

Jesus in Athens
Kenwood Baptist Church
Summer Sermon Series: **Join His Mission**
Pastor David Palmer
July 14, 2019

TEXT: Acts 17:16-34



We now turn our attention to God's Word. Even as we have looked this summer at what it means to *Join His Mission*, it is fitting that we are in Athens this Sunday as we have been in Athens all week together in Vacation Bible School. Acts 17 teaches us, just as Paul taught the Athenians, about a God that we do not yet know. The reason that missions exists in the world is that worship does not yet exist. The goal of missions is not just conversion. Conversion is the beginning, but conversion leads us to that glorious freedom and joy of worshiping God. When Paul reached the city of Athens, it was the farthest that he had ever been from home. It was across a major cultural divide, as we learned a couple of weeks ago. When Paul, the Jew from Tarsus, came to the city of Athens, he came to the cultural epicenter of the ancient world. Athens was a city rich in history, rich in culture. It was a city that had famous monuments and buildings. The Parthenon, for which Athens is so famous, was actually built by Pericles after the Athenians had defeated the Persians. The structure of the Parthenon is phenomenal, even to modern visitors who stand there with selfie sticks to get a clear view of themselves as they almost roast on top of the Acropolis, where there is no shade at all. You can stand on the Acropolis for only about seven minutes before you dehydrate.

The Parthenon structure is beautiful, and one of the mysteries or secrets of it is that there are no straight lines in the Parthenon at all. Every piece of the building has a unique fingerprint, and

the building is built in such a way that it seems to float in the air. The ancient Greeks understood optical refinements, and they carved the columns in such a way that they would appear straight from any angle. Even the floor of the Parthenon is not level. It's bowed. If you set a book on one end of the Parthenon, you can't see the book on the other end, because even



the floor is curved. If you take all of the architectural lines of the Parthenon and shoot them up, they converge about a mile above in the sky. That's why the building seems to float in the air. This building was there when Paul visited the city. Not only is the structure itself impressive, it has the longest continuous frieze in low relief, over 500 feet long. Inside the Parthenon was a gigantic gold and ivory statue of the goddess Athena, patron deity of the city. Athena had 2,500 pounds of gold plates on her carved image. She literally embodied a significant part of the treasury of the city. This structure was there when Paul was there. Athens was known for its religion. It was known for its culture, its architecture, its philosophy. I studied at the University of Athens during my doctoral program, and I'll never forget the graduation. The graduation ceremony ended with the president of the university standing up and quoting this line from Isocrates: "The name Greeks applies to those who share our education and culture more than to those who share a common blood." He almost made the sign of the cross, but he basically said: "Now that you've had a Greek education, you're all Greeks," so we went out for Greek food and Greek dancing. We were Greeks because we had received a Greek education.

As glorious as the city was and is today, when Paul visited the city, his spirit was stirred within him because of the lack of worship. Wherever you travel in this world, you will see monuments of human construction that are impressive. You may be impressed with the Paul Brown Stadium or the Eiffel Tower; you may be overwhelmed by the Great Wall of China or the pyramids of Egypt; you may be in awe of the Coliseum in Rome or the skyline of New York City; but whatever monuments man builds, our real calling as human beings is to worship God, who is building a City that outshines anything that we make. When Paul was in the city, his spirit was provoked because he saw that the city was filled with idols. In other words, people were not worshipping the living God. They were worshipping the things that they had made. Acts 17:16 tells

us:

“Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.”

His spirit was stirred within him as he saw this. What do you do if you see a lack of worship, if you come into a family reunion, into your workplace or your school, and there is a lack of worship? Paul engages in the city in Acts 17:17:

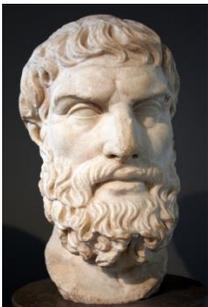
“So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.”

He reasons in the synagogue with his kinsman and other devout persons. These are the God-fearers. He talks with people in the marketplace every day, with people who happen to be there. He talks with people in the mall. He talks with people at the schools. He talks with people who are religious and those who are just trying to make a drachma. He talks with learned people. In Acts 17:18, we read:

“Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, ‘What does this babbler wish to say?’ Others said, ‘He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities’—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.”

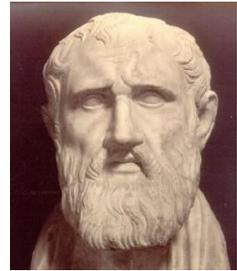
Some weren't very impressed with what he said. They insulted him by saying: “What does this babbler wish to say?” In the film, “My Big Fat Greek Wedding,” there's a great scene where the dad reveals how life looks to the Greeks. He says: “The world is divided into two parts: Greeks and everyone who wishes they were Greek!”

These ancient philosophers insult Paul, probably because of his diction, because Greek is a second language for him. He didn't appear impressive or learned. The Athenians have a particular diction that is very elegant. It's like when you meet someone from London or you talk at length with Tony Fairhead in the narthex, and you think: “This man is intelligent,” no matter what he says. Connie Zannis and my wife Christine have this Athenian diction. It's very beautiful



in its sound. Paul didn't strike them that way. His teaching, as they understood it, seemed to be focused on Jesus and His resurrection, ideas that they'd never heard before, ever. Epicurus was the leader of the back-to-nature movement of antiquity. You know this kind of thinking. There are thousands of Epicureans today. Epicureans think that the city has corrupted us and that the truth lies within us, and what we all really need to do is to bivouac on the shores of Walden Pond and discover that the truth lies within us. Epicurus' philosophical school was in a garden, and he taught people to reject the ways of culture and to look within themselves for answers. Thousands of people in our city think the same today. The Stoic said the other opposite solution. They thought the problem with humanity was lack of education. If

everyone had a Harvard PhD, we would all be good. If we all went to the right schools and learned the right things, we would be good. That's what the Stoics taught. Zeno of Citium, the founder of the Stoics, taught people that the problem with humanity was a lack of education.



Well, Paul engaged people wherever he was, and finally the hearers brought



him to the Areopagus, which is Greek for the Hill of Ares, the god of war. The Latin version of Ares is Mars, so this hill is Mars Hill today. Mars Hill is a rocky outcrop just underneath the Acropolis, where the Parthenon stands in ruins today. This is what it would have looked like as Paul was there standing in the foreground on Mars Hill. He was brought and asked about his teaching and what these things mean, and Paul's speech, or mini

sermon, on Mars Hill was challenging. It was instructive and is relevant for all of us today, and so I want us to look at this as Paul introduces us to a God we do not yet know.

Paul begins by complimenting his hearers in Acts 17:22:

“Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious.”

This is not a negative thing. It's not a slam. As a piece of application, it is always good to start an evangelistic conversation with a compliment. Paul compliments them, and he wants to move forward. He continues in Acts 17:23:

“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.”

This was a god that was venerated in the city, but unknown. Brothers and sisters, we have eternity set in our hearts. Whether we believe it or not, we are made in the image of God, and we are created to know Him and respond to Him in praise. So, the God that they do not yet know, he says: “This is the One I want to tell you about.” What does he tell us? Beginning in Acts 17:24, he says that the God not yet known is:

“The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man.”

The world that we are in is made by God, and not only the world, but everything in it. That

includes us. This God, who is the Creator, is not only the Creator, He is the Lord of heaven and earth. He is our Creator; He is our sovereign; and, Paul says: "He does not dwell in temples made by human hands," which is an absolutely astonishing thing to say when the Parthenon is right behind you. Every time I stand on Mars Hill, I am fired with courage at that line. There's a 41-foot high statue of Athena, made of gold and ivory, right behind him as he says this: "The God you don't know is our Creator. He's the Sovereign." We learn this from Genesis, that God is the Creator of the heavens and the earth. Deuteronomy 10:14 says:

"Behold, to the LORD your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it."

Psalms 24:1 says:

"The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein."

Dear friends, we are in a world that God has made, and we are made to know Him and worship Him. In Acts 17:25, Paul says:

". . . nor is [this God] served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything."

The most amazing thing about the God of the Bible, the Creator and Sovereign, is that He does not need us. The God of the Bible is self-sufficient; He is the giver of life; He has no lack within His being; He is all sufficient and all-powerful; He is the Creator; He is the Lord; He is not served by us as though He is in need or lacking—which is the theology of idolatry everywhere you find it, whether that's a plate of food out in Thailand to offer an offering to the gods or any other manifestation where we posture ourselves as though God needs us. Friends, we need God. God in His lavish generosity and power, in the overflow of His goodness, in His sheer delight in manifesting His glory, makes us. He is the One who gives life and breath and everything. Again, we find this truth in the Bible. Genesis 2:7 says:

"Then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature."

That's why the first man is called Adam, because Adam in Hebrew just means *dirt* or *ground*. But, dear friends, we don't just stay dirt. We are not only dirt. God breathes into us His Spirit, and we become alive. He gives breath, His spirit, and makes us alive. Not only is He our Creator, Lord, and self-sufficient, but God makes us, and, we read in Acts 17:26:

"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,"

We have shared DNA. Scientists tell us that humanity comes from a single point of origin. Sometimes this is called the Eve Hypothesis. I wonder where they got that! We do come from

one. What we have in common is infinitely greater than what separates us. God creates from one man every nation to live on the face of the earth, and Paul says that God is sovereignly determining the time and the boundary where we live. So, you know the fact that you're here now is by the will of God.

You exist, every one of us exists, because God wills for us to exist right now, and we live where we live because God wills for us to live where we live. He determines the time and the places. Sometimes people wish that they had lived in another time. Sometimes people love the Middle Ages, and they think: "Oh, I wish I had lived in the time of chivalry," and all they are thinking about is the armor. They're not thinking about the lack of indoor plumbing or medicine or things like that. Sometimes people think: "Oh, I wish I had lived in the time of the Trojan War." Sometimes people think: "Oh, I wish I was in a different country." But Paul's speech, then and now, tells us that God wants you to be here right now in this place at this time, and He determines this, our countries of origin, our families of origin, our current location, for this critical reason, in Acts 17:27:

“. . .that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward Him and find Him. Yet He is actually not far from each one of us,”

The point of human existence is to seek after God. Isaiah 55:6 says:

“Seek the LORD while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near;”

In Jeremiah 29:11-13, we read:

“For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will hear you. You will seek Me and find Me, when you seek Me with all your heart.”

Amos 5:4 says it concisely like this:

“For thus says the LORD to the house of Israel: ‘Seek Me and live;’”

Is the driving ambition of your life to seek God and to know Him? That's the summons of this speech. In Acts 17: 28, Paul says:

“. . .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.’”

Paul quotes two well-known Greek poets, the Cretan poet Epimenides and the Stoic philosopher Cleanthes, who were thinking in the right direction. Paul says that that's headed in the right direction, but it's not crystal clear. We only know with clarity when we pursue God and seek after Him as He is revealed in His Word.

Paul's speech to the Athenians begins to reach a climax and draw to a close when he turns to

the implications of all this truth. It is a lot of truth, isn't it? One God, Creator, Sovereign, one single origin of humanity, filling the earth and determining the place and time for everyone to be born with this overarching purpose to seek after Him. That's a lot in a few verses, but that truth has implications.

The little word in Acts 17:29 signals the beginning of these implications—the word *ought*. Do like the word *ought*? It's an acquired taste, but it's actually a wonderful word. It's the same word in the Lord's Prayer when Jesus says: "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." As we relate to God, God is there, and there's a massive *ought*, or a massive *what we should do*—whether you translate that as *I ought to do*, or you translate that as *I have an obligation to do* or *a debt to do* or *I am supposed to do this*. Sometimes people who are not familiar with the God of the Bible mischaracterize Him, as though the God of the Bible is all about what you should not do. But, what we should do is critical. God's Word contains about equal portions of what we should do and what we shouldn't do. Paul says in Acts 17:29:

"Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the Divine Being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man."

We shouldn't think that. We should never think that the true, the real, the living God, is a product of our imagination. God has made us; we don't make Him. In Genesis 1:26-27, we read:

"So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, . . ."

God wanted us to fill the earth with image-bearers of His likeness who can know and respond to Him in praise. God's vision from the beginning is to fill the earth with His glory and give us the great joy and privilege of celebrating and seeing that together.

One of my most vivid scenes from VBS was actually not in the drama. It wasn't in a hallway conversation. It was looking around the sanctuary and seeing a dad with his son. They didn't know I was looking at them, but I could see in this young son's face how much he loved his dad. He could hardly take his eyes off of his dad. At one point, they were holding hands, and then they both looked forward. There they were, father and son, worshiping God together. They were singing, and I thought this little boy will never forget that, and whatever he's seeing and knowing about his father, what he knows right now about his father is that his father worships God, and he's following along. They're doing that together. It is so wonderful to have kids with their families and to see: "That's my dad. He's worshiping God."

The time for worshiping God and abandoning our idols is now, and that's how Paul's sermon comes to a conclusion. In Acts 17:30, he says:

“The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now He commands all people everywhere to repent,”

The time for not knowing God is over, and God has come. He commands everyone to repent, to turn away from our idols, and to worship Him with joy and satisfaction and no regrets. We are to turn away from our idols because they are offensive to God and they hurt us and others. Idolatry is not neutral. Thursday night, when the kids had the chance to talk about and reflect on their own sin, they wrote their sin down on the back side of hand-shaped cards. It was really powerful because the room got serious. You might think as an adult: “How serious is your sin?” But, that was serious to the kids. All sin is serious, whether it’s the sin of disobeying your parents, whether it’s a sin of being unfaithful, whether it’s a sin of coveting your neighbors stack of Pokémon cards. Sin is offensive to God because it’s an affront to His glory, and it’s saying: “God, You have not met my needs. If I just had this one thing, I’d be happy.” The times of ignorance, God has said: “They are over.” He’s commanded us to repent and turn to Him.

Paul’s speech ends with saying in Acts 17:31:

“. . .because He has fixed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by a Man whom He has appointed; and of this He has given assurance to all by raising Him from the dead.”

That’s Jesus Christ, and God has shown us that we will stand before Christ, and He has given us assurance by raising Him from the dead. Not only do we live in a world that God has made and that He is running, but all of us, dear friends, will stand before Jesus Christ, face-to-face. Paul himself says we will appear before Christ’s judgment seat, and each one may receive what is due for what he has done, whether good or for evil. Jesus said that we will be accountable for every word we have spoken. That’s seriousness, isn’t it? That includes every tweet, every post, every message. Are our lives offered up in fragrant worship to God, or do we all have sin that we need to repent of? I think we all have that, and that’s what Paul wanted the Athenians to see and hear. Like many then and now, they respond to his speech, some of them with scorn: “Come on. Really? Don’t you know who I am, where I’m from?” Others mocked, saying: “You know, I’m really a good guy. If God wants anyone in heaven, it’s me!” Others said: “We need to hear more. Tell us more,” and that’s okay. Maybe some of you this morning or this week are in a spot where you’re saying: “Christianity is not for me. Maybe it’s for my kids, but it’s not for me.” Dear friend, you’re in a world that God made. You are drawing breath from Him. You are racking up a debt every day that you can’t pay, and God asks you to turn and put your faith in Him. Maybe you’re like some of the Athenians today saying: “I’m learning, I am interested. I just want to hear more.” That’s okay. I hope you will be here next Sunday.

The ending of the scene, Paul walks away from the Mars Hill, from the Areopagus, and Luke tells us that as he walked away, he looked over his shoulder and saw that some of the people

who had heard him were joining him and believed. This is how it is. Always, some mock, scorn, and some say they need more time, but some say, like many young hearts this week: “I believe.”

I remember one young boy leaving the drama area. I was in the habit of giving kids high-fives as they walked out. This one boy had his hand up, and he rush towards me. He put his hand down, and he just threw his arms around me, and he said: “I love Jesus! I believe in His Word, and I want to be baptized.” Praise God! When Paul looked around at Mars Hill, he saw that Dionysius the Areopagite had joined him, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.



When you come out of the Metro stop in Athens today, it is the prettiest walk in the city. it's a promenade, the only place in Athens where there's no traffic, just people. It's a cobblestone street, and the Parthenon is still up there. But when you look at the street signs, the street is called the Street of Dionysius the Areopagite, because he was the first Christian ever in the city. That's the joy that we have today: seek God and live; repent and believe to discover the God who is revealed in the pages of Scripture; and then to join His mission wherever we go.

Amen.