

Paul Goes To Mars (Hill)

Acts 17:15-34

April 14, 2024

Say Mars. Did you hear that the food network is going to open a restaurant on Mars? Great food, horrible atmosphere. We should send all of politicians to colonize Mars. All that hot air would make it habitable quickly! Sorry, I know these space jokes about Mars and eclipses are a little out there. Today **Paul** goes to Mars, well, Mars Hill. Please open your Bibles to Acts 17. If you've ever struggled to know how to talk to your unsaved neighbors about Jesus, or how to start a spiritual conversation, Paul gives us an excellent example today as he addresses total strangers.

He's on his first missionary journey to Greece and he's been hitting all the major cities. Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth, and of course, no trip to Greece would be complete with a visit to what famous city? Athens! Anybody remember Mrs. Josephine Lynn? I remember all the reports we had to do on Plato, Hippo-crates, So-crates, and cantaloupe crates. I remember studying about the Parthenon and the Acropolis. The Acropolis is the hill on which the Parthenon, a temple for the goddess Athena, was built. There were many other Greek temples there and today's story takes place in the shadow of this famous hill, on this rocky part down here, which is known as Mars Hill. In fact there's a plaque with Paul's sermon from Acts 17 at this very spot. For Paul, who is used to addressing Jewish crowds, it might as well be the planet Mars. So he had to use a different approach. Let's see what he does. Please stand if you are able. Acts 17:15 The men who escorted Paul brought him to Athens and then left with instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible. 16 While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was **greatly** distressed to see that the city was **full** of idols. 17 So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. 18 A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbling trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. 19 Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? 20 You are bringing some **strange** ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean."

It's AD 54, about 20 years after Jesus' resurrection and Paul is in Athens, but he's not sight-seeing. He's there to win people to Jesus. As he's waiting for his fellow travelers, he looks around and notices how many idols there are. Here's one to Zeus, there's one to Hermes, down there's Aphrodite, and across the street is Athena. Everywhere he looks, there are idols. When we studied the Greek philosophers in the 5th grade, we also studied all the false gods that the Greeks worshipped and Athens was chock full of their idols.

Imagine the impact this had on Pharisee Paul who knew the 10 Commandments better than we know John 3:16. No other gods, No graven images. It turns his stomach to see people worshipping lifeless hunks of metal and rock. It's all he can do not to take a baseball bat to them. The ESV says, "His spirit was **provoked** within him." I wonder what he'd do if he watched TV with us one evening. Anyway, he can't hold it in any longer and he begins to speak up. What's up with all this? You Athenians are supposed to be so smart. How could you worship something so dead and lifeless?

In the synagogues, Paul was probably asking the Jews why they aren't speaking to this problem, but when he's out on the street, he addresses it to anyone who will listen. On this day, he was doing this at the agora which was a large open air market on the lower level of the Acropolis with lots of people. But it was much more than that. Commerce, city business, and even idol worship took place there. People met there to talk and visit. A lot like Walmart times 300. And as they heard Paul talking about Jesus, some wanted to hear more, so they moved him up to the Areopagus. This was the rocky place we saw earlier, called Mars Hill, but it was also the name of the ruling body that met there, made up of supposedly the smartest of the smart. This was Paul's audience that day.

The Greeks were known as great thinkers. Plato and Socrates lived about 400 years earlier and had given Athens a reputation as an intellectual hotbed. The city dedicated itself to learning, art, philosophy, debate, drama and science. It had a university and was known as a place for free thinking. And the Areopagus was designated as the place for public debate on all the latest ideas.

Whenever someone had a new idea about life, truth, or anything else, he could bring it here and voice his thoughts. Not only could the men on the hill hear it, so could those down below in the agora/marketplace. Open mike. Others would then respond. Tear it apart, support it, question it, refine it. Much like social media. Vs 21 says, "All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing **nothing** but talking about and listening to the latest ideas." It was the first century version of The View, The Five, and Bill Maher all rolled into one. It was a marketplace, not just for green peppers and red onions, but for ideas.

There were two major groups in the crowd, Stoics and Epicureans. You've probably heard the word stoic before. A stoic person is very disciplined and seems unaffected by joy, pleasure, grief, or pain. They seem to have no emotions. You just won the Lottery- Great. Someone just backed over your dog. That's nice. The Stoics in Athens placed thinking above feeling. Spiritually, they didn't believe in a supreme god, but that God was in everything, which is very similar to what Hindus believe. Many entertain this idea today. Everything is God. Trees, birds, rocks, statues, even cats. Devils maybe, but not God.

The Epicureans were almost the exact opposite of Stoics. They didn't believe that anything spiritual existed including God. For them, there was nothing but matter and space, so their chief goal was pleasure. You only go around once in life so get all the gusto you can! It started out in moderation but it evolved into unrestrained sensual satisfaction. If it feels good, do it, eat it, drink it, smoke it, etc. Any of this sound familiar?

These two philosophies are still very common today without their old names. Epicureanism is probably **most** prevalent and was actually the forerunner of evolution. Sometimes we're tempted to think our modern ideas are all so new, but Solomon was spot on when he wrote 3000 years ago, there's nothing new under the sun. It's all the same old recycled lies from the same old father of lies because people still fall for those same old lies. He just puts a new spin on them.

So how did Paul face these same old lies on Mars Hill? The first important thing to note is that Paul never changed his tune. His very first sermon was about Jesus being the Messiah and that's exactly what vs 18 says he's still preaching; the good news about Jesus. Paul had a one track mind. The good news of Jesus and His Resurrection. If only we all did. Paul took the Great Commission seriously! But he did change his approach with the Areopagus, And since we face these same beliefs today, let's see what we can learn from Paul. Vs 22. Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. 23 For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you. 24 "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. 25 And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. 26 From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. 27 God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 28 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.' 29 Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone — an image made by man's design and skill. 30 In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he **commands all people everywhere** to repent. 31 For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead."

While not all Athenians believed in idols, many of them did. And this is where Paul begins, by complimenting them. That's always a good way to start. People like to be complimented. He commended them for being so religious. Not Christian, but

religious. There's a big difference. Many church members are very religious but not very Christlike. Paul commends those who at least believe some type of god exists and their efforts to please them. The Greeks worshipped hundreds of them. They had gods for everything. Farming, health, sky, sea, rivers, etc. Mars Hill was named for their god of war, not for the planet. Concerned that they might miss and offend a god, they covered their bases with this catch-all shrine to an unknown god. And Paul seized upon it. Imagine him motioning as he says, Let me tell you about this God you haven't yet met.

And then he goes back to Genesis and starts with how **this** God created this world and all that is in it. It's obvious that Paul believed Genesis 1-3 and unashamedly preached it even to disbelieving Athenians. There is something in every person that knows we didn't just happen. We cannot escape it. We cannot begin to make even the smallest ant with all of our intelligence or even artificial intelligence. How could we believe that we arose from nothing with no Creator? You gotta have faith to believe that lie.

Paul goes on to explain that God's purpose and desire in all this was that we would seek him, reach out to Him, and find Him, for he says, God is not far from any of us, regardless of what it may seem like. Ever felt like God was a million miles away? He's not. He's very close. Paul assures us of that. He then quotes not the Old Testament, nor even Jesus, but from their own Greek poets when he says, "In Him we live and move and have our being." It's a line from a Greek hymn to their god Zeus. Then he quotes another Greek poet as he says, "We are God's offspring, God's children." And, he reasons, since we're God's offspring and since we're alive, then certainly God is alive and can't possibly be in these lifeless idols, nor can He live in these fancy temples all over this Acropolis. Paul's use of Greek poets is very instructive. Without buying in to all the evil idolatry they represent, he extracts something from their own culture that they already believed in order to point them to the Savior.

Then he moves into his conclusion, 1. In the past God overlooked ignorance, but not any more! Now He **COMMANDS** all men everywhere to repent and believe. 2. He talks about the coming judgment, something they probably didn't want to hear about either, and he emphasized that Jesus himself will be the judge. God proved this by raising Him from the dead. And that's where the Athenians choked. They were with him til then.

I once heard someone on TV say that the disciples didn't really believe in a bodily resurrection of Jesus. Why would anyone get in front of a camera and record their stupidity. The resurrection was and is the heart of the gospel. It was at the heart of all their sermons, even as it was here on Mars Hill. Even though some Greeks believed in life after death, they didn't believe in bodily resurrection so they rejected Paul who did. Vs 32 When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject." 33 At that, Paul left the Council.

34 A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

End of sermon. The written part is not very long-it was recorded on that plaque if you can read Greek. Was it a total loss? Absolutely not. Some believed! Did all believe? No. Just like today. But **some** did, because Paul was willing to take Jesus into **their** marketplace in a way **they** could understand. Church tradition tells us that one of these new believers, Dionysius, became the bishop or head of the church in Athens. Not everyone will listen to us either, but **some** will if we talk about Jesus. Let us talk.

The other important thing Paul did was to set an example for all of us. Let's get off the sidelines, out of the church walls, and into the marketplace of ideas. If we're not present, the Devil wins by default. His ideas become the only ones out there, the only ideas for sale. Which is why we Christians need to have a presence on the Internet, TV, Radio, YouTube, and all forms of media. Facebook, X, Truth Social, etc. We must be involved in education and government. We've got the best ideas and the only reliable truth in the universe! We gotta be in the marketplace!

What might Paul's method look like for us? Perhaps pulling a scene or episode from a movie or sitcom that illustrates spiritual truth. Maybe quoting some lyrics from a popular country or rock song. We must be careful not to embrace the godlessness most of that idolatry represents, but if there is some spiritual truth illustrated, it can help bring someone to Jesus. Paul didn't bring this stuff into the synagogue or the churches, but when witnessing to folks on their own turf, he drew from two popular Greek poets to lead them to Jesus. Ask the Holy Spirit to show **you** how **you** can share Jesus in a way that will connect with others.

Sometimes there are some obvious gimmies, like an unknown god, that we flat out miss because we're not looking. Paul was looking for a way to effectively reach these people and he found it. If you're talking to a turkey hunter, tell him how that reminds you of God calling us to Him. Not to kill us but to give life. If you're passing Italian Touch, ask them if they have the Nazarene's touch, or if they have true liberty. If you're talking about OJ's death, explain how we'll all die one day and face the ultimate Judge. Let's look for ways to talk about Jesus. We must be passionate about Him and ready to explain, even as Paul did, the basics of Christianity to anyone who asks. We must be able to intelligently defend our faith, even as Paul did. To tell **why** we believe what we believe in a way that connects. Come to the seminar with Christopher Yuan on Holy Sexuality on April 27. It's the hottest topic out there and we need to be able to share what the Bible has to say in truth and love in a winsome way.

Our society today is much more like Athens than Jerusalem was where everyone at least knew God and the Old Testament. That might have been the US 40 years ago. No

more. Most people today don't have a Biblical background and sometimes I feel like I'm on Mars when talking to some people about spiritual things, don't you? Most don't know anything beyond the basic basics. And while **we** should know much more, more is not the place to start. We need to start with something **they** can relate to and then lead them to the Jesus. Always to Jesus. Paul's a one trick pony. Everywhere he goes, he preaches the same thing: Jesus Christ is the Savior and Messiah, crucified, resurrected. Repent and believe in Him. And when Jesus is your trick, He's all the pony you need! Let's ask the Holy Spirit to help us know how to lead someone to Jesus this week.