

Faithful Evangelism, Part 1

Acts 17:16-23

September 6, 2015

This weekend is Labor Day weekend, which means it's the start of the fall season. We pastors often think of our church calendar, not in terms of January to December, but in terms of September to August because fall season kicks off school routines and change in schedules, getting back into the flow of, of life that is kind of defined by our culture and its demands on us. And as we do that together as a church, I wanted to help the students, and really of us, as we think about this start of the fall season. I wanted to help all of us and the students in particular with a message that will remind all of us, encourage all of us, provide us with a little bit of direction in accomplishing the task that our Lord has given us while we're here on earth to spread the Gospel.

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Let's start by looking at 1 Peter, chapter 3, verse 14. You can turn there in your Bibles. While you're turning there, just to remind you, our Lord has commanded us in Matthew 28, verse 19. He said, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Making disciples. That's the task. That is the key command in that text, making disciples. And it involves both baptizing and teaching, both evangelism and edification. We evangelize the lost, bringing them to the waters of baptism. And then we edify those who are saved, teaching them to obey Christ. We go out to proclaim the saving Gospel, calling unbelievers to repent and to embrace Jesus Christ by faith. When God saves some, then we bring them in. And we teach them the Bible and its doctrines. We teach them how to obey God, to obey what Jesus said, "Everything, to observe everything that I've commanded you." As those new converts, as those new Christians grow in maturity, as they grow healthy and strong, the Lord uses them as maturing Christians, to go out and save others, to bring others to

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Christ, to bring them into the fold. So we gather for edification. We scatter for evangelism. That's the biblical model.

Now Peter tells these Christians, and remember he was writing to Christians who were on the margins of society. They were despised and ostracized. Some of them were even enduring persecution for the sake of Christ, and, folks, we're heading there. We're going in that direction. And Peter tells these Christians, 1 Peter 3:14-16, he tells them to evangelize, even in the midst of a hostile culture. Even in the midst of hostility, persecution, marginalization, he says, "Tell them the truth. If you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed." But this, "Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do this with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame."

Notice Peter says, "When you are slandered," not, "If you are slandered," "When." It's going to happen. But as we go about out

days doing school, doing work, raising children, shopping, keeping the home, we need always to be prepared to do what God has called us to do. We Christians have a sure hope. We have a deep profound conviction about the future, about the God that we know, about the God before whom we will stand one day. We have a deep conviction about him, about the way to him through Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ alone. We need to defend that truth. We need to defend that doctrine. And we need to give a reason to anybody who asks us, in the changing tides of the culture, in the changing flow of the world, we need to give people a reason why we have that hope, why we know what we know with such deep and profound conviction. We need to give them a reason.

And we need to understand, and Peter helps us with this, we need to understand the evangelistic task if twofold. It's both offensive and defensive. It's both proclaiming and defending. As Jude says, "We need to contend for the faith." And contention means offense and defense; it means both. By actively proclaiming the faith, we are going to draw fire. We're going to receive opposition in the form of arguments and "every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God," 2 Corinthians 2:4 and 5. But we cast down those arguments. We unseat those lofty

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opinions, and we don't do it because we're so brilliant, we do it because we have a powerful Gospel. It's a simple gospel to explain, but it's a powerful word and it casts down arguments. It unseats all lofty opinions. And we take captive every single thought, making even the thought life of an unbeliever obedient to Christ, as our thought life has become obedient to Christ. We're not here after numbers that can be counted. We're after hearts, to bring all under the gracious Lordship of Jesus Christ, whom we love, whom we serve.

Now to make a defense of the faith, that's the task. You all have heard this word. That's a task of what we call apologetics, apologetics. It's from the word that Peter uses in 1 Peter 3:15. You can see it there, to make a defense, to give a reason, to give an answer. It's the idea of defending, answering. And it's the word *apologia* in the Greek. *Apologia*, I guess you could say. But it sounds like apology, like were asking for permission or forgiveness or something like that. That's not at all the idea. It's the idea of making a reasoned argument, a reasoned argument.

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Contrary to the popular cultural stereotype about faith, contrary to maybe an Oprah Winfrey view of faith, Christian faith is not unreasonable. The Christian faith is not mystical, ethereal. It's not opposed to reason. It's not even beyond reason. Quite the contrary, Christianity is the only worldview that comports with pure reason. It's not subject to human reason, but it is reasoned. It's a reasoned faith. If you were to remove the influence of sin from the human mind, well you know what, all the Scripture makes perfect sense. You take away sin, everything that God says is reasonable. It's only the presence of sin and then the weakness that's caused by sin that turns clear black and white here on the pages of Scripture, it turns them into shades of gray. It makes it muddled and confusing.

So as we evangelize, as we teach others the Gospel, you need to understand that just as Job 28 said, we are bringing wisdom to the world. We are bringing understanding to them and calling them to repent, put their faith in God. We're calling them to repent, to cast away all unholiness and ungodliness and to fear the Lord and turn to him. That's the most reasonable, knowing what we know about God, knowing what we know about the future

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and the fact we're all going to stand before him one day, it's the most reasonable thing we could do, right, is repent now, so that we're not cast away later.

So when unbelievers don't understand that, when they reject it, when they ridicule it, when they scorn it, they only prove how lost that they really are. Whenever someone rejects the truth, that person demonstrates just a lack of sound reason. They demonstrate a lack of clearheaded rationality. They, they indicate a lack of sound logic. Denying God and his revealed truth is to depart from rationality. We are seeing a lot of irrationality these days, aren't we? You read the headlines; it just isn't making sense anymore. We can't even make this stuff up. Not just talking about people who maybe go through gender reassignment surgeries, as horrific as that sounds, human history has always had its share of people who are nuts, or absolutely confused, right? But what I'm talking about is when the rest of society wants to affirm that and then accommodate that kind of moral insanity.

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Today, people seem to be hellbent on normalizing perversion, promoting degradation as an acceptable lifestyle option for our children. We're in new territory, folks. Do we need any further proof that non-Christian worldviews are anti-reason, anti-rationality, utterly illogical? Don't let anyone, don't let anyone make you feel foolish for believing and proclaiming the Gospel. It's the most reasonable sound thinking proposition that we've ever been given right here in Scripture. Don't let anybody make you feel foolish for that. The Gospel is rational, it's logical, it's reasonable. The unbelieving world, they're the ones who are foolish and they're proving it more and more as the days go by.

That's why Paul says in Romans 1:16, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes." You know what? God, by his grace, has opened our eyes to that. We'd be just like them. We'd be just like them, affirming and confirming all of that. But God has been gracious to snatch us out of the fire and open our eyes to the truth. So we proclaim him. We defend the Gospel because that is reality, because that is what Christ left us here on earth to do.

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Now apologetics, defending, contending for the faith, reasoning for the faith in light of objections, that's just part of the evangelistic task. That's just part of the larger issue of evangelism that we're called to do to make disciples. All evangelism is going to have an apologetic element to it. But just, just making arguments to people, that falls short of the full evangelistic task.

Making disciples is what we're called to do. On the one hand, we're not here to argue with the lost. It's not about, my worldview is better than your worldview. It's true, but it's not our task just to prove the superiority of worldviews. It's not our task just to prove theism, or move the needle from unbelief, rejection of God, atheism, it's not our task to move that needle over to, to the possibility of theism. And then there is theism, and then monotheism, then Christian theism, and then Christ...no! That is not our task.

Our task is to go to this unbelief or anywhere in between and call people to Jesus Christ, to call people to him, to uphold him. So we're not just about, it's not just about debating worldview.

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And we're not just engaging in intellectual exchange either. This is not an exchange of ideas equally valid, all in the same level. No. We're not here for interfaith dialogue. We're called to make disciples. It is a kind confrontation we are called to. And we need to make distinctions between saved and unsaved. We need to distinguish between believer and unbeliever. Why? So we can know the difference between those we need to evangelize and those we need to edify.

We evangelize the lost. That's really the first step in edifying anybody is to call them to Christ, to call them to faith in Christ. Once they've embraced the Gospel, well you know what? They're a new creation in Christ. All of a sudden, they have all the internal spiritual machinery to be able to receive what you're teaching them. They don't have that, no edification can happen, no further edification can happen.

We start with evangelism and once they've embraced the Gospel, then we keep on edifying those people to bring them to completion or into maturity in Christ. Colossians 1:28, "Him we proclaim, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all

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wisdom, that we may present every man complete or mature in Christ." So the task of evangelism requires us to make distinctions. It requires us to have discernment.

So that's all pretty basic, pretty foundational. I know you understand all that. But let's take this a step further. Just looking at our main text. You know, before we look at our main text, just take another look at 1 Peter 3:15. Peter says, "In your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy." "Honor Christ the Lord as holy." That's the ESV translation, which is a good translation. But let me just clarify the thought there by quoting from the NAS, the New American Standard Version. The NET says something similar. "Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts." The NET says, "Set Christ apart as Lord in your hearts." "Sanctify, set Christ apart as Lord in your hearts." That's the idea, to make him holy.

The idea of making something holy is to put it at the very center. When, yes, when God told the people of Israel, I want you to set apart the Sabbath day as holy, basically, there's all

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the other days of the week, the Sabbath day is not at the end. No, it's at the center. So clear away all other clutter, clear away all of your life responsibilities, all other money-making, all other buying and selling and trading and all other activities and sanctify or set apart the Sabbath day for it's holy unto me. We're to do that with Christ in our hearts.

As we engage in evangelism, as we engage in the task of defending the faith, we need to start with an attitude of submission to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. The Lordship of Christ, that's the starting point for all biblical evangelism and that's what 1 Peter 3:15 is referring to. In submission to Christ, we are responsible for sharing the Gospel he gave. We're responsible for sharing the Gospel that he gave in the way he prescribes us to give it, not in our own way. You don't get an "A" for effort for running a race if you run the wrong direction. You're no help in fighting the war if you don't fire your weapon, and if you don't fire it in the right direction, or if you don't fire it at the right time.

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In the same way, someone preaching an incomplete gospel or preaching an accurate gospel, but in a combative manner, that person can seriously undermine the cause. They can cause friendly fire. They can bring reproach on the Gospel, on the Lord Jesus Christ. What's worse is when someone thinks they've been saved by an incomplete or inaccurate gospel and they enter the church, they become a member, they start exercising influence. That's bad. That's why, like everything else in the Christian life, we need to do whatever the Lord prescribes in the way he prescribes it. We're not trying to win the approval of man. We're not trying to show people how culturally relevant we are, how openminded we are, how nice, how tolerant, that's not our aim. Pleasing the Lord Jesus Christ, that's our aim. That's our goal. Winning the argument is not even our aim. Pleasing Christ is our goal.

So the Lordship of Christ has to govern what we say to the unbeliever and also how we say it. The Lordship of Christ determines both the content of our proclamation and also the manner of our argumentation. Both are important. Evangelism, everything we say to an unbeliever has to run through the grid of this question: Is this faithful to Christ or not? Is the

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content of what I'm saying faithful to his Gospel in all its fullness or not? Is the way I'm saying this, the manner in which I'm saying this, the tone I'm expressing it, is it faithful to Christ or not? Set apart Christ in your heart as Lord. Fear him.

You know what the fear of the Lord does as we set him apart as Christ as Lord in our hearts, you know what the fear of the Lord does for us? It frees us from the fear of man. It makes us a bold and courageous witness for Jesus Christ. Also, it makes us winsome and gracious in the face of provocation. When people blow back at us, it's all right. We can handle it. We serve Christ. You're insulting, not me as ambassador, you're insulting the King. Yeek! I hate to be you on Judgment Day. You know, we teach about repentance because you're in trouble. I love you. I don't want you to face his wrath. It teaches us how to speak and what to say.

We, as we think about this, 1 Peter 3:15, we speak to the unbeliever with gentleness. We speak to him with respect because we want to maintain, before our Lord Jesus Christ, a good conscience, a clear conscience in how we speak. Because the

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Christ that holds us accountable for if we evangelize, he also holds us accountable for how we evangelize. We want to make sure that he is pleased. That's what's important.

So for this morning, you say, You know, how do I? How do I do that? I'm a little bit nervous now. You know I thought I was doing okay, but now I'm concerned. You know what? We're going to help with that by turning into our Bibles in Acts 17, Acts 17. Because we're going to look at a biblical illustration of someone who modeled faithful evangelism for us, the Apostle Paul. This is the Apostle Paul in his encounter with the Athenian philosophers on Mars Hill. Acts 17:16-34. We're going to cover part of this today, and then part of it next week, just hitting, hitting the high points. We can't go into great depth.

But for the Apostle Paul, the Lordship of Christ meant that he preached the Gospel in humility and boldness. He was bold with those people, but he was also humble and meek. Some people believe those two virtues cannot coexist. One who's humble won't be bold. One who's bold certainly can't be humble. That's not true at all. That is an error promoted by the modern-day

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tolerance movement. It's turned everybody into the niceness police.

That attitude gets into the church, as well. Some people think that the greatest commandment in all of Scripture is, Thou shall be nice. I have searched in vain to find that commandment in Scripture: Thou shall be nice. We are to be nice. We are to be kind. We are to be winsome. But eventually, we've got to tell people that they're sinners. They don't want to hear that. Eventually, we've got to tell people that they're an offense to a holy God. And they need to repent or face the judgment of eternal wrath in hell.

Folks, I don't care how you say that, it's not going to be perceived as nice. No matter how you say it. Say it with a smile on your face. It's not going to look nice. But Christians who refuse to say those hard things, they're not preaching the Gospel. They're not being helpful. They're not being faithful. They're denying the Lordship of Christ by spreading a partial Gospel. And not only do partial Gospels not save, they do further damage by inoculating sinners against the truth of the

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Gospel. They make people think they're saved when they're not. That's not helpful.

So we want to be winsome in the way we speak. We want to be pleasant and cordial, respectful, yeah, even nice. But the goal is faithfulness. The goal is faithfulness to our Lord. We need to preach the Gospel in a spirit of meekness, which means humble boldness. Now when we proclaim the Gospel in humility and with boldness, we honor the saving content of the Gospel, and we put the transforming power of the Gospel on display in our lives. We show them how we've been transformed by how we even speak and that pleases the Lord, that pleases Christ. It keeps us faithful to Peter's command to set apart Christ as Lord in our hearts whenever we give an answer.

That's not an easy task, especially in a hostile culture. Especially as we've been used to being able to be evangelicals freely. It's no problem to be evangelical. There's even some modicum of respect that people have and deference; yesterday, years ago, no more. We have to adjust to that. We have to

change. We have to change not because of the changing culture. We have to change and conform to what Scripture requires.

God has given us biblical examples to show us how to do this well, how to be wise. Paul's example, Acts 17:16-33, it's so helpful. And as we work through the text here, I want to expose the theology behind his evangelistic example, okay. I want to bring some of that to the surface. There are five principles we need to understand to follow Paul's model of faithful evangelism. We're going to cover three today and we're going to cover then two more next week. But here's the first principle: Faithful evangelism starts with the proper motivation. Faithful evangelism starts with the proper motivation.

Take a look there at Acts 17:16, "Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens." Stop there for a second. What's he doing in Athens? What's he waiting around for? Well, he'd just been unjustly imprisoned in Philippi, then released. But he was unjustly imprisoned in Acts 16 and he saw a great work of God happen there, but among a precious few believers, some women having a prayer meeting. Lydia and her people, they came to

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Christ and some others were saved, a Philippian jailer was saved. Others as well, they were brought into form the nucleus of that little church start-up.

And after that, he went to Thessalonica and he was run out of Thessalonica by the Jews, by the city authorities. And again, he'd seen, as Acts 17:4 says, "Some of the Jews were persuaded." And he saw a "great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women," they were saved. That's encouraging, to be at opposition though. Next, Paul fled to Berea, where he found more noble Jews, those who were willing to test his teaching against the Scripture. That's nobility for you. And as a result, Acts 17:12, "Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men."

Again, Christ-rejecting Jews hunted Paul down in Berea and they chased him out of Berea as well. But some of those new Berean brothers, brand new Christians, they escorted Paul to Athens. And that's where he waited for Silas and Timothy to join him. You might think that his recent experience have, experiences have prejudiced him against the Jewish people, have kind of

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caused him to more favor the Greeks. He watched more Gentiles respond to the Gospel than the Jews. So was God closing the door on the Jews? Were the pagans nobler than the Jews? Were they closer to the Gospel? Let's keep reading.

Look at verses 16-17, "Paul was waiting for them in Athens, his spirit was provoked," when, "within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. 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." Stop there. So after his experiences in Philippi, Thessalonica, then in Barea, you might think Paul would've abandoned the strategy of taking the Gospel first to the Jews and then to the Greeks, Romans 1:16. Paul doesn't do that. He doesn't abandon that strategy. He doesn't change his evangelistic strategy to get better results. God called him as an apostle to go the Jews first and then to the Greeks. It doesn't really matter what he sees on the surface. He keeps doing what he's supposed to be doing. Faithful to the Lord, you see. He stays the course. He first enters the synagogue.

As much, though, as he cares for his own people, the Jews, God has given this apostle love for all people, all people. In fact, he's become known as the apostle to the Gentiles. He left the confines of the synagogue to evangelize the lost in the marketplace, reasoning about the Gospel there every single day with whoever happened to be there. Most of the Jews hated him, wanted him dead. Most of the Gentiles considered his Gospel foolishness. They were inclined to be indifferent to him, just hear him as one part of the clutter, part of the white noise from the culture, even to turn hostile if they felt he was denigrating sacred traditions, he was affecting their bottom line.

So what kept him coming back? What kept him faithful to the task? What motivated him? It's that sharp little word in verse 16. It's the word, provoked, provoked. Paul's "spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols." Now the ancient city of Athens was the heart and soul of Greek culture, heart and soul. Athenian influence, it, it declined in Paul's day, in the Greco-Roman world because the Athenians, they had backed the wrong side in a recent civil war. So, was, the city was somewhat out of favor with the Empire, but Athens was

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still the cultural center of Greece. Athens was the connection that Greeks had to the ancient Greek heritage.

Its intellectual elite upheld the philosophical traditions of a more glorious past. Four major philosophical schools called Athens home. You had Plato's Academy, Aristotle's Lyceum, the Garden of Epicurus, and the Painted Porch of Zeno. So Zeno, Epicurus, Aristotle, Plato, all that influenced Athenian culture. And the philosophers considered themselves superior to all the masses because they were superstitious. They were pagan. They were idolaters. And these masses were extraordinarily idolatrous. Athens was full of idols. One ancient writer named Petronius said, Quote, "In Athens it was easier to find a god than a man." Idol on every corner. Kind of like us in our country, church on every corner. Athens, idol on every corner.

To the formal philosophical schools, to the idol-loving masses, you can add synagogue Jews, God-fearers, neo-Pythagoreans, all kinds of cults, Mithra cult, all this stuff. Athens was a scene of spiritual distraction. It was a scene of moral relativism. It was a scene of intellectual subjectivism. And all of that led

ultimately to skepticism, to agnosticism. And so many options to chose from you could pick whatever flavor of religion and philosophy you found appealing.

Not too dissimilar from our own country, is it? Same thing. Not unlike middle school, is it? High school? Not unlike university campuses. Not unlike all of our friends and neighbors. People we work with. Not unlike the people we do business with, the marketplaces we visit. They may not bow down to statues of gold and silver. They may not visit temples, make sacrifices like they do in the East. Make no mistake, their hearts are just as idolatrous. They bow to modern gods of progress, power, autonomous self-expressions, sexual freedom.

Notice Paul's internal reaction there in verse 16, because that gives us the insight we need to understand his motivation for evangelism. He was not indifferent to their idolatry. He wasn't a tourist snapping photos there in Athens. All the cool statues and religious artifacts, Hey, let me show my family. "His spirit was provoked within him as he saw the city full of idols." The word provoked, *paroxyno*, if you're familiar with the word

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paroxysm, which is like a spasm of violent emotion, it comes from that Greek word. Paul wasn't just a little irritated here. He's angry. He's angry! Their idolatry upset him. It disturbed him. It aggravated him. Why? Why couldn't Paul just have a little bit more tolerance? Why couldn't he just be understanding? Oh, that's their culture. That's their traditions. Why couldn't he just have like a libertarian Colorado live-and-let-live kind of an attitude, right? I mean, When in Rome..., right?

Paul couldn't do that. He couldn't do it. He's a Christian. He's a Christian. Paul was, first of all, zealous for God. He was zealous for God. His zeal for the glory of God provoked hatred for false worship. He couldn't stand to see people worshiping false gods. 1 Corinthians 10:20, "What pagans sacrifice to they offer to demons." He knew what was behind false worship. It's demonic. Their demons who are being celebrated and their doctrines are being celebrated and promoted. He couldn't rejoice in that. He couldn't be indifferent to that. Those spirits set themselves up as substitutes for the true God. He had a passion for God.

God is the only being that deserves all worship. And since he's the only being in the universe that deserves all worship, he's the only being that ought to receive all honor and glory and praise from men. So Athenian idolatry provoked him. And look, that's why in our evangelism, we can never sympathize with the rebellious sinner. Okay, we may empathize with sinners because we remember what it was like to be enslaved to sin.

We remember what it was like to worship idols. 1 Corinthians 12:2, Paul says that "You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to mute idols, however, you were led." Titus 3:3, "We ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another." "We all once lived in the passions of our flesh," Ephesians 2:3, "Carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, we were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind."

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Look, we get that. We understand. But we're not sympathetic to the mentality of sinners. We're not sympathetic in siding with them against God. We can never say, hey, I get it. I understand your anger against God for this reason or that reason or this trial or that trial. Your anger against God makes perfect sense. No, it doesn't. We can't say things like, Yeah, I don't understand why God allow evil either. No, we can't say, that's just something we take by faith. It doesn't make sense, but... We can't say that. We can't sympathize with rebellion.

You have to sympathize with God. All your sympathies need to be devoted to God and God alone. That's what it is to sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts. God and his interests are your interests. You sympathize with God and God alone. We may empathize with the lost condition of sinners because we were once sinners. We understand that. We understand the futility. We understand banging our head up against the truth. We understand how hard it is to suppress the truth in unrighteousness and hold it down. We understand the shame of a guilty conscience. We understand how it's destroyed our life; sin has destroyed us.

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But our sympathies are never with the devil, never with his people. Our sympathies are always for God. We are provoked at false religion. We're provoked by false philosophies. We're provoked by what they're teaching our children. It strikes out against our good and awesome God. And that's the first reason, because we love God. We're zealous for him.

But secondly, Paul was zealous for people. He was zealous for people. He was passionate for them. His zeal for the hearts of men provoked a sincere love for men's souls. He wanted to see them delivered from the darkness of sin and error, that they, too, might walk in the light of holiness and truth. Paul loved people. He was zealous for their repentance, to be delivered from the bondage of sin.

We know Paul's zeal for God's glory, his love for sinners motivated his evangelism because verse 17 says, "So he reasoned in the synagogue and in the marketplace." The word, so, is what we call an inferential conjunction, all right, inferential conjunction. It's often translated, therefore. Therefore, based

on the provocation within his spirit, as a direct result of his zeal for God and his love for sinners, Paul evangelized.

What did he say? Well his habit was to preach the Gospel from the Scriptures. He went right to the revealed word of God. Earlier in chapter 17, if you look back at verse 1 there, I'll show you what he said. "When they passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, 'This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.'"

Okay, so it was a full Gospel presentation. It wasn't slipping somebody a tract, hoping they get it. This was investment on his part. It was getting involved. And he didn't do it just once, as some kind of special outing, some kind of special event. This is a way of life for him. The imperfect tense of the verb, he reasoned, which is also translated, he disputed, he discussed,

but the imperfect tense of that verb indicates he was doing this continually, over and over and over again.

Evangelism is just Paul's way of life. It's just who he is. Why would he talk about anything different? This was no prepackaged Gospel presentation using cartoons and some Gospel-like tract. This was full on conversation, full on dialogue with people, interacting with their ideas. I hope this resonates with you, this internal motivation. I hope you get this. Faithful evangelism starts with the motivation of zeal for a holy God, whom we love, who saved us, who's given us truth and revelation, who's given us wisdom, Job 28, right?

Glorious God. We love him. We love these people. We look around at these people and they're just destroying their lives. They're walking off cliffs and they're breaking up into pieces at the rocks below. We watch young teenagers and twenty-somethings and they're just getting into sin and they're loving it, they're reveling. They're rejoicing in all their newfound freedoms. They get away from mom and dad and all the restrains and they just indulge. And it looks cool for a while, but then the thirties

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come along. And then the forties. And now they're left with a really broken life. And it hurts. It's painful. And it destroys the next generations of relationships. It kills people.

Look, we love God, and we love people. That's what drives us forward to preach the Gospel. The expressions of sinfulness and idolatry, they provoke us. We see God being denied. We see our fellow man being enslaved and deceived. That motivation drove Paul, drove him into conversations with unbelievers no matter who they were, no matter where they were. He wanted to see sinners saved, God glorified, so he reasoned, he dialogued, he confronted, he conversed with whoever the Spirit put in his path. He just started sharing the Gospel, spreading seed like a farmer, just spreading it out there. He was indiscriminate in scattering that seed of the Gospel. He threw it around everywhere. He reasoned with everyone. Whoever. It says there in verse 17, "With anyone who happened to be there." You know what, he trusted God. He knew God was sovereign over all this. So he just trusted God. He knew God would put the right people in his path. God and God alone initiates conversion. He uses an accurate Gospel as the means to effect salvation. So Paul just spoke it, let God take care of the rest.

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Look, as Christians, we need to hear that, don't we? We need to preach the Gospel to all people. It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter what their cultural background is. It doesn't matter what their ethnic or religious background, it doesn't matter their particular flavor of sin. It doesn't matter what circumstances or situation they're in. We don't hold onto prejudices. I'd like nothing more than to preach the Gospel to Caitlyn Jenner. I'd love to. I'd love to because that man is confused. And he's destroying himself.

No matter what a person looks like on the outside, that person may prove to be an eternal brother or sister for whom Christ died. Treat everyone, no matter what they look like, no matter how they present themselves, treat everyone with dignity and respect. Love them by sharing the Gospel, as Paul did. So we need to cultivate a zeal for the glory of God. We need to cultivate a love for lost people. We need to be bold and obedient to tell people the truth, that's the internal motivation, the first thing that we need to understand for faithful evangelism.

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Let's consider a second thing, a second thing: The impossible task. The impossible task. When you start sharing the Gospel with sinners, you know what, it draws interest, but it also draws fire. It brings conflict and you quickly become aware of the impossibility of the task, especially when you endeavor to be biblically accurate, theologically precise in sharing the Gospel. You know what? Anyone can preach and inaccurate, shallow, barebones message, gain followers. Anybody can build big numbers in a church, gain a following.

The real challenge, where you need to see evangelism as an impossible task, something only God can accomplish by his Spirit, the real challenge is in seeing the dead raised to life. That's what's going on in evangelism. That's something only God can do. We can't do it. Notice verse 18, Paul's preaching drew some attention, created some stir. "Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, 'What does this babbling wish to say?' Others said, 'He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities or deities—' because he's preaching Jesus and the resurrection."

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These Epicureans and Stoics are two opposite schools of thought, really, engaging Paul in conversation. Both of them dualist, philosophical dualist. They radically divided spirit and flesh. They believed that the spirit, the spiritual is pure good, the material is evil. So flesh is evil. Salvation from, salvation for them, they'd talk in terms of salvation, but salvation for them was to escape the flesh, to be absorbed in pure spirit. So Stoics thought while you're living on this earth and encased in flesh, your pure good inside of you is encased in evil. The Stoics said, deny fleshly impulses. Stifle. Live an ascetic lifestyle. Epicureans believed, ah, since the flesh doesn't matter anyway, indulge it. Who cares? Live however you want to. What do you think was more popular? Just like today, right?

Well, the philosophers from these two opposite schools of thought, they engaged Paul and immediately you can see their spiritual condition in what Luke describes here. These people were spiritually blind. They were spiritually proud, as well. Just like all the unbelieving people you're going to encounter; doesn't matter how many degrees they hold; doesn't matter how many letters behind their name; doesn't matter what job they

hold or don't hold, what path they're on, what, what they've experienced in life, apart from the regenerating grace of God, unbelievers are dead in trespasses and sins. Unbelievers are spiritually blind, and yet, at the same time, they're proud of it. They think they see clearly. They think they know and understand.

They think their own reason is a trustworthy and reliable guide. I'm going to listen to this voice and not that voice. I'm going to trust science and what I've been taught in school against what God reveals in the Bible. I don't know. I kind of met this one philosopher from the East. He was kind of a Buddha Hindu thing, Hindu thing and I'm just, I'm going to take a little bit of that and I'm going to mix it with a little bit of this and I've come up with a different thing." They trust that. They believe their judgment is impeccable. And their reason and logic is unassailable. Just like these guys.

Here's how they approached Paul, verse 18, "Some of the philosophers said, 'What does this babbling wish to say?'" Paul came preaching. He came preaching the objective, revealed truth

of God the Creator to these creatures and all they could hear was babbling. Clear evidence of blindness. The term translated babbling is literally seed-picker. To them Paul is just an idle babbler, a seed-picker, like a scavenging bird that indiscriminately picks up each and every seed off the street, eating it, digesting it and the digested mishmash that comes out is what Paul's saying. That's the result. It's kind of an insult.

So they hear him mixing truths together. They think they do. They think they've heard these things before, so they have no understanding and they've got a scoffing and mocking attitude. Not only that, but the others said, look there, "He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities. That's because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection." Why do they accuse Paul of preaching foreign divinities, plural? Jesus is God, yeah, but where's the other deity? The Greek word for resurrection is *anastasis*. So they thought Paul was introducing them to two gods: the male god, Jesus, and his female consort, Anastasis. Jesus and Anastasis like Apollo and Eros, like Aries and Aphrodite. They interpreted Paul's clear message through their own pluralistic idolatrous grid. Clueless.

It's an impossible task. How're you going to get through? How are you going to reason through that? Spiritually blind. You know at the same time they possessed a tremendous spiritual pride. You say, well it doesn't seem like that if you look in verse 19 and 20, it looks like they're kind of sincere seekers of the truth. They took Paul, brought him to the Areopagus, saying, 'May we know what this new teaching is that you're preaching that you're presenting. For you're bringing some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.'" I'll admit these guys appear humble. They seem sincere, but that's not their heart.

Deep down inside they are morally aggressively committed to their biases. They are committed to their presuppositions. They're committed to their own judgments, their own worldview. What you're seeing in verse 19 and 20, it's only a pretended neutrality, a pretended objectivity. As philosophers, and you understand philosophy, it's *philos*, love, *sophia*, wisdom, so it's the love of wisdom. They have love, really, human wisdom. And they seem like lovers of wisdom. They needed to appear unbiased. They needed to appear open-minded, objective,

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undecided, willing to consider all viewpoints. But guess who's still on the throne of their thinking? They are. They're going to be the arbiter between truth and falsehood, between truth and error, between what they'll accept and what they'll object to.

But apparent neutrality, objectivity, that's just apparent. It's really just a mask that covers over their, their commitment to their autonomy, their commitment to their moral rebellion against God, commitment to their spiritual pride. Luke has already revealed this. He's revealed their true heart attitude. They've already judged Paul's teaching, scorning him as a seed-picker, as a babblers. Even in what they say, "May we know, may we know." It sounds open-minded, but the verb they used indicates they're merely interested in scratching an intellectual itch. They, they just, they just want to satisfy a desire for intellectual stimulation.

That's what Luke says in verse 21, "Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing," that means they're not even working. "In nothing except telling or hearing something new." Boy, we get that,

don't we? We see people like that all through our culture. Their true motive is to satisfy their craving for news. This is talk radio before talk radio. This is CNN, Fox News, BBC, whatever your flavor. They were addicted to novelty, addicted to news, devoted to distraction. Just like our culture today. There's really nothing new under the sun, the heart is the same. We've just technology to enable us to do it better than they did.

Make no mistake, they were not open-minded seekers of the truth. Romans 3:11 says, "There's no one who seeks for God." These philosophers, they were committed to their thinking. They were committed to their idolatry, their self-worship, their independent thinking, self-centered autonomy, intellectual freedom. We face the same kind of sinners today, don't we? Our task of evangelism is as impossible as Paul's was. We want people converted who have no interest in being converted. They see no need. They're satisfied, they're dead to spiritual realities. Nothing compels them. They simply want to distract themselves with nothing new.

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But get this, the impossibility of raising a spiritually dead sinner to life, to new life, it didn't deter Paul for one moment. Why? Because he knew God has the power to raise the dead. God unleashes his power through the faithful proclamation of his word. Listen, it's because of the impossibility of the task when we know the utter deadness of the fallen human condition. When we give up trying to convert people by our cleverness, by our niceness, by our gimmicks, our enticements, we don't flatter rebellious sinners, we don't soft-pedal the hard truths of the Gospel, we don't hold back difficult things, waiting until they're attending our church regularly before we start to say the hard things; in kindness and love we confront them up front, don't we? We tell them the truth. And we trust an all-powerful God to send his Spirit to regenerate them to bring them to life. We tell the truth; God does the rest.

And not only does faithful evangelism involve the right motivation, not only do we need to be fully aware of the impossible challenge that we face in preaching the Gospel to dead sinners, third principle, just quickly. Third principle we need to understand about faithful evangelism: A gracious manner. A gracious manner. Short point. I just want you to see how

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honest Paul was in speaking to these arrogant self-satisfied philosophers, but he was also gracious. His introduction there in verses 22 to 23, this is what the late apologist Greg Bahnsen calls, "Humble boldness."

"Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said, 'Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. 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.'" When Paul stood to address the intellectual elite of Athens, and he said, "I perceive that in every way you are very religious," some people think he's commending them as religious, that he's complimenting them as fellow worshipers. Not quite. We already saw in verse 16 Paul's provoked by their idolatry, so he's, so we know he's not commending them. He's not giving them a compliment. He's not affirming great strides they've taken in philosophical thought, development, how they've done the best that they can with what they've seen around them.

But he is acknowledging that they worship. That's the common ground that he has with them. Both are fellow creatures. Both are designed to worship. So Paul calls these Epicureans, Stoic philosophers, all the Christ-rejecting Jews, all the fickle superstitious masses, all of them are designed by God, created by him with a heart to worship. You cannot find anybody who does not worship. Everyone worships something. It doesn't matter how emphatically someone declared himself to be an atheist, agnostic, secular, scientific, whatever, in the heart, every man, every woman, worshiper.

Paul says in Romans 1:21, "All men know God." All men have a sense of the divine inscribed on their hearts, imbedded on their minds. John Calvin called it the *Senses Divinitatis*. It's the sense of divinity that is resident within each one of us. God has created us all in his image after his image, after his pattern. And no one can escape that innate knowledge they have of God. It's one of the aspects of our creatureliness.

Our innate programming, it's, it's frustrated the modern thinker, the modern secularist, the atheist. There's a recent

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interview with author Wendy Thomas-Russell. She's author of the book, *Relax, It's Just God: How and Why to Talk to Your Kids About Religion When You're Not Religious*. Okay, so she's written a book to help you secular, atheistic parents to undo their sense of God. And she describes her perplexity in dealing with her daughter's sense of God. She said, "I was in the car and my daughter announced to me that God had made her, and that God had in fact made all children and all people. And I was so, you know, she was just so incredulous because she just thought, 'This seems like really big news. And how you don't know it, Mommy, is really beyond me.'" Out of the mouth of babes, right!

We are all born with that same sense. We naturally assume the existence of God our Creator and the atheists and the secularists who run our primary schools, our secondary schools, our colleges, our universities, they are constantly and continuously hammering their heads against that innate God-given sense within every single child, every single person. They try to undo it. We're going to one day face him, we know that. They battle to undo what God hardwired into our DNA. And again, it just demonstrates that willful commitment to sin, what Paul refers to in Romans 1:18, as suppressing the truth in

unrighteousness, denying what God did, what is true about God, what's revealed in nature, his eternal power, his divine nature.

And that denial leads directly and hastily, inevitably to idolatry. Romans 1:22-23, "Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds, animals and creeping things." Atheism, secularism the cult of scientific technological progress, those are simply the gods of the Modern Age; false god of human reason is an image resembling mortal man. Nothing new.

Paul's exposing the Athenian philosophers here to the fact that all are worshipers, all are creatures, created by God. That's the common ground that we share with unbelievers. But notice he's not neutral in acknowledging their worship. He's confronting their ignorance. He says, you Athenians are religious, yes, but you're confused. The multiplicity of idols shows you can't make up your mind. You cannot make your mind. You've even got a catch-all idol, a bucket idol for the unknown god. He's not affirming them as legitimately religious. He's

confronting them as sinfully idolatrous. He's just exposed their, their ignorance and he doesn't excuse it.

He is gentle about it. But he's also very clear to confront their spiritual ignorance to tell them that it's not okay. End of verse 23, look at it there. "What you therefore worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you." Basically he's saying, you've admitted, and you've demonstrated your ignorant. I agree. So let me inform you about the God you don't yet know. Here we go.

Again, don't miss, Paul's been very gracious in his manner. He's been very gentle. He's been respectful. He's been bold. He's also been meek and humble. He's, he's honored Christ as Lord in his heart. He's told the truth. He's confronted error. He hasn't flattered any of these guys affirming their religiosity. He's been bold in confronting it, clear in exposing it. At the same time, he's been gentle. He's entered into their thinking. He's not immersed himself in their false philosophies. He's not sympathized with their rebellion in one bit, but he has empathized for their condition. He gets it. He's entered into

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their thinking long enough to lead them out of it. You know what? That's our task, too. That's what we've got to do.

If we're going to be faithful in our evangelism, we have to start with proper motivation. We've got to see, long to see God glorified in the salvation of lost sinners. We want to long to see people abandon idolatry and sin and worship God and Christ. Driven by that motivation, we have to recognize our task is impossible. We've got no power. We don't rely on our cleverness, our personality, as charming as it may, development of relationship to win people over. These people are dead in their sins. They're spiritually ignorant. They're spiritually proud.

So we give up flattery. We don't hold back. We tell them the whole truth. We rely on God, rely on his Spirit to save. Because we rely wholly on God, our next concern is to be completely accurate with the Gospel, winsome and gentle in how we deliver it, but accurate in the Gospel. Pressure's off. Pressure is off. God is sovereign. We just need to tell the truth. All that in mind, none of what I've said matters if we don't get the Gospel right, right? That's what we'll get next time.

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Let's pray. Heavenly Father, thank you so much for giving us this amazing task of being your ambassadors, the ambassadors of Jesus Christ, to be his representatives here on earth, your representatives here on earth, to speak a saving Gospel to a lost people. We love you. And we want to see your name honored and glorified. We want to see it lifted up, exalted. We want to see people acknowledge you as mighty and holy, gracious and saving. So please give us the mentality we need, the right motivation, an understanding of the task we face, a commitment to be gracious, bold, humble. Help us to get the message right, too. Help us to take that into our week and our month and our year because we fear you. We set apart Christ as Lord in our hearts, wanting to bring him honor and glory. It's in his name we pray, Amen.