

## Confronting Idolatry

Lesson 9

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### DEVOTIONAL

The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things.

What is he saying here? First, that God is the Maker and not the one who was made. God was not created by man; He is the One who makes man and everything else that exists in all the universe. He is the originator of all things.

We have not moved very far from ancient idolatry. In the ancient world, they took a piece of gold or silver or wood and carved or formed an idol, thus worshipping the works of men's hands. Today we don't use images, but we still see men worshipping themselves, projected to infinite proportions. Man simply thinks of himself, projects this into infinity, and worships that. That is his god. That is exactly what idolatry did. Paul points out that this is not in line with reality. God is not the projection of man; God is greater than man. God originated man. Everything that exists came from his hands. He is the Maker, and not the made.

Second, God is the giver, and does not have any needs himself. God is not looking for anything from man, as idolatry and paganism taught. People had to bring gifts to the gods, they had to do things for their gods, to propitiate them and sacrifice to them, and bring them all kinds of things. People today are still doing the same. The gods of people today still make demands upon them. Do not think that we are free from idolatry, for if a god is that which is the most important thing in your life, that to which you give your time and effort and energy, that which occupies the primary place of importance to you, the thing you live for, then men have many gods even today. Money is a god for some. Fame is a god to others. Your children can be your gods. You yourself can be your own god; you can worship yourself. I am appalled at the number of people today who worship America and enthrone it as the highest value in life, the thing for which they would give their lives, the only thing worth living for. These are the false gods that people everywhere worship. They make continual demands upon us. They do nothing for us, but we must work for them.

Paul cancels all this out. He says the real God is one who gives, who pours out. He does not need anything from you. He does not live in temples made by man. I am sure he must have pointed to the Parthenon as he said that, for it was regarded as the home of Athena, the goddess for whom the city was named. God does not live in places like that, he said, but he is the one who made you and everything about you, and there is nothing you can give him that he needs. He is, rather, giving himself continually to you.

Father, I know how I have tried to satisfy the emptiness within with some lesser concept than you. I can never do so and am therefore rendered restless and unhappy, never finding what I am looking for. I pray that this great message may have its effect on me as it did on Athens, and that our darkened society will be set free from its bondage to materialism and made to be what you intended us to be.

Both the Berean and Thessalonian churches, then, have much to teach us—particularly in terms of how we should hear, consider, and obey God's Word. To visit Thessalonica, Paul and his mission team first travel about a hundred miles southwest from Philippi. Due to opposition, the mission in Thessalonica gets cut short, so the team travels onward about fifty miles west to Berea. Accounts of ministry in these two cities are brief. In fact, we find out much of what can be known about the church in Thessalonica from Paul's letters to them. Despite the brevity of the visits, however, helpful applications and needed inspiration for Scripture-saturated, Christ-exalting ministry exists within these passages.<sup>1</sup>

### LIFE APPLICATION

Are we willing to honestly evaluate and courageously confront, and name, our personal idols? Do we see our idols as affronts to the presence and power of Christ in us and through us? Are we sacrificing our time, our very lives, to those idols—lives purchased and legitimately owned by Christ who died for us?<sup>2</sup>

## OPEN IT

1. If someone were to make an inscription on your tombstone, what would it be? Why?

## READ IT

Acts 17: 16–34

## EXPLORE IT

2. Who was Paul waiting for in Athens?
3. What did Paul first notice upon arriving in Athens, and how did he respond?
4. What were the varied responses that Paul received from the Athenians?

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<sup>1</sup> Merida, Tony. *Exalting Jesus in Acts* (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary) (Kindle Locations 5206–5219). Holman Reference. Kindle Edition.  
<sup>2</sup> Devotional by Ray Stedman found @ <https://www.raystedman.org/daily-devotions/acts-13to28/confronting-idolatry> Daily Devotion © 2014 by Ray Stedman Ministries.

- 5. How did Paul describe the Athenians as he began speaking?**
  
  
  
  
  
- 6. What does Paul say God is commanding all people to do? Why must all people do this one thing?**

## APPLY IT

### BIG CITY LIGHTS

While Paul was waiting for them (Silas and Timothy) in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols (v. 16). The word translated “beholding” (NASB; ESV, “saw”) is the same word from which we derive theater. The apostle stared long and hard at what he saw, for the city was truly “full of idols.” Pausanius, who visited Athens fifty years later, said it was easier to meet a god or goddess on the main street of Athens than to meet a man. This was statistically true because the population was about 10,000, but there were 30,000 statues of gods. The streets lined with idols of false deities, framed by the architectural magnificence of the Parthenon and the Acropolis, were dazzling to the eye. No doubt Paul appreciated much of the city’s beauty, being a man of culture.<sup>3</sup>

- 7. While it is rare today to find our cities filled with statues of so-called deities, what things has our culture created to worship?**
  
  
  
  
  
- 8. Athens was the center of Greek mythology. Who were some of the Greek gods and goddesses of Paul’s day? What do these gods say about what was important to people then?**
  
  
  
  
  
- 9. Look back to question 7. What do our gods say about what is important to us today?**

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<sup>3</sup> Hughes, R. Kent. *Acts: The Church Afire* (Preaching the Word) (Kindle Locations 4268-4270). Crossway. Kindle Edition.

## ALL WOUND UP

Verse 16 says that Paul’s “spirit was provoked within him.” The word translated “provoked” is a strong one. From it, we derive the English word “paroxysm.” The Greek term “originally had medical associations and was used of a seizure or epileptic fit.... The verb is in the imperfect tense, which expresses not a sudden loss of temper but rather a continuous, settled reaction to what Paul saw.”

It carries the idea of being “greatly disturbed” and can even mean “to be irritated.” But we should not read this as Paul being rashly and disrespectfully irritable and angry. Rather, we should see it as Paul being moved to righteous jealousy for the glory of God. In fact, the word is used in the Septuagint in this very fashion. It is used of God who is a “jealous” God (Exodus 34:14).<sup>4</sup>

**10. What about Paul’s experience in Athens bothered him? Why should the same issues be bothersome to all Christians? What keeps Christians from being bothered by this today?**

**11. What social and spiritual things in our culture should “provoke” us? How does one keep from becoming arrogant or judgmental in a world that openly accepts and practices such things?**

Like an Old Testament prophet (1 Kings 17), Paul was zealous for God’s name. Often overlooked in this chapter is Paul’s tone and demeanor in Athens, which display compassion. Verse 17 says Paul “reasoned” with the people. Rather than allowing his feelings to lead him to angrily take a sledgehammer to the idols, he—in holy love—engaged the people, listened to and heard them, dialogued with and debated with them. That takes gentleness and compassion. And in the speech at the Areopagus, he also demonstrated respect for his audience (v. 22).

The lesson for Christians here involves the state of our hearts. If your life doesn’t reflect both sweetness and thunder, you will either be a coward or obnoxious when it comes to sharing your faith. Some people, for example, are good at the ministry of truth, but they are terrible at the ministry of tears (Keller, *A World of Idols*). They are good at telling people that they need to change, but they aren’t willing to connect with them and love them to Christ. As believers, we need both gentleness and boldness. No one displayed this combination approach to evangelism better than Jesus. He rebuked people boldly, but he was also gentle.<sup>5</sup>

**12. When it comes to engaging our present culture, which one comes more naturally to you—anger or empathy? How can this natural bent be of value? How can it be a detriment?**

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<sup>4</sup> Sermon from Doug Van Meter found @ <http://brackenhurstbaptist.co.za/sceptics-and-the-city/>

<sup>5</sup> Merida, Tony. *Exalting Jesus in Acts* (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary) (Kindle Locations 5489-5491). Holman Reference. Kindle Edition.

**13. As Paul began to speak, some of his listeners said that he brought “strange things to their ears.” What things about Christianity and the Gospel might be strange to the unbelieving world?**

**14. While the initial response from the Athenians was one of bewilderment, they still desired to hear more from Paul. What can we do to be more attractive and engaging even though the world sees our beliefs as odd or “out there”?**

## **DEAD POETS SOCIETY**

For centuries this small hill in Athens, called the Areopagus, had been the location for a court that heard criminal cases. In Paul's day it had become a center for the discussion of philosophical ideas among local and foreign experts in history, philosophy, and religion. This “thinkers’ club” had taken on the name of the hill, Mars Hill. Nothing got their intellectual juices flowing like a hot new idea.<sup>6</sup>

**15. Discussing the hot topics of the day was en vogue in ancient Athens. What things does our society like talking about, and how can we steer the conversations of our day in a spiritual direction?**

Paul’s message is a masterpiece of communication. He started where the people were by referring to their altar dedicated to an unknown god. Having aroused their interest, he then explained who that God is and what He is like. He concluded the message with a personal application that left each council member facing a moral decision, and some of them decided for Jesus Christ. Paul opened his address with a compliment: “I see that in every way you are very religious” (Acts 17: 22 NIV). They were so religious, in fact, that they even had an altar to “the unknown god,” lest some beneficent deity be neglected. If they did not know this god, how could they worship him? Or how could he help them? It was this God whom Paul declared.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Girard, Robert C. *The Book of Acts* (The Smart Guide to the Bible Series) (Kindle Locations 3787-3790). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

<sup>7</sup> Wiersbe, Warren W. *Be Daring* (Acts 13-28): *Put Your Faith Where the Action Is* (The BE Series Commentary) (p. 60). David C Cook. Kindle Edition.

- 16. The very thought of Athens' pluralism offended Paul greatly and yet he compliments their religious thinking. Why might this have been wise? How can this approach backfire?**

### MIC DROP

The nameless God of Athens had a name! Introducing him to the Athenian intellectuals, Paul called him by the Greek name Theos. The name rang a bell with his educated listeners, because it was the name the great Greek philosophers had used when writing about the supreme God in whose existence they believed.

Drawing his information from the Bible, Paul unmasked their “unknown” Theos-God with these facts:

- ❖ Theos-God made the world and everything in it (Acts 17:24; Genesis 1).
- ❖ Theos is Lord of heaven and earth, sky and land—too great to be confined to a man-made temple or altar (Acts 17:24; 1 Kings 8:27; Isaiah 66:1–2).
- ❖ Theos is not dependent on people to meet His needs or run His errands. Au contraire! People are dependent on Him for “life, breath, and all things” (Acts 17:25 NKJV).<sup>8</sup>

- 17. In verses 24–26 Paul declares that God is the Creator and Sustainer of everything in the world. Why is a clear understanding about who God is so foundational to any Gospel message?**

- ❖ Theos created all nationalities, beginning with one man (Acts 17:26; Genesis 1:27; 2:7). (Athenians believed they “sprang from the soil of their native [Greece],” and were superior to other races and nationalities. Paul punctures their balloon!)
- ❖ Theos planned specific times and places for people to live and created an inhabitable planet before putting them on it (Acts 17:26; Genesis 1:1–26).
- ❖ Theos provided everything needed for life and security so people could see what He’s done and reach out to Him (Acts 17:27). (If God remains “unknown,” it is because humans suppress the truth about Him visible in the created universe [Romans 1:18–23].) He wants people to know him. “He is not far from each one of us!” (Acts 17:27 NKJV).
- ❖ Theos doesn’t play hide-and-seek. In fact, we “can’t get away from him!”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Girard, Robert C. *The Book of Acts* (The Smart Guide to the Bible Series) (Kindle Locations 3830–3841). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

**18. How is God revealing Himself to the world? In what ways do people suppress these truths about God?**

- ❖ Theos originated humans. It makes no sense to think he could be a statue chiseled by a human sculptor from gold, silver, or stone (Acts 17:29; Isaiah 44:9–20)!
- ❖ Theos overlooked Athenian ignorance about him in the past, but no more! Now they must turn from unknowing and know God (Acts 17:30).
- ❖ Theos has set a time for the world to be judged (Acts 17:31; Psalms 9:8; 96: 13; Hebrews 9:27). The identity of the presiding judge has been revealed: He's the man God raised from the dead (Acts 17:31; John 5:25–27; Romans 1:4)! <sup>10</sup>

**19. What does it mean that God commands men everywhere to repent? What does our need to follow God's command to repent tell us about God and ourselves?**

Paul was a master communicator and yet the results were varied after he shared the gospel. While some mocked and others believed, it was the group in between that is most intriguing. They wanted to hear more.

**20. Within your sphere of influence, who is open to hearing more about Jesus? In what ways can you continue the conversation in light of Paul's example?**

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

**Note:** This study was compiled and questions were written by Pastor Tim Badal, Village Bible Church. [www.villagebible.church/smallgroups](http://www.villagebible.church/smallgroups)