

Tusculum Hills Baptist Church
Paul Gunn, Pastor

IT'S ALL GREEK TO ME

Acts 17:15-34

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This week's sermon has three points:

- Paul was distressed by idols.
- The audience did not understand.
- Paul spoke with boldness and love.

PAUL WAS DISTRESSED BY THE IDOLS

SCRIPTURE: Acts 17:16-17

Those who escorted Paul brought him to Athens and then left with instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible. ¹⁶While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there.

EXPLANATION: Four hundred years after the golden age of Greece, believers escorted Paul to Athens, the cultural center of the Middle East. By this time in history, Athens was no longer of political importance, but it was still known for its art and deep thinkers, including Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. The city was also full of architectural wonders, including the Parthenon, a temple of the goddess Athena, a copy of which is located right here in Nashville. While Paul may have appreciated the artistic beauty of the city, the object of much of that art and architecture hurt his soul. Historians tell us that there were more than 30,000 idols in an area that was about the size of Rhode Island. They would have been hard to miss.

In verse 16, the Greek word is translated as *distressed* is *parōxy-neto*. In some versions, it is translated *provoked*. Webster defines *provoke* as “to call forth, stir up, or to incite to anger.” Distressed means “troubled or disturbed.” If we put those

definitions together, we can see that the idols stirred up difficult emotions within Paul.

ILLUSTRATION: JFK's assassination, the Challenger explosion, 9/11, the Columbine school shooting - these were experiences many of us watched play out over the evening news. They are the types of events that prompt the question, "Where were you when...?" They are the kind of stories that evoke strong emotions - shock, horror, anger, and deep sadness - the same kinds of emotions that Paul experienced.

EXPLANATION: The stone and marble statues were not just pieces of art; they were items of worship. Those idols represented the lostness of the Athenians.

- Having being raised to know the one and only true God, I'm sure Paul was shocked by the sheer number of idols.
- Knowing the Old Testament history of God's wrath against Israel's idolatry, I'm certain that he was horrified.
- Believing in and loving the Lord, I'm sure the idolatrous worship made him angry.
- Understanding the sacrificial love of Jesus, I know that Paul was sad.

THE AUDIENCE DID NOT UNDERSTAND

SCRIPTURE: Acts 17:18-21

A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate 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 would like to know what they mean." ²¹ (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

EXPLANATION: Paul's great distress over the lost people in Athens compelled him to share the gospel message in the synagogue and in the marketplace. In a city known for famous philosophers and educators, his presentation would not have been unusual. In fact, he probably drew quite the crowd. This was the sort of thing

Athenians lived for. They “spent all their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.”

Among those in the crowd were Epicureans, followers of the Greek philosopher Epicurus. Philodemus, one of the followers of this philosophy, defined it as a Four-Part Cure or system of living. “Don’t fear gods. Don’t worry about death. What is good is easy to get. What is terrible is easy to endure.” Basically, the Epicureans believed in gods, but their gods were uninterested in them or their lifestyles. They did not believe that a soul could exist after death, therefore there was no afterlife. They believed that enjoying good things was OK, though the pursuit of good things led to trouble. And they minimized the effects of hardship. Some of their beliefs aligned with Scripture, but their ultimate understanding of God was wrong.

Stoicism originated with another philosopher named Zeno of Citium. It was based on three things: ethics, logic, and physics. A Stoic’s beliefs or morality would be defined by applying logic to the natural world. Like Christians, Stoic philosophers discouraged emotional and thoughtless reactions. However, they had no recognition of God, of the Bible, or of Jesus, “the true logos who governs all things (John 1:1).”

Try to imagine what it would have been like for these people to hear Paul speak of the God who was creator of all and yet desired a relationship with his creation, a God who loved humans enough to die for them, a God who came in the form of his creation, who died, and then rose from the dead. Think about all the ways the simple gospel message contradicted everything they believed.

ILLUSTRATION: (*Names have been changed.*) Renee lost her hearing as a result of a misdiagnosed case of meningitis when she was six months old. In turn, her speech was very undeveloped. When the Thompsons first met the young woman, they found it difficult to understand her. Renee could speak with sign language, but they could not. Communication was difficult, but the family fell in love with Renee and so, they kept trying. Renee spent a lot of time with the family, and after a few months, Mrs. Thompson realized that she could understand Renee much better. Renee’s speech had not improved. Mrs. Thompson’s listening had.

EXPLANATION: The Epicureans and the Stoics called Paul a “babbling.” They could not understand what he was saying. The problem was not Paul. They just

were not listening. If Paul was discouraged by their responses, he did not let on. Instead, he continued to share the gospel “day by day.” Out of curiosity, they invited him to speak at the Areopagus, a rock outcropping, where cases were sometimes tried. They wanted a judgment on Paul’s message. They wanted to know whether or not it was true.

Sometimes, it takes time for the Holy Spirit to break through the self-sufficiency, pride, and falsehoods of the human heart. Paul, like Renee, kept speaking because he knew that the more he spoke, the more opportunities that the people would have to listen. The more they listened, the more they would hear, understand, and hopefully, believe.

PAUL SPOKE WITH BOLDNESS AND LOVE

SCRIPTURE: Acts 17:22-34

Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “People 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. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what 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 human hands. ²⁵ And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. 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. ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’^[a] 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 human 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 everyone by raising him from the dead.” 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 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.

EXPLANATION: Even though Paul had strong emotions about the idols, notice what he did not do. He did not take a hammer and tear down the idols. That kind of action would only have alienated the people. Paul wanted to draw them to the message of Christ. So, he used those idols as a way to connect the dots. Their idol worship actually demonstrated that they believed in powers that were greater than them, and they had a desire to worship. The image to the unknown god was a physical admission that they did not know everything. Paul found the question that the Athenians were asking: Who is the Unknown God? And he answered it.

Paul did not sugar coat the message. He introduced them to the One true God. He pointed out their sin. He called them to repentance. He spoke with boldness, but he also spoke with love. He hurt for these people who were like children groping for an exit in the dark. Their efforts to find the right path were futile. Paul tried to take them by the hand and lead them to the Light.

Paul was distressed by the idols. The audience did not understand. Paul spoke with boldness and love.

APPLICATION: When was the last time you were distressed for the lostness of the world around you? If you're a believer and you're not concerned about the people you see every day, the people in your family, the people at your work, the people at the check-out counter... if you're not concerned about their eternal salvation, then you might want to think about your own. Paul hurt for the lostness of the people. We should too.

Our love for others should motivate us to spread the gospel message—not with a guns-blaring, beat-them-over-the-head type of way, but with Godly persistence, patience, and consistency in our words and in our actions. There's a saying, "People do not care what you know until they know that you care." When we, like Paul, begin with a heart of compassion and speak the truth in love, our message is more likely to be heard. When the message is heard, there is more opportunity for the hearers to respond.

Of course, there will always be some who reject the message. There will also be some who think they need to know more, who want to argue and rationalize, and postpone a personal decision. But, praise God, there will also be those who believe.

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Sincerely, Paul Gunn
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