

You Are Sent, Vol 3 | July 11
Allan Waruhiu, *Mercy Students Director*

ACTS 17:16 -34

MPS: **The Gospel meets us where we are, so let's reach people where they are.**

INTRODUCTION

Do you remember where you were-spiritually speaking- when the Lord opened your heart to the message of the Gospel? I remember I was in 11th grade and we had gone to this crusade, and the preacher preached through Matthew 7:21-23. I felt every single word in that passage cut deep into my heart because I had been a fan of Jesus, a lover of the things of the Lord, like gathering with the church, prayer, involved with my Christian club at school, but I was by no means a follower of Jesus. I had not surrendered to the Lord but glory hallelujah; Jesus saved me that day.

You see, the gospel message met me where I was, and the Lord opened my heart to the truth that life apart from him would lead to eternal separation from him. Where are you right now, spiritually speaking? Some of you are strong in the Lord, you have a testimony and a song. And yet there is someone in here who, is a fan of Jesus but not a devoted follower, another who is apathetic to the Gospel, and yet another who searching or even hostile to the Gospel. Here is

the thing, I believe that the Lord is able and willing to meet you where you are right now, and open your heart to the gospel message and make you a new creation.

Here at mercy, we keep the Gospel at the center of everything we do; throughout this series, we have been encouraged to go out and share the Gospel, start gospel conversations with our neighbors and friends. And I'm assuming you are eager to proclaim the Gospel, and you are excited that our Lord has invited you to his mission to redeem a people for his glory. As we take up this commission, we need to remember where the Gospel met us, so we can be able to reach people where they are.

So how do we share the Gospel in a compelling, persuasive, and understandable way with people from different spiritual backgrounds? How do we meet people where they are? For example, do you share the Gospel with the family that just moved into your neighborhood from east Asia who has never heard of Jesus, the same way you share the Gospel with a friend who thinks he is a Christian because he attends church service every Sunday? The East Asia family may not have the bible background your friend does. They may not know the bible stories; they may never have been to bible drills.

To see a gospel awakening in the city of Charlotte that is carried out to the ends of the earth, our message of the Gospel has to be clear and biblical, but we also have to be versatile in the way we deliver this good news. Today we will learn from Apostle Paul how to be ready in season and out of season to share the Gospel with those familiar with the Christian faith, those searching, and those who are hostile to the Gospel in our city.

We will be in Acts 17:16-34. In this passage, we will see how Paul shared the Gospel without compromise. How he proclaimed, Jesus was the Messiah to the Jews in the synagogue and gentiles in the marketplace. And how he challenged scholarly skeptics who thought the Gospel was foolishness. Paul communicated the same good old gospel message, but he contextualized his delivery. Our main idea today is

The Gospel meets us where we are, so let's reach people where they are.

Now I know I've said Gospel like 20 times, and if this is not a familiar term to you, the Gospel is the good news that God, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, has offered

reconciliation to all men who will repent and believe in Jesus alone.

THROUGH THE TEXT - ACTS 17: 16 -34

CONTEXT

To give you a little bit of context here, Paul was sent by the church in Berea to Athens to save him from the Jews who had followed him from Thessalonica. He was most likely sent to Athens to rest, this was meant to be a vacation for Paul, but Paul being Paul. He took the Gospel with him and was not afraid to share it. He was always ready in season and out of season.

¹⁶ While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed when he saw that the city was full of idols.

Right on the onset, we see two things, what **Paul saw** and what **Paul felt**.

It says in our text that **Paul saw a city full of idols**. According to historians, the city of Athens had a "population of about 10,000, but there were 30,000 statues of gods. The streets were lined with idols of false deities." Upon seeing this, Paul became deeply distressed. He felt concerned when he saw the degree of spiritual emptiness in the city of Athens. This word distressed can be translated to mean being carried away in anger or

provoked. This is a kind of anger that is mingled with love.

One commentator says it this way, Paul experienced a mixture of righteous indignation for the name of God and brokenhearted compassion for the people who worshiped false gods. Paul knew by heart Deuteronomy 6:4-5, "Listen, Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. "

The first thing we see here is the reason **WHY** Paul shared the Gospel. Paul could not stand to see God not rightly worshipped. Another reason is he could not stand to see people made in the image of God, to glorify God and find their identity and purpose in Him give themselves to worshiping false idols.

It's easy to look at our city and just see a growing city full of opportunity and potential, the banking capital, and a great American city. It's easy not to see the idols in our city because we do not have 30k physical idols on the streets like Athens did. But **an idol is anything that we put ahead of or in place of God**. Idols range from **the things we daydream** about, such as wealth, fame, or approval of others. **What we pay most of our attention to** while neglecting our walk with the Lord, **the things we spend money** on, or **the**

things we get into debt because of. Our relationships can be idols, our desires, what we fear losing; all these could be idols.

Like Paul, we need to be provoked when we see people around us consumed by things and activity that does not have eternal value and cannot give them satisfaction. We ought to be provoked when those around us choose to worship the many idols of modern-day culture and not worship the true and living God. But being provoked is not enough. We need to have compassion for people who are walking around blind to the truth of who God is. We need to be awake to the reality that the souls of men and women are at stake. Paul was driven by this reality.

He had such compassion for lost people to receive the Gospel that in Romans 9:3, he says, "For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from the Messiah for the benefit of my brothers. Paul is teaching us to

Proclaim the Gospel out of a Love for the Glory of God and a Compassion for All People

If our love for God and compassion for people is not our motivation for gospel proclamation, we will have a savior mentality. We might end up thinking we are the ones saving people, or we will

look down on people and forget we were at some point as they are, death in our trespasses and sins. To meet people where they are, we have to proclaim this message for the Gospel out of love for the glory of God and compassion for all people.

Now that we have laid a foundation let's look at our text to see **How Paul reaches the Athenians where they are with the Gospel.** Look with me at verse 17

17 So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with those who worshiped God, as well as in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.

It was customary for Paul to first proclaim the Gospel in the synagogue. The Jews knew God from the Old Testament; they knew of the prophecies of the coming Messiah, they were at this point slaves to the law, and so Paul's pattern was to reason with them, explaining and proving that the Messiah needed to suffer and rise from the dead. While reaching people familiar with God's law, Paul's approach was to reach them where they were and point them to Jesus. I can hear Paul telling them that Jesus was the offspring who would crush the serpent in Genesis 3, the son of man in Daniel 7, the forever King better than David, a better prophet than Moses,

the one who would keep all the law and salvation was through him and him alone.

This should be our approach when reaching people who know about God but do not know God. The person who will come to church on Easter, Christmas, and every other Sunday but is yet to give their lives to Christ needs to see the necessity of salvation from the bible. It is very tempting to find all kinds of entertaining and safe ways to persuade people to respond to the Gospel. Listen, if your friend is a cultural Christian, meet them where they are and introduce them to Jesus using the Scripture.

Paul doesn't stop at the synagogue though, he is on a mission to meet people where they are, so he also reasoned with those at the marketplace, and it doesn't say; he did this in one afternoon, or one morning, or one day; the text says he reasoned with those at the marketplace every day. And this being the land of Socrates, you can best believe that Paul had to answer a whole lot of questions about this new teaching. But he was patient and bold as he persuaded them with the truth that Jesus is the Messiah.

This leads us to a second observation.

Proclaiming the Gospel will require us to be Bold and Patient.

Our Lord Jesus in Matthew 28 gave us the Great Commission to go and make disciples, baptize and teach them his word, the Apostle Paul in Romans 14 asks, how can they hear without a preacher? You see this message; the good news, that God has provided salvation to a rebellious people requires those who have received it to communicate it. But proclaiming it requires boldness and patience. Paul had to have been bold to step into the Jewish synagogue and try to persuade them that they did not have to wait for the Messiah anymore because Jesus was the Messiah.

It took boldness and patience to keep going back to the marketplace to share the Gospel with God-fearing gentiles. And it will take boldness and patience for us to do the same in our city and beyond.

Now I am not suggesting that we need to get in a huddle and motivate ourselves to be bold. You know, like those motivational speeches "say I'm bold three times, say I'm bold to your neighbor, tell your neighbor to be bold, now walk in your boldness and step on these hot coals" NO NO, we

need to pray for ourselves and each other that the Lord would give us boldness.

Paul, writing to the church in Ephesus, pleads with them to pray for him for the sake of the Gospel, he tells them. "¹⁹ Pray also for me, that the message may be given to me when I open my mouth to make known with boldness the mystery of the Gospel. ²⁰ For this, I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I might be bold enough to speak about it as I should.¹ To effectively reach people where they are, we will need boldness and patience. let's continue on to verse 18,

¹⁸ Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also debated with him. Some said, "What is this ignorant show-off trying to say?"

Others replied, "He seems to be a preacher of foreign deities"—because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.

Epicureans were practical materialists. They believed that pleasure was the chief end of human existence., they believed the gods were not involved in human affairs, and there was no afterlife or judgment – Does that sound familiar? – you do you, you only live ones, do thou wilt-

¹ [Christian Standard Bible](#). (2020). (Eph 6:19–20). Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers.

Stoics, on the other hand, were pantheists, believing God was the soul of the universe. To them, God was in everything/everything was God. This sounds familiar, right – all roads lead to God, coexist, and so on?

Now, these guys were not very nice to Paul. They called him an ignorant show-off. Literary what they called him is a "seed-picker"—a bird that goes about picking up scraps in gutters.² This group of philosophers valued a coherent presentation of a worldview. And so, to them, Paul's thoughts were not flowing or making sense.

They did not have a category for what Paul was talking about. – indeed ".to those who are perishing the message of the cross is foolishness, but to us who are being saved, it is God's power. (1 Corinthians 1:18)

Our world is plagued with the same kind of dismissiveness towards God and the Gospel as it was in Athens. Some believe Christians are deluded and silly for believing the Gospel. Maybe you are here today because a friend invited you and you didn't want to be rude, or you are here with your family. But if you were, to be honest, you think this Christianity business is all

² The Navigators. (2012). [LifeChange: Acts](#). (K. Lee-Thorp, Ed.) (p. 148). Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress.

foolishness, you don't believe it's true, and you don't think it's good. Please do not reject Christianity before you have examined it, lean in and hear as Paul reaches the Athenian professors where they were with the truth of the Gospel.

Look with me at verse 19.

19 They took him and brought him to the Areopagus and said, "May we learn about this new teaching you are presenting?" **20** Because what you say sounds strange to us, and we want to know what these things mean." **21** Now, all the Athenians and the foreigners residing there spent their time on nothing else but telling or hearing something new.

I can almost imagine Paul saying to himself, "I'm about to change up the game" Remember, at the synagogue, Paul met the Jews where they were by reasoning with them and proving to them that Jesus was the promised Messiah. These philosophers were not familiar with the Old Testament, so Paul changes his approach to meet them where they are. He used something in their own context to Proclaim the truth about God and their need for salvation through Jesus.

Look with me at verses 22-23

22 Paul stood in the middle of the Areopagus and said, "People of Athens! I see that you are extremely religious in every respect. **23** For as I was passing through and observing the objects of your worship, I even found an altar on which was inscribed, 'To the Unknown God.' Therefore, what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you.

You are familiar with the constructive criticism sandwich. This is where you sandwich your criticism between two compliments; Paul is doing the same thing.

He starts by letting the Athenians know that he has noticed their religious devotion, however misplaced it is, and by the end of his speech, he will give them the good news of eternal Life in Jesus. But in between those two points, he critiques their worldview, proving that even though they were intellectually competent, they were religiously foolish. We can make our last observation here

Proclaiming the Gospel will require us to contextualize the message.

Paul established common ground with the Athenians. First, he says he had spent time walking around their city. I can almost see them leaning in to hear what Paul thought of their city.

Paul gives them a compliment; he doesn't scold them for worshipping idols; he compliments their devotion and then to draw them even more, he singles out one object of their worship, now they are hooked, and Paul is about to give them the business.

Paul is not giving them a way out. He is not affirming their idols. He is, recognizing that their idol worship points to their greater need to be in a relationship with their creator, and he is on a mission to show them the rightful God who deserves their worship. Paul does not start with do you know Jesus? have you read the bible? Do you go to church? This is a different crowd, So he meets them where they are. They have a god they do not know, and Paul knows this God, so using his Christian worldview, Paul introduces the Athenians to God. Let's go through verses 24-31 to hear who God is

24 The God who made the world and everything in it—he is Lord of heaven and earth—does not live in shrines made by hands. **25** Neither is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything since he himself gives everyone life and breath and all things.

According to Paul - **God is the creator and sustainer of life.** Not only that, God does not need anything. He is self-sufficient in himself.

Paul is saying to the Athenians, Ever wonder where the trees, the mountains, the oceans, the planets all come from? They were all made by God. The heavens declare the glory of our Lord, and the skies proclaim the works of his hands. Listen, the order, complexity, and beautiful design we all see is as a result of an all-powerful creator and sustainer of life. Paul goes on

26 From one man, he has made every nationality to live over the whole earth and has determined their appointed times and the boundaries of where they live.

According to Paul - **God made man in his image and is Lord over history and geographical placement.**

Paul says, listen, Athenians, listen, Charlotteian, you are not a product of random, impersonal evolutionary processes. God purposefully created you in His image, meaning you have intrinsic value. Paul leaves no room for ethnic dominance either. He places all humankind on the same level, acknowledging their singular origin from one man Adam.

Not only did God create humanity, but he is also Lord over human history and geographical placement. It's not by mistake that you were born where you were born or live where you live. God

determined that. It's not by mistake that you are here right now. The providence of God guided you to this very moment. – Paul goes on

27 He did this so that they might seek God, and perhaps they might reach out and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. **28** For in him we live and move and have our being, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also his offspring.' **29** Since, then, we are God's offspring, we shouldn't think that the divine nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image fashioned by human art and imagination.

According to Paul - **God is a knowable father.**

Paul is still building bridges; he quotes two of their poets to emphasize that God is a knowable father. God did not make the world and then left the scene, never to be seen again; no, he is a present knowable father. Not only that, he has being. If humanity gets its being from God, then there is no way God can be a statue made of human hands. God has revealed his existence through nature, through his word, and through the Person of Jesus Christ who became God with us; John 1 tells us **14** The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. We observed his glory, the glory

as the one and only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.³

Now, as Christians, we know that he is more than our creator father. He is our heavenly Father who adopted us as his children through the finished works of Christ. – Look at verses 30-31

³⁰ "Therefore, having overlooked the times of ignorance, God now commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has set a day when he is going to judge the world in righteousness by the man he has appointed. He has provided proof of this to everyone by raising Him from the dead." According to Paul - **God is a Merciful Judge**

Paul lets the Athenians know that the living God will not overlook their worship of idols; he is the only one who should be worshiped, he is the rightful Judge of the world, and He has appointed a day when he will pass judgment on the world. Paul lets them know they are in a state of war with God because they have elevated themselves to the point of creating gods in their own image. They thought they were in charge and they could

live outside the commands of the Lord. They stood condemned.

But Paul doesn't give them just the bad news; he also gives them the good news. He says there is hope for those who will stop worshiping idols, those who will repent and believe in Jesus. This Jesus was fully man and fully God. He lived a sinless life, mocked, beaten, and crucified on behalf of humanity, but was raised up from the grave and is now seated on the right hand of God with all power and authority.

You see, from Adam we inherited sin, but from Jesus we get redemption
From Adam, we inherited separation, but from Jesus, we get adoption
From Adam, we inherited death, but from Jesus, we get resurrection
And we know this because Jesus himself resurrected, it's not a story it's a historical reality according to 1 Corinthians 15, the resurrected Jesus was seen by over 500 people, He is alive, he rose from the grave, and that is the basis of our faith and hope

³ [Christian Standard Bible](#). (2020). (Jn 1:14). Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers.

³² When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some began to ridicule him, but others said, "We'd like to hear from you again about this."
³³ So Paul left their presence. ³⁴ However, some people joined him and believed, including Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them. ⁴

Brothers and sisters, when we proclaim the Gospel, we should expect this same response. Some will ridicule, some will be reluctant, and yet some will receive this message, repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Ours is to be faithful to the Lord and proclaim the Gospel.

As we conclude, I would like to give you some handles on how to meet people where they are because Christ met us where we were. Now, these are not exhaustive, but they are a good start.

Pray for Unbelievers

Prayer is our best tool for evangelism. This week at staff prayer Sarah led us to pray for the Indian community in Charlotte, when was the last time you prayed with a holy expectation that the Lord would save the unbelievers at your work, school, neighbourhood. I challenge you to earnestly pray

and see the Lord soften the hearts of unbelievers close to you to hear the Gospel.

Build Bridges

What if we used the many connections we have with people for the sake of the Gospel. We need to leverage our points of contact with unbelievers to reach them where they are. They are not in your life by mistake. Did you know research shows that most people are open to attending a church gathering or bible study if asked? How about, while watching the NBA finals with a lost friend, you just said, hey, want to come to church with me this Sunday? Want to read the Gospel of John? How can I be praying for you?

Understand the Culture

Get to know what people around you value and treasure and point them to how Jesus can eternally satisfy them than whatever it is they are chasing. (you can start by reading Counterfeit Gods by Timothy Keller) Also, talk to the unbelievers around you to find out what they value, meet them where they are, build those relationships with the Gospel in mind. The best

⁴ [Christian Standard Bible](#). (2020). (Ac 17:16–34). Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers.

way to understand culture is to engage in conversation with people.

Engage the Culture

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we cannot afford to retreat and let the skeptical intellectuals who reject the truth, the existence of God, the meaning of life, and humanity's need for salvation be the only voice in the culture. We, like Paul, have to engage with those who would think us foolish with humility, boldness, and intelligence. Armed with the truth of our faith, engage the culture. We need to be bold and bring our convictions to the marketplace.

The Gospel meets us where we are, so let's reach people where they are.

Paul was on a mission to persecute Christians when the Gospel met him, and he went all over the Roman empire, reaching people where they were with the Gospel. We have the same opportunity in our city. Now, if you have never given your Life to God, the Living God is a merciful Judge. He has provided a way for you to be reconciled to him. Recognize the sinful state that has separated you from God, turn from sin and believe in Jesus for your salvation.