

Jesus Addresses the Makers of High Culture

Acts 17:16-34

Acts of the Exalted Jesus Sermon Series

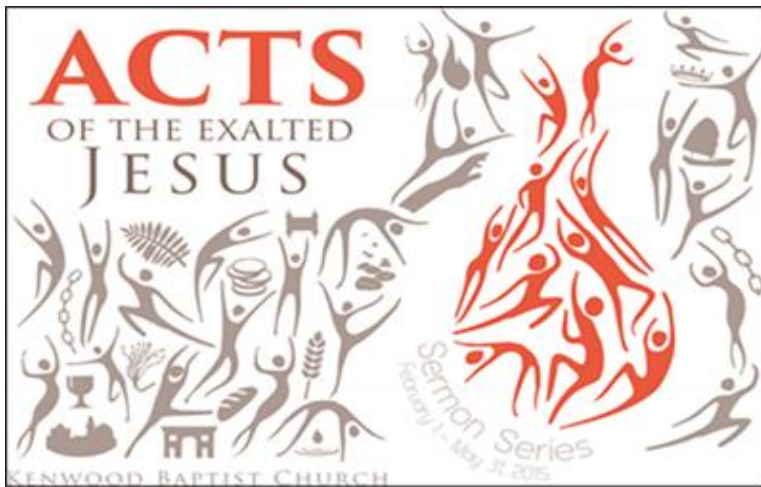
Kenwood Baptist Church

Pastor David Palmer

May 10, 2015

TEXT: Acts 17:16-34

I want to begin this morning by asking you a set of diagnostic questions. The first question is: Would you prefer to go downtown Cincinnati and listen to a piece of classical music or country



music? Is your setting of choice this sophisticated environment or more of a honky-tonk atmosphere? The second question is: Do you feel more at ease at an art museum or at the Reds Hall of Fame? The third question is: Do you feel more at home getting dressed up in your finest outfit or in shorts and a T-shirt at a backyard barbecue with friends? These questions indicate the

difference between high culture and low culture, and most of us will fall on one side or the other. High culture people can seem pretentious, they are often sophisticated, and they can be intimidating. The good news of this passage is that the Gospel is for high-culture people, too. You may be thinking to yourself, "Hey, I like country music; I like the Reds Hall of Fame; I love a backyard barbecue." Well, next week we will see that the Gospel goes to Corinth, which is a city of low culture, and we can see that the Gospel is for all people. So, it doesn't matter if you are sophisticated or not, the Word of Jesus Christ is relevant and true and calls all people to believe.

This morning, we look at the Word of Christ coming to the city of Athens. Athens is a very sophisticated city. It is the epicenter of classical Greek culture, and as we look at this passage together, we will see that the Word of Christ is for these people, too, and though sophisticated people can be intimidating, we see the Gospel announced with great courage and boldness. Sophisticated people can also be wrong and just as in need of God as anyone else. Let's look for a minute at the city of Athens. The city of Athens is dominated by the Parthenon, this famous building in the ancient world that was an architectural marvel. The Parthenon has no straight

lines in its structure. The whole building seems to float in the air. It has been imitated by countless other structures. The Parthenon itself was surrounded on all four sides by beautiful sculptures. The inner cella has a continuous relief that is 524 feet long with 192 figures carved in it immortalizing those who fell in the battle of Marathon. Inside the Parthenon building, there was a massive 41-foot-high statue of the goddess Athena made of gold and ivory, with removable plates. These plates alone weighed 2500 pounds.



Not only was Athens a city of great achievement in architecture, it was also a city of great learning, philosophy, and arts. There were philosophers like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. There were poets like Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes, whose plays are still celebrated today. Athens was a city of learning that saw itself as the teacher for the rest of the world. Isocrates said in a famous speech:

“Philosophy was invented by our city and philosophy was given to the rest of mankind so that the students or disciples of Athens have become the teachers of the rest of the world.”

Athens is a sophisticated place, but sophisticated people, who can seem intimidating, are just as in need of God as anyone else.

The narrative of Acts 17 in Athens begins with Paul in the city, and though this city is luminous with its learning and its accomplishments, it is also a city that is filled with idolatry. Luke tells us that while Paul, this Jew from Tarsus, believing in Jesus, was in Athens, he came to the sophisticated place, and his spirit was provoked. His spirit was distressed. He didn't admire the buildings; he didn't admire the works of literature; his spirit was provoked when he saw the scale of idolatry in the city. The city was filled with idols, statues of Zeus, Apollo, Aphrodite, Dionysus, and a massive statue of Athena was inside the Parthenon itself. So what did he do? What would you do? What should I do in going to a place that is filled with things to admire, and yet inside it is desperately in need of knowing the truth of the living God? Well, Paul goes to the synagogue, and he addresses his kinsman. He speaks with God-fearing Greeks, but he also encounters people in the marketplace all around him. As he goes, he meets them and discusses with them. He finds

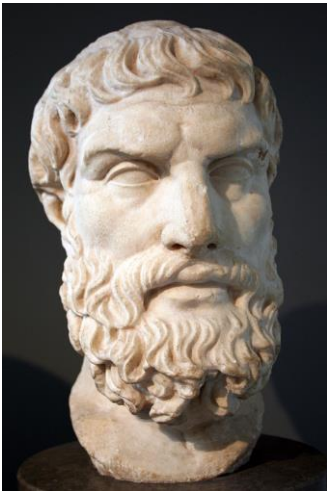


groups of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers in the city, and these begin to debate with him. They say something that is not very complementary in Luke 17:18:

“What is this babbler trying to say?”

The word that they use is the same as saying: “This is a man who is just spewing seeds of thought around. What’s he trying to get at?” Paul engages with them what he calls the Good News of Jesus and the resurrection.

Who were the Epicureans and Stoics? They were the most popular teachers of the day. Epicurus founded a school, and he taught in a garden. The philosophy of Epicurus was that you should



flee from the city and you should move to the country. The city is bad; go to the country. You should find the truth within yourself; trust your own judgments, your own sense perceptions. Go your own way; let's get back to nature, probably nothing but organic foods. Trust yourself; find the truth within. Epicurus' philosophy was very popular. Volcanic eruptions are usually negative things. There are certain rare moments when archaeologists and scholars are thankful for volcanoes, such as when Mount Vesuvius erupted and buried the cities around it and also buried libraries and other things. In one of the ruins of Mount Vesuvius, a library was recently found, and scholars thought: “Oh, wow, this is a great library. We’ll find all those lost works from

antiquity.” Well, it turned out that the man who owned the library was a rabid fan of Epicurus, and the whole library was packed with Epicurus' books. Scholars were disappointed, but they did find there the text that gives Epicurus' remedy for humanity, and this will sound strikingly modern to us.

Epicurus' remedy for humanity is that the problem with humanity is that we are afraid. We are afraid of things; we are afraid of life in the city; and we need to have truths that will set us free from those fears. So he decided to give us four pills. Can imagine that? You are upset, you are distressed. You are going through anxiety, so here are some pills! He gave four pills. The first pill is this one: *Don't fear God*. God doesn't exist, so don't be anxious about trying to please God or win His favor. He's not there. Be free. The second pill goes down just as easily. He says: *Don't worry about death*. When you die, you're dead, and your body is just laid in the ground and you decompose. Can imagine anyone's thinking that? His third pill is: *What is good is easy to obtain*. Stop striving; stop racing around. The good is easy; all you need is readily at hand in nature. The fourth pill is: *What is terrible is easy to endure*. Pain is not that bad. Epicurus was wildly popular in the first century.

The second group that Paul encountered were the Stoics. The Stoics are the total opposite of the Epicureans. The Stoics believe that the essence of humanity is our mind, and that the



problem of humanity is our mind ignorance, and that you can become good and can conquer your fears through education and learning. The Stoics invented formal logic, invented the study of language. They taught in these colonnaded structures called the *Stoa*. Their founder was Zeno of Citium, and he

taught that we were made like God, and that the distinguishing characteristic of humanity was our mind, and if your mind is trained, then you will become good and you will not have fear. The famous Stoic hymn celebrates this and says:



“For it is proper for any mortal to address you: we are your offspring, and alone of all moral creatures which are alive and tread the earth we bear a likeness to god.”

When these philosophers heard the teaching of Paul, they were stunned. They’d never heard anything like this before. So, in a city that was sophisticated and filled with learning, they



brought Paul to this public square, the Areopagus. The Areopagus today is a rocky outcrop in the center of the city. Paul was brought to this place. When he stood there

and turned around and looked the other direction, he saw something more like this, a city adorned with temples, idols,



complex and elaborate buildings crafted with human hands. He stood in the midst of the city and he announced to the Athenians this proclamation of the Gospel. He addressed them in this sophisticated place in Acts 17:22-23:

“People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. 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.’”

One of these has been found recently. Paul comes through this opening to a sophisticated and



learned society to announce a God that they don't know. This is a great challenge for you and for me, because when we encounter sophisticated people, or upper-class people, we're tempted to think they don't need God. We're tempted to be intimidated, and yet the word that is proclaimed through Paul is a word that's announced with tremendous courage and insight. In Acts 17:24, Paul announces the God that they don't know is the true God, the living God. He says:

“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.”

The God that you don't know is the real one, the living God. Many people today in our own city are living this life unaware of the identity of a God who made them, and Paul says that He does not inhabit temples built by human hands. To say this line, with the Parthenon standing right behind you, takes tremendous courage and boldness. Paul goes on to say in Acts 17:25 about this true God:

“And He is not served by human hands, as if He needed anything. Rather, He Himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else.”

Paul addresses the ignorance of his peers with great courage, and then he moves on, not just from their ignorance, but he addresses their arrogance. This is hard, but bold. The Greeks believed that their ancestors had sprung up from the ground and inhabited the place in which they dwelled and that they were there to disseminate their own culture and learning. But Paul comes with a different message. He comes with a different account of our origin. He says in Acts 17:26:

“From one man He made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and He marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands.”

Because Paul is reading in Genesis, he says that from one man, Adam, God made all the nations. In so doing, He levels us and eliminates a cultural pride. No one can ever say my father was greater than your father, because Paul would say we have the same father and that God filled this world with people and that the meaning of human life is that God has placed you in the

place where you are. God has put you in the time in which you live. In Acts 17:27, he says:

“God did this so that they would seek Him and perhaps reach out for Him and find Him, though He is not far from any one of us.”

The reason that we are here is to know and serve God. The reason that you are here, the reason that I am here, is to come to know this true and living God and to give our lives back to Him in service. Paul says in Acts 17:29:

“We are God's offspring.”

We are made in His image. We don't make Him in ours. When you're sophisticated, it's tempting to take great delight in what you make or what you do, and yet the Scripture teaches us that God has made us. We have not made Him. We are God's offspring. Look at yourself. We are not made of gold, silver, or stone. We are not lifeless, inanimate creatures. As the Psalmist says: “Can the dust praise You?” We are made in God's image, and we are made in this way to know Him. It's not as the Stoics have said, that we are made in God's image just because of our minds. It is not what the Epicureans would teach us, that the truth lies within us. No, the truth is that we were made in God's image with the capacity to know Him and delight in Him. That's what we are here for, and if we are not doing that, our lives are a struggle because we are trying to live in a way that we were not created to live.

In Acts 17:30, Paul moves in even closer to the heart of the Athenians. I am sort of an adopted son of Athens, and this verse is difficult for me because I feel the pain of this verse. This verse says something to the Athenians that they can hardly bear to hear. Paul addresses this sophisticated, learned city, and he says:

“In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now He commands all people everywhere to repent.”

God has overlooked your ignorance. That's so hard, isn't it? God has been kind enough to forget about your stupidity. What? Doesn't he know whom he is addressing? He says God has overlooked your ignorance. He has been patient with you until this very moment, but now He commands everyone, everywhere, including the sophisticated, to believe. He goes on in Luke 17:31 to say:

“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 everyone by raising Him from the dead.”

Paul told them God has demonstrated the truth of this by sending Christ who died for our sins and has been raised from the dead. When Paul mentions the resurrection from the dead, we read in Acts 17:32:

“When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered.”

Have you ever been sneered at? That's not even a good word to say: sneer. *Sneer* is to look down on someone, to find their beliefs, their teaching absurd. Most in Greek philosophy believe that the body was something bad, something that we were to be freed from. No Greek philosophical school teaches anything like the resurrection. The Greek tragedian Aeschylus, for example, says: “When the dust has soaked up the blood of a man, once he has died, there is no resurrection.” No resurrection! Paul says from Scripture that the God of the Bible raises the dead, and He has raised Jesus from the dead. If Jesus has died for our sins and raised from the dead, then He is enthroned above heaven and earth. If He is enthroned this morning, and that has implications for everyone, sophisticated or not. We are to turn to him in repentance, heartfelt sorrow, for our failure to worship God as He deserves. Notice that Paul's critique of the Athenians is not their immorality; it's not their failure to turn in their taxes on time; it's not their pride of their literature to the exclusion of everyone else. His critique of them is their failure to worship God as He truly is. Are we worshipping God? Are we serving Him with all that we are?

Sophisticated people can be intimidating. Sometimes when you encounter a sophisticated person, you might think: “Let me just leave a tract on the table and go my way.” Sometimes the Lord might give you so much courage that you even ask the question: “Do you know something of Jesus Christ?” but you say it as you are walking away. Do you believe that every strata of society needs Jesus Christ? Do you believe that? I do. I believe that everyone needs repentance in Jesus Christ and that the Gospel transforms the hearts of the sophisticated and unsophisticated alike.

Acts 17 ends with hope. It ends with this diverse reaction which is the same set of reactions that you and I can expect when we share Christ. Some people hear and say: “That is ridiculous!” Have you ever received that response? “Christianity is not with the times. No one believes those things anymore. Do you really think that is true?” and they sneer. Others, though, have their hearts just beginning to open. Some of the people that hear Paul say: “You know, we'd like to hear you talk about this again,” and that challenges us, because the tract thrown out the window approach won't do. You can't just say a word about Jesus as you go on your way. That means you stay in relationship with people and answer the questions they have today and any questions they have next week. Some of the people responded in Acts 17:32 by saying:

“We want to hear you again on this subject.”

Paul leaves the counsel that day. He remains in the city, and then we are told the most remarkable and hope-birthing truth in Acts 17:34:

“Some of the people 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.”

Some of the people actually joined them. They became followers; they started going with Paul. We don't know for how long; we don't know the interval between when they were following him and that great verb at the end that they believed. Some of his hearers believed. Their hearts were open. We might be tempted to think this was maybe just the people who were collecting tickets for the Mars Hill speech. But, no, Luke tells us among those who responded was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, a member of the ruling Council, a man who was at the highest level of a society that saw itself as the highest of humanity. His heart was opened and he believed. There was also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others. So the Gospel is for the makers of high culture, and as we will learn next week, the Gospel is also for the makers of low culture. The Lord can redeem both of those by His powerful and outstretched arm.

If you go to Athens today, you come up from the metro station near the Acropolis, and you come out onto the street. It's the most beautiful walk in the city. As the sun starts to set, a golden light fills the street. It starts with a trickle of people. There are no cars, and as the night

goes on, the street is filled with people from all over. You have got to have a certain sense of style to walk down this street underneath these famous buildings. We can see these two young women in the foreground. But as these thousands of people walk this street daily, most of them don't realize the street's name. This is *Dionysius the Areopagite Street*, named for the first



believer of the city. When you're on the street like this and you know Jesus Christ, you should be moved to engage the people around you.

This may not be the street we walk, but all of us live in this place, in this time, around these streets, and we have to leave the safety and security of this sanctuary as we go out into these streets knowing that the Gospel is for everyone. You will never encounter someone who's too good or too intelligent for Jesus Christ. Do you believe as we go about our lives this week that the Gospel of Jesus is for the sophisticated? If you do believe that, then you will find ways to start conversations. There are Epicureans and Stoics all around us. There really are. There are people who don't believe God exists and that when you die you die, that's it. They believe you

should not be afraid of everything and that you should just live for your sensory pleasures. There are thousands of people that think that around us right now. There are thousands of people that think the solution for humanity is to get a great education and build yourself up and become someone. There is cultural pride in our hearts, and all of the needs and all of the idolatry are real around us. May the Lord make us a courageous people to love the people around us as Paul loved the Athenians. The greatest way of loving someone, as we see in Acts 17, is to tell them the truth. The truth in love is that even these people are desperately in need of Jesus Christ.

Amen