

Introduction

1. I mentioned last week that Paul was a master at communicating the Gospel not just because he understood the Gospel, but because he understood his audiences
2. I also mentioned that between last week's passage and this week's, we were going to see two different examples because he deals with two different audiences
 - a. Last week, his audience was primarily Jews and God-fearing Gentiles:
 - 1) They would have been familiar with the Old Testament Scriptures and the primary themes and concepts of Judaism
 - 2) Paul relied heavily upon the Scriptures to prove to them that Jesus was the Christ, the promised Messiah
 - 3) While most of the Jews at Thessalonica disregarded his claims and rejected the Gospel, the Jews at Berea were more noble-minded and examined the Scriptures to see if what Paul claimed was true, and ultimately many of them came to Christ
 - b. Today, Paul addresses a much wider and diverse group of people:
 - 1) It includes not only Jews and God-fearing Gentiles, but those steeped in Greek mythology and philosophy
 - 2) As we'll see, he takes a slightly different approach to sharing the Gospel with them

A. Paul was provoked to share the Gospel by what he saw around him (Acts 17:16-21)

1. Paul's spirit is provoked by the idols he sees at Athens (READ 17:16):
 - a. Paul is on his second missionary journey and now waiting at Athens to be joined by Timothy and Silas (who were still at Berea)
 - b. While there, the text says, "**his spirit was being provoked within him**" (1)
 - 1) This is a word that literally means to make something sharp but it's used here in a metaphorical sense meaning to agitate, disturb, stir up or make upset
 - 2) The tense indicates an ongoing provocation, implying that the longer Paul was in Athens the more provoked he became
 - 3) We're told this was due to "**beholding the city full of idols.**"
 - a) Athens was a pagan, Greco-Roman city completely immersed in polytheism (many gods) and deism (not interested or involved in the affairs of men)
 - b) Athens was well past its prime in terms of political influence, but still the educational, philosophical and religious center of the Greek and Roman world at the time
 - c) One ancient writer claimed that there were over 30,000 idols in Athens during Paul's day, in addition to the dozens of large temples and monuments
 - d) It led him to claim that it was easier to find a god in Athens than a man!
2. This provocation in his spirit led Paul to share the Gospel with anyone who would listen (READ 17:17):
 - a. It's easy to overlook the word "**so**" at the beginning of this verse but we shouldn't do that; it explains what motivated Paul
 - b. Luke writes that Paul spent his days "**reasoning**" with anyone who would listen in the synagogue and the marketplace (17):
 - 1) This word implies a debate over ideas and arguing for one's belief or position

- 2) It's the very word used to describe the debate between the apostles as to who was the greatest (Matthew 9:34)
 - 3) Luke uses it often to describe Paul's preaching and teaching and even combines with the Greek word for persuading (Acts 18:4; 19:8)
- c. Three different groups of people are mentioned:
- 1) The first group mentioned were Jews and God-fearing Gentiles: these would have been those at the synagogue and they would have been familiar with Judaism and the Law
 - 2) The second group was anyone present at the market place—most of these would have been Greeks steeped in Greco-Roman mythology and philosophy
 - 3) The third was a group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers:
 - a) Epicureans:
 - They believe in the existence of the Greek gods, but also believed that they were so far removed from the affairs of man that they didn't interfere with humanity; if fact, they weren't even aware of mankind
 - Therefore, there was no way to appease a god or gods who don't know you exist and don't care about your life, and thus there certainly couldn't be any judgment after death
 - They didn't believe in the afterlife because the soul was connected to the physical body and ceased to exist once the body perished
 - So, the highest goal a person could pursue was absolute peace, absent of mental, emotional, and physical distress or need
 - Their motto was, "Nothing to fear in God; nothing to feel in death; good [pleasure] can be attained; Evil [pain] can be endured"
 - b) Stoics:
 - The stoics were pantheists meaning they didn't believe in a personal god or gods, but rather that the universe (all of creation) is god and exists in all things
 - They emphasized rationalism and logic and promoted aligning oneself with the natural law of the cosmos
 - Their motto was to live according to nature
3. Paul's message didn't garner much respect among the philosophers, but it did intrigue some of them (READ 17:18):
- a. Some referred to him as an "**idle babbler**" (lit. "seed-picker") which referred to someone who simply regurgitated bits of knowledge picked up from others like scraps of food on the floor; it also implies that Paul didn't understand what he was talking about
 - b. Others were intrigued because he was proclaiming something new to them: "**strange (lit. foreign) deities**" and "**Jesus and the resurrection**"
4. So, they brought Paul to the Areopagus to hear more (READ 17:19-21):
- a. The Areopagus was a rocky hill in Athens, what is referred to as Mars Hill, and is where the supreme tribunal (called the Council of the Aeropaus) met to address civil, religious and legal matters
 - b. There is no indication here that Paul was arrested or tried, but rather that he was brought there to continue the discussion before a much bigger audience of philosophers and city leaders

5. Takeaway: our first takeaway this morning has to do with how Paul was provoked by what he saw in Athens and how it motivated him to share the Gospel:
 - a. There's so much going on in our culture today that should provoke us—Abortion, LGBT issues, politics, Covid, cancel culture, etc.
 - b. However, I often wonder if the Church gets more irate and angrier about these things than provoked
 - c. When Paul looked around Athens, he didn't get angry or irritated; rather, he was moved to preach the Gospel because he recognized that the things he saw simply represented a lost and dying world in need of a Savior

B. Paul tailored his message to his audience (Acts 17:22-29)

1. The first thing Paul did was take advantage of Greco-Roman oration and rhetoric and used it to shape his message:
 - a) His sermon fit the general pattern:
 - 1) Opening INTRODUCTION or *exordium* (READ 17:22a)— he begins by addressing them, “**Men of Athens**”
 - 2) Next, he laid the FOUNDATION or *narration* for what he was going to address by calling to mind their interest in religion (READ 17:22b-23a)
 - 3) The PROPOSITION or *propositio* came next (READ 17:23)—his proposition is that he is going to proclaim to them the unknown God they worship in ignorance
 - 4) He then provides the PROOF or *probatio* (24-29; we'll read these later)—it revolves around the nature of God and man
 - 5) He then concludes with the EXHORTATION or *peroratio* where he calls on them to repent (30-31; we'll read these later as well)
 - 6) He also uses concepts and ideas familiar to his audience, including some loaded words like “**ignorance**” (23, 30)
 - b) In spite of his use of the Greco-Roman style of rhetoric, Paul made it clear elsewhere that he didn't rely upon such skill, but rather on the truth and power of the Gospel:
 - 1) Greek rhetoric stressed style and ability (to persuade) over substance
 - 2) It wasn't whether something was true, but whether one could persuade others by his skill and clever speech
 - 3) Paul rejected this idea when he reminded the Corinthians how he preached the Gospel to them:
 - a) Not in “**cleverness of speech**” (1CO 1:17)
 - b) Not with “**superiority of speech or of wisdom**” (1CO 2:1)
 - c) Not in “**persuasive words of wisdom**” (1CO 2:4)
 - d) Not in “**words taught by human wisdom**” (1CO 2:13)
 - 4) Instead, Paul “**was determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified**” (1CO 2:2) and to rely upon the wisdom and power of God and the Holy Spirit.
2. The second thing Paul did was recognize their interest in religion and he took advantage of it; he did this by focusing on two things: the nature of God and the nature of man (17:24-28):
 - a. The nature of God (READ 17:24-25):

- 1) God is Creator of everything (24a)
 - 2) He is Lord of Heaven and Earth (24b)
 - 3) He does not dwell in man-made temples (24b)
 - 4) He does not need to be served (e.g. He doesn't need to be cared for by man like an idol does) (25a)
 - 5) All life originates from Him (25b)
- b. The nature of man (READ 17:26-28):
- 1) God made every nation from one man to inhabit the earth (26)
 - 2) He is intimately involved with mankind, even determining where they live and how long (26b)
 - 3) He created us to seek after Him and desires that we find Him (27a)
 - 4) He is not distant or disinterested in us because we are His offspring and live, move and exist in Him (27b-28)
 - 5) Lastly, God's nature should not be constrained to idols made by gold, silver or stone based on the art and thoughts of man (29)
- c. All of the points Paul made regarding the nature of God and the nature of man directly confront the religious ignorance of the audience
3. A third thing Paul did was use words and concepts that were familiar and important to his audience:
- a. Ignorance was a popular theme among the Greek philosophers because they despised it and were always in pursuit of knowledge—you'll notice Paul uses that word twice (v. 23b, 30)
 - b. When speaking of God's nature, he uses the phrase "the Divine" (NASB Divine Nature) which is right out of Greek philosophy
 - c. He even quotes from two of their own prophets (see 28):
 - 1) "...**for in Him we live and move and exist**" from Cilician poet Arastus (315-240 B.C.)
 - 2) "**For we also are His offspring**" from the Cretan poet Epimenides (600 B.C.)
4. Takeaway: I think the primary takeaway from this is how well Paul knew his audience and how it impacted his sharing of the Gospel:
- a. He communicated in a way they respected, understood their interests and took advantage of them, and used words and concepts that were important to them
 - b. I've been challenged by this myself recently as I've been looking for ways to share the Gospel with co-workers

Opportunity with co-worker (Jebi) this last week

C. When sharing the Gospel Paul wasn't afraid to talk about sin and judgment (17:30-34):

1. We saw this in his prior sermons which ended with calls to repent (Acts 13 and 16)
2. We see it here as well (READ 30-31):
 - a) God overlooked the ignorance of the past but is "**now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent**" (30)

- b) He has **“fixed a day to judge the world in righteousness”** (31a)
 - c) This judgment will be in relation to one’s standing with Jesus Christ (31b)
 - d) And He has provided proof of this by **“raising [Jesus] from the dead”** (31c)
3. The response to Paul’s message before the Areopogus is found in the remaining verses (READ 32-34):
- a) Some **“sneered”** (32a)
 - b) Some wanted to **“hear more”** (32b)
 - c) But some **“joined him and believed”** (33-34)
4. Takeaway: when we get an opportunity to share the Gospel, we shouldn’t be afraid to talk about sin and judgment:
- a) It certainly isn’t popular to talk about sin, or about a God who judges, in fact those things are quite offensive to the unsaved
 - b) It’s a lot easier to talk about the positive things like God’s goodness, love, grace, faithfulness, etc.
 - c) However, it’s hard to fully comprehend those things without a proper understanding of His perfect holiness, sin and judgment
 - d) I’m not suggesting we run around telling people they’re going to hell, but we shouldn’t focus purely on the positives and neglect the consequences of rejecting the fact that a day of reckoning is coming and God is going to judge the world
 - e) It’s hard to tell people about their need for a savior when they don’t understand from what they need to be saved
 - f) That’s exactly what see Paul do here and it’s something repeated throughout the sermons in Acts