus and Anastasis. It's ridiculous. The multitude of idols throughout Athens testified to their absolute blindness and confusion. They didn't know where to direct their worship. They even admit their ignorance by erecting an altar to an unknown God.

And that's Paul's in right there. That's where he jumps in to tell them about the common ground that he shares with them. Those Athenian philosophers, even fellow Jews, ignorant superstitious masses around the entire Roman Empire, they all shared the same common ground. And that is this: God designed human beings to worship. They all worship. That's the common ground that you and I share with unbelievers today, as well. All are worshipers. We are creatures. As such, we are worshipers. We are created in God's image and we're created to worship him. Sin has distorted that, it's perverted that and so we direct our worship elsewhere, but it's an objective, undeniable testimony to our creatureliness. It points us all to the God who created us.

Let's pick up the story there at verse 22, Acts 17:22. Paul's standing in the midst of the Areopagus and he said, "Men

of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious," again, not a compliment, just a fact. "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." Let's stop there for a second. The Athenians have already acknowledged the fact of God's existence. That God exists is not the question. For them it's a question of what god exists. Who is this unknown god? What is he like?

You say, well, that's not our problem today. Today's intellectual elite deny not just the whatness of God, who he is, what he is, they deny the thatness of God. They say, there is no God. We can't even get to the whatness of God until we establish the thatness of God, that he exists. Listen, today's unbelieving intellectuals are just like yesterday's unbelieving intellectuals. They're still blind, they're still full of pride and they still share the same common ground as being creatures created in God's image. So put out of your mind that they are more evolutionarily advanced than their predecessors. If anything, philosophy has devolved since Paul's day.

You just need to demonstrate the folly of whatever they assume to be true. Show them. That is our task in apologetics

these days, to expose, in as kind of way as possible, but still to expose the folly of atheism. Both Psalm 14 and Psalm 53, they're nearly parallel to one another. Both begin this way, "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'" So when we hear the folly of unbelief, whether it's atheism, secularism, paganism, humanism, any other kind of "ism," if it's unbelief, it's folly. It's foolishness.

And we need to confront folly. We need to expose it for what it is. Proverbs 26:5 says, "Answer a fool according to his folly lest he be wise in his own eyes." In other words, answer a fool as his folly deserves, expose his folly. It is not wise, it is not intelligent to deny God. It's stupid. Show the atheist, the secularist, the agnostic, tell them how foolish it is, how unscientific it is, for instance, to claim that everything spontaneously self-generated out of nothing. How does that happen? How do we get all of this from absolutely nothing? That's silly. It's completely unscientific.

They talk about the eternality of matter, just always existed. Well then, why would say that intelligence comes from nonintelligence? Nothing comes from something. Complexity comes from that kind of simplicity. No, that's completely

unscientific. You don't see that in a lab. You don't see that in the experiments. Why would you apply that to your metaphysics?

Ask your philosophy professors, ask your ethics professors, ask your social science professors, have them explain to you where innate moral standards come from. Ask them to defend their right to make moral judgments about you, which they make all the time. For example, whenever you hear the words, should, or ought, you're hearing moral language. For example, they say, Christians should stop holding to an ancient book of myths and opinions. They ought to get with the moral revolution. Get with the program and support the gay marriage revolution. Should? Ought? Really? Why should we? Why should we? What is the moral reason we ought to do anything at all?

Listen, people may deny, university professors, public intellectuals, scientists, whomever, people may deny the existence of an objective absolute transcendent moral standard. They may claim such a thing doesn't exist, but they do not live that way, do they? Try grabbing their wallet and walking away. Morality all of sudden becomes an issue, doesn't it? Try driving away in their car and just yell back behind you, in my culture taking your stuff and making it mine isn't wrong. Listen, no one lives as if morality is subjective, as if it's all relative.

They reveal that every time they use words like, hey, you shouldn't do that. You ought to do thus and such.

According to God's design, we are all moral creatures. And we all live and think instinctively in our own hearts according to the moral code that God preprogramed into our souls. Romans 2:14-15, it says, "When Gentiles, who do not have the law," that is talking about the law of Moses. "When Gentiles, who don't have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they're a law unto themselves, even though they don't have the law. They should that the work of law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them."

You say, I can't tell that they have law. I can't tell, they look very honest and open to me. But you know what, you can't see their conscience. God can. You know what he told us right here in Romans chapter 2? He says, I can see their conscience and you know what it tells me? It tells me they're either accusing them or defending them based on the law written on their hearts. You can't see that. I can't see that. God can and he's written it down in a book. You believe it? Do you believe that it's written on their hearts? Do you believe that

you when you speak the truth that you have an ally in the heart of an unbeliever?

It's called the law of God written on their heart. It's called the conscience that either excuses them or defends them, according to what you've said, according to the truth. It's true. It's powerful. When we preach the Gospel to people, man, it's, it's unfair. It's unfair because we have their conscience on our side. We have the law of God in their hearts on our side. We have the truth on our side. We have the immortal God on our side, and we have the Holy Spirit who's speaking through us to them and the Holy Spirit who's convicting them inside. It's completely unfair, but I'm okay with that. I don't know about you.

Listen, that passage, Romans chapter 2, tells us why in every culture around the world murder is wrong, adultery is wrong, taking what belongs to your neighbor, all wrong. People say, oh, that's just social convention. That's just societies getting together and figuring out what kind of works for them and they've evolved that way. And then they kind of agree that that's kind of the social convention for their culture. But it may be different in another culture. One culture ought not to judge another culture.



Really? So you're going to tell me that Hitler, it's okay to do what he did? You tell me Stalin, 20 million people? Mao Tse-tung, 70 million people, who knows! Atheistic regimes that destroy people, you're going to tell me that that's just their culture? I don't think so. We have a need to make moral judgments. Our hearts, though sinful and fallen, our law codes, though they're flawed and distorted, they testify to the existence of God's transcendent, universally binding moral law. And every time an atheist tells us, you shouldn't believe in God, he's testifying to the God he denies by using moral language that God programmed him to use. He can't help it.

So never be intimidated for one second by these rebellious creatures. They need salvation and you and I understand that. We've been converted by a holy God, who loved us enough to tell us the truth and expose our folly. I'm so grateful he did that to me, aren't you grateful he did that to you? They need salvation. They need the grace of God's marvelous light. They need the moving of his merciful spirit to open their eyes so they can see his truth. Again, folks, 1 Peter 3:15, "Sanctify Christ as Lord in your heart. Be prepared to give an answer." Be obedient to speak when the Lord gives you opportunity and then leave the results to the Holy Spirit.

That's exactly what Paul did. His evangelism in the Athenian marketplace, it caused a stir. It caught some attention. Epicurean and Stoic philosophers escorted him to the Areopagus. They ascended Mars Hill and Paul took the opportunity there, in their midst, in hostile territory to teach them about the God who created them. I say, hostile territory, as if Paul was surrounded. It was hostile for the Athenian philosophers. They were surrounded by the creation that God made, and they were confronted with the Almighty Holy Spirit speaking through the Apostle Paul.

It was hostile territory for those guys. They had to be a tad uncomfortable when they'd realized they brought him right into their midst. He shined light into their blind eyes. He spoke God-exalting, man-humbling truths to their proud hearts. He exposed them to the God that they'd been suppressing all their lives in unrighteousness. He preached the Gospel.

Like Paul, we must rely on the God of the impossible to convert sinners. And we have to preach the message he has given us to preach, and only that message. We don't rely on our charm. We don't rely on our friendliness, our persuasiveness, the power of our great arguments. We preach an accurate Gospel, faithful

to God's whole message so the Holy Spirit can use the means of his word to convert dead sinners and raise them to new life.

That's exactly what we see Paul doing here. Having declared the thatness of God, that God is, he now proclaims the whatness of God. He proclaims what, or more properly, he proclaims who God is. That's the bulk of this account. It's focused on Paul's message.

Faithful evangelism is driven, number one, by the proper motivation. Number two, it recognizes an impossible task. Number three, it's conducted in a gracious manner, what we called humble boldness, which is really just another term for meekness. Fourth point: Faithful evangelism requires us to preach the biblical message, the biblical message.

Faithful evangelism means we teach people a rudimentary theology, the basics. We can't make any assumptions about what people think they know about God, even if they use the same terms as we do. That's true even if they come from a church background. Perhaps, especially if they come from a church background. A clear and accurate Gospel is hardly ever preached or even recognized in many churches today. The light has been hidden. The salt has lost its savor. And that has an effect on the wider culture. Increasingly we're living in a day that's

become more and more like the First Century, in which people were completely ignorant of, bibl, biblical truth.

So, like in Paul's day, like he did here, we also need to go back to the beginning. We need to start with God the sovereign creator and sustainer of all things and that takes us back to proclaim the truths of Genesis. What a beloved book that is. Take a look at verse 24-28. It starts out there, Paul's speaking. He says, "What you worship in ignorance, I'm going to proclaim to you," and here he goes right here.

"The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not very far from each one of us, for 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we are indeed his offspring.'" Stop there.

In God, all creatures live and move and have our being. God is the context in which we live. God provides the air that we breathe. He provides bodies that can process the food that he gives us. God is our environment. And he's the environment of the unbeliever, too. The unbeliever rejects him. The unbeliever uses his good gifts to rebel against him. It's like a little kid who wants to rebel against his father, but he needs to wait until his father is sitting down so he can sit on his lap in order to slap him in the face. He can't reach. So he uses his father's accommodation to rebel.

It would require another sermon or two to unpack this short paragraph in great detail, but we'll just cover a few things here. What you need to see is that Paul has taught these Athenian philosophers a very, very basic theology. This is what all Christians believe and affirm about God, even if they don't know the fulness of each proposition. In fact, this is the theology proper that we're teaching to our children in Sunday School every single week. Keep in mind, for the crème de la crème of the Greco-Roman world, this is new news to them. Though God has hardwired their souls to recognize the truth of what Paul's teaching them, they had never been exposed to the truth in that kind of clarity. All their reasoning had been conducted

in the darkness of unbelief and it did not bring them here. Same thing with those you encounter today. This is new news to them.

Now, let's get a, just a brief exposure to what Paul is telling them here, see what kind of impact this has on the God-suppressing mind. Now let me just give you a basic division here in verses 24-28 or, as we go on. We're going to look at verses 24-26, he teaches them really a theology proper, just theology about God, who God is. In verses 27-29, he unpacks a few implications of that theology. Notice the use of the words ought and should in that section. And then he, in verses 30-31, he presses them for a verdict, call them to repentance.

That's what the biblical message of faithful evangelism involves: teaching, implications, and exhortation. You have to teach them. Then you have to show them the implications of that and then you have to exhort them to repentance. If you're not doing all three of those things, then you may not be evangelizing.

When we preach the Gospel accurately, clearly, boldly, God's elect will recognize the truth. Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice and they come to me." Religion, philosophy, culture, history, none of that can hinder God's power to save his people from their sins. That's what we're doing in faithful evangelism.

We herald an accurate Gospel, and God, who opens the hearts of those he's chosen, they embrace it by faith. They repent of their sins. They embrace Jesus Christ. That's what God has called us to do. So let's go do it. Amen!

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, thank you so much for this time in your word and for encouraging us with this word about evangelism, about being faithful to what we're called to do here on this earth. We ask, Father, that you would help us to be bold and courageous especially in a, in an environment of hostility and intimidation and marginalization. It's even increasing these days. Christians are not at the center of the intellectual conversation, at least in this world. And yet, we are at the heart of it because you have given us your truth. We are finally able, with your revealed word, to think reasonably, to think logically, to think with understanding, to think with wisdom. Please help us to apply that wisdom to our evangelism, make us bold, faithful, and especially joyful and cheerful about the tasks that you've left us here to do. We give all praise and honor and glory to you, Father, because of Jesus Christ in whose name we pray. Amen.