

## Paul

Series: Heroes: Amazing Stories of Faith

Acts 17:16-34

September 24, 2017

Welcome again to worship. I'm so glad you are here, especially after all the activities in town this weekend. And I checked the news; the apocalypse did not occur yesterday. We were not left behind.

Some of us love to take the simple and make it complex. Some of us thrive on taking perfectly obvious matters and making them as obscure as possible. A pastor wrote that his neighbor's car had a bumper sticker that said, "Eschew obfuscation". After about a half-hour with the dictionary, the pastor found out what it meant: "Keep it simple, stupid."

That's what I want to do today as we talk about this week's Heroes and their amazing stories of faith. I invite you to turn to page 6 in your bulletin so that you can take some notes.

So far in our series, we have talked about:

- David and how he depended on God and his past.
- Hannah and how she depended on God and the power of prayer.
- Today, we are going to talk about Paul and how he depended on God and the power of the Gospel.

### PAUL BACKGROUND AND PRACTICE

Eventually, Paul arrives in the city of Athens, once the capital of the Greek empire of Alexander the Great, and still a very important cultural center within the Roman Empire. In Acts 17 we are told what Paul did during his single trip to this famous city. He came up from the sea by the new road (North of the ancient) along which were altars and temples, entered the city from the West, and passed by the Ceramicus (burial-ground), which can be seen to this day, the "Theseum," the best preserved of all Greek temples, and on to the Agora (Market-Place), just North of the Acropolis, a steep hill, 200 ft. high, in the center of the city. Next was the magnificent gateway (Propylaea), of which the Athenians were justly proud of. A monumental bronze statue by Phidias stood on the left, as one emerged on the plateau, and the mighty Parthenon a little further on, to the right. In this temple was the famous gold and ivory statue of Athena. The eastern pediment contained sculptures representing the birth of the goddess (which is now in the British Museum); the western depicting her contest with Poseidon for supremacy over Attica.<sup>1</sup> Needless to say, it was, as it is today, a very impressive city.

Let's look at Acts 17:16:

*While Paul was waiting for [Silas and Timothy] in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.<sup>2</sup>*

Write this down: When Paul arrives in Athens, he is distressed by the lack of worship of God.

Paul had always been one who jealously worshipped God, and to see such idolatry all around him, he was appalled. Athens was a city of many gods. It was said

---

<sup>1</sup> The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Athens

<sup>2</sup> Acts 17:16 (NIV)

that there were more statues of the gods in Athens than in all the rest of Greece put together, and that in Athens, it was easier to meet a god than a man.<sup>3</sup>

Let me ask you something: are you still appalled by the sin so unashamedly paraded around society and media today? Are you aghast at the immorality on your television and in the news? Or have you become numb to it all, and resigned yourself to the idea, “Well, that’s just the way it is anymore”? Has the sin of adultery or false testimony become less offensive to God today than it was at the giving of the Ten Commandments? Is the worship of idols considered “no biggie” anymore (and don’t think there isn’t idol worship today)? Is lust or greed or stealing so a part of the world today that it’s become accepted?

And this leads me to another observation in verse 17:

*So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there.*<sup>4</sup>

“So he reasoned.” The Greek words mean, “Accordingly therefore, with his spirit stirred by the proof of idolatry.”<sup>5</sup>

He first went to the synagogue, which was his usual practice. There he would always find people, like him, who studied the Scriptures and who believed in the Law of Moses. And here is our second observation: I believe Paul is distressed by the lack of witness for God. He’s saying, “Why aren’t you God-fearing Jews and Greeks doing something, saying something, about the sin that is so rampant within your city?”

My friends, I believe the Church is the greatest force for good in the world, period. Not social programs, not education, the Church. I saw an article reporting that the Church was faster and more effective in these early stages of the devastation of Hurricanes Harvey and Maria than FEMA or any other government agency solely devoted to disaster relief. The Church is the greatest force for good in the world, and if the church stops witnessing for the Lord, the world is doomed.

God is a loving God, but God is also a just God. He hates sin today just as much as when it was first committed in the Garden of Eden. And if the church stops pointing out what is wrong with the actions of humanity, what standard will be left? If we no longer point out what is and isn’t sin, we have lost part of our witness.

There are those who would say, “You can’t judge.” I’m sorry, but that is snowflake mentality. If we do not say, “This is right and this is wrong,” then nothing is wrong. If we don’t say child abuse or the sex trade is wrong, then it will become accepted. If we don’t say drunk driving is wrong, then drunk drivers will rule the streets and kill innocent people. Failing to judge abdicates our responsibility, just as the Jews and God-fearing Greeks in Athens. Failing to stand up for what is right results in a North Korea or high-paid athletes who dishonor the National Anthem or Hollywood and its dissemination of smut.

The Church must stand up, in love, and say:

- Child football or soccer games on Sunday morning are wrong.
- Drug and alcohol abuse is wrong.
- Exploitation of children is wrong.
- Neglect of widows and orphans is wrong.

---

<sup>3</sup> Barclay’s Daily Study Bible (NT), Acts 17:16-21

<sup>4</sup> Acts 17:17 (NIV)

<sup>5</sup> Word Pictures in the New Testament, Acts 17:17

- Sex outside of marriage is wrong.
- Worshipping anything, be it sport athlete or musician or money or power; worshipping anything other than God is wrong.
- And failing to say something about sin is wrong.

The Scripture indicates that eventually, Paul makes his way to the center of the philosophical world, to the Acropolis, also called Mars Hill. Here Socrates, Plato, Zeno and other philosophers and rhetoricians had stood and spoken. Paul joins their ranks to make his argument for Christianity, and we see him use 3 keys to effective witness.

**First, Observe the people.** Verse 22:

*“Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious.”<sup>6</sup>*

Paul did not begin by reciting Jewish history, as he usually did, for this would have been meaningless to his Greek audience. He began by building a case for the one true God, using examples they understood. And to do that, he observed.

Sometimes, we can get used to what is all around us until someone new points it out to us.

LAMAR SIZEMORE AT BREAKFAST.

As Christian witnesses, we can point out to others what they have become used to. Look around, observe, see where a person is hurting or missing out on the blessing of the truth and presence of God.

**Second, Explain what is clearly in front of them.** The first part of verse 23:

*For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.”<sup>7</sup>*

The Athenians had built an idol to the unknown god for fear of missing blessings or receiving punishment. Paul’s opening statement to the men of Athens was about their unknown god. Paul was not endorsing this god but using the inscription as a point of entry for his witness to the one true God.

He said, “Look, you’ve got so many gods in your town that you have created an altar for any one you might have missed. Well, let me tell you about that one.” And that brings us to our third point.

**Share the Truth.** The rest of verse 23:

*“Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.”<sup>8</sup>*

Paul moved his message to the person of Christ, centering on the Resurrection. Look at verse 18:

*A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, “What is this babbler trying to say?” Others remarked, “He seems to be advocating foreign gods.” They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.<sup>9</sup>*

COMMENT

Paul explained this one true God to these educated men of Athens; although these men were, in general, very religious, they did not know God. Today we have a “Christian” society, but to most people, God is still unknown. We need to proclaim who He is and make clear what He did for everyone through His Son, Jesus Christ. We

---

<sup>6</sup> Acts 17:22, NIV

<sup>7</sup> Acts 17:23a, NIV

<sup>8</sup> Acts 17:23b, NIV

<sup>9</sup> Acts 17:18 (NIV)

cannot assume that even religious people around us truly know Jesus or understand the importance of faith in Him.<sup>10</sup>

When you witness to others, you can follow Paul's approach: Observe, point out what is right in front of them, then share the truth to move people toward a decision about Jesus Christ.

Every single one of us are responsible for sharing with others about the good news of Jesus Christ. We are not to shirk our duty as the Jews did in Athens.

But you say, "How do I do that, Gary?" Let me suggest a few things.

When you invite someone to church, the invitation should be about a genuine connection and not staged. It comes across as a genuine connection and not something staged that comes out of left field. I might say, for instance, "I have an extra ticket to hear that new group you like on Friday at 7. I would love for you to come with me." The connection is authentic because they have an interest in the group. If we translate this to inviting someone to church, then we share with them how the sermon series may be helpful to them, or the new GriefShare ministry will help them, or that we have such a wonderful fellowship and terrific people you'd love to meet. The point is the invitation comes across as thoughtful and something that connects with the other person.

Next, be specific. Often, when we do invite, our invitations are very general. If I say to someone, "come to dinner at my house on Sunday," it leaves out important information, like the time of dinner and where I live. A better dinner invitation is "come over at 5 p.m. on Sunday and my address is 46 Hickory Pointe Dr., which I will text you so you can Google directions." The same principle applies to church. Simply saying, "Why don't you come to my church on Sunday," is not as specific as "I would love for you to come to Germantown United Methodist Church at \_\_\_\_\_. Our address is 525 Farmersville Pike, and I will meet you in the parking lot." Be specific!

Third, be honest about what we know and do not know. Another reason many of us do not invite is that we are afraid someone may ask us questions to which we do not know the answer, such as, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" It is okay if we do not have all the answers. In many cases others are relieved that we do not know everything. This communicates to others that you are not trying to sell them a bill of goods. We all have been in situations where a salesperson was willing to tell us anything to get us to buy the product. Imagine a salesperson saying you need this vacuum cleaner (that works well on shag carpet) when they know you only have hardwood floors. This would leave a bad taste in your mouth. Honesty goes a long way and individuals respect those who are upfront with them.

Finally, it is important to invite with expectant hope. Do not invite with a defeatist attitude. There are times when we so underplay the invitation, it comes across as if we really do not want the other person to come. For instance, a friend saying, "My family reunion is on Saturday. It probably won't be fun, but you might want to come if you have absolutely nothing else to do." This is not a compelling invite! But it's equally important not to go to the opposite extreme and be overly effusive. The goal is an invitation that leaves space for others to say yes without painting an overly negative or rosy picture.

Inviting others to anything is a scary proposition. This is especially true for church because of the personal nature of faith. I believe it is helpful to make a genuine connection, be specific, be honest and avoid shading the picture too bleakly or too

---

<sup>10</sup> Life Application Study Bible, Acts 17:23

rosily. Ultimately, we are inviting others to experience a transforming relationship with God.