

## **Acts 17:16-34 (1984 NIV)**

### ***The Outreach Mindset***

#### **Introduction**

A leading philosopher came to town to give a lecture on the meaning of existence. After his talk and during the Q & A time, a man rose and asked, "You have talked so much about existence. Can you prove to me that you really exist?"

The philosopher was perturbed not so much by the question, but by the attitude of the man who asked it. He said to himself, "Well, here's someone trying to pick me for a verbal fight."

After a pause, the philosopher looked at the man and asked, "Excuse me, are you talking to me?"

The man replied in a loud and aggressive voice, "Yes, I am talking to you. Prove to me that you are real; that you really exist."

The philosopher asked again, "Are you sure you are talking to me?"

The man replied even more loudly and agitatedly, "Yes, I am talking to you. Now, don't try to waste time. Prove to me that you exist."

Slowly and calmly, the philosopher responded, "Sir, the fact that you are so sure you are talking to me proves that as far as you are concerned, I already exist. If I do not exist, then you are not talking to me, but to nothingness. Sir, if you can talk so loudly to nothingness and before so many people here, I am very worried for you. You may have a very serious problem ... you know what I mean?"

The man thought hard over what he heard, and decided that he wanted to show others he had no serious problem. He then replied, "Okay, you exist. Thank you."

My point is this: Our acceptance of an idea does not necessarily mean we agree with it. Sometimes, our acceptance is because we don't want to look silly or ignorant before others. Thus, it is not a position of conviction but of compromise on our part.

Acts 17:16-34 is about Paul's encounter with the best intellectuals of his time—the Greek philosophers in Athens. As he witnessed the gospel to them, he did not compromise on the essential gospel truth. Rather, he worked at moving the Athenians from where they were to somewhere closer to the gospel.

Paul's experience in Athens gives us some pointers on how to develop an outreach mindset.

### **I. Acts 17:16-21**

16 While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. 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. 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. 19 Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? 20 You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean." 21 (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

We have come to the time when Paul was travelling on his second missionary journey, establishing churches in the Greek cities of Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea. Persecution of Paul and his message, however, forced the apostle to flee to Athens, leaving his fellow ministers—Silas and Timothy—to minister in the cities where churches had been established.

When Paul was in Athens waiting for his co-labourers, he took time to tour the city. Athens was a university city where students would gather to sit at the feet of great philosophers like Socrates, Plato and Aristotle.

At the time of Paul's arrival in Athens (about AD 51), the city was vainly trying to regain the former glory of its philosophy and arts. As the apostle walked the streets, "he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols" (v. 16). Historians have recorded that there were more than 30,000 idols within the city proper.

As Paul toured the city of Athens, he was not swept by the majestic buildings and their architectural splendour. Instead, what gripped him most was the idolatry. The city was "full of idols"—probably lining the streets, and sitting or standing in every building and home.

So, Paul was "greatly distressed" with what he saw. This is a very emotionally charged description of how Paul was feeling. It means He was intensely provoked and aroused ...

- Over the abuse of God's glory.
- Over the spiritual blindness of man's mind and reason.
- Over the enslavement of human lives to false worship.
- Over the lost souls of people.

Paul had been waiting patiently for his co-labourers to come meet him in Athens. But he could not take the gross idolatry before his eyes any more. So he moved into action, and began to reason with the people in Athens and "preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection" (v. 18).

As was his customary practice whenever he was in a new place, Paul preached first to the Jews in the synagogue and then to the God-fearing Greeks. In Athens, he again went beyond the synagogue. He also went to the marketplace to speak to the people—he went to the public square to reason with the city crowd.

There, he met two groups of people—the Epicureans and the Stoics.

- The Epicureans view that the ultimate purpose of life is personal happiness. And happiness simply means pleasure itself. The immediate purpose of very human action is to experience pleasure. They also view that death is nothing because all good and evil is in feeling. When you die, you just give up your ability to feel. Hence, in order to enjoy what this life has to offer, the right thing to do is not to desire immortality, but to understanding rightly that death is nothing—we lose our feeling when we die, and so what is good and what is evil don't matter to us anymore. According to the Epicureans, the wise thing to do is not to desire the longest or immortal life, but the most pleasurable life here on earth.
- The Stoics view everything in the universe as fated—"que sera sera, whatever will be, will be". Hence for the Stoics, the wise thing to do is not to allow your emotions to cause you to be upset by external circumstances or fated realities—avoid passion and emotion by developing an inner calm through reason and reflection. All things fated must come to pass, and so, worrying over them or fighting to stop them is simply doing the futile. A man is not in control of human history. But there's one thing that one can control—control one's passion or emotion and face life as it is fated to be.

So the Stoics would say, "It's no use to worry." The Epicureans would say, "Must always be happy." You put them together, you have "don't worry, be happy."

But the Epicureans and Stoics were not the best of friends—the Epicureans believed in going all out to express emotions and experience pleasure; the Stoics believed in suppressing your emotions and not to be affected by pleasure or pain. However, when they heard Paul preaching about a personal relationship with God in Jesus Christ and the hope of an afterlife in the resurrection of Christ, they found a common opponent in Paul. They disputed with him and called him a "babbler" (v. 18)—a person who picked up bits and pieces of information, but without any real wisdom.

Indeed, the gospel is often sneered as foolishness by the wisdom of the world even until today. Imagine Paul walking the streets in Singapore. And he stops one of these well-dressed and well-

groomed professionals and asked, “Excuse me, are you an idol worshipper?” What do you think the answer will be?

Very likely, it will be something like this, “Idol worshipper? You mean those statues; those religious and superstitious stuff? No, of course! Those belong to the era of my forefathers. I am too educated and sophisticated for that. In fact, I am a free thinker—I am free to think because I am the master of my own life.”

Now, imagine Paul follows up with a second question this way, “What do you consider as the most important thing in your life today?” What do you think the likely answer will be?

The answer will probably be like this, “I have been setting my eyes for that next promotion. I have put in all the efforts and made all the right moves. I have been looked over the past few years. But this should be my year. In fact, nothing matters more to me than to get that move up the ladder. I am sacrificing everything else to make this happen.”

Paul was greatly distressed when he was in Athens more than 2,000 years ago because the city was full of idols. If he could come to Singapore today and walk through our streets, what idols will Paul find in modern-day Singapore?

To answer the question, we need to understand what idol worship really means. Idol worship can mean at least three things:

- One, working up concepts and ideas of God that are not true to the revelation of Scripture. In this sense, we worship the idol of our own mind.
- Two, revering images of metal, wood or stone that are made with human hands.
- Three, loving something more than God in that it consumes all our heart and passion—we give it all our thoughts, time, energy, efforts, and loyalty.

Is it possible to love a person too much? Is it possible to love success too much? Is it possible to love the praise of others too much?

If the answer is “yes” to all these questions, then idol worship can pop up anywhere in life, even in places we usually don’t associate with religion.

When we talk about idol worship, we may tend to associate it with some poor and primitive places in the world. But idol worship can be as real and rampant in a prosperous and progressive country where life is good. This is because anything good in itself may become an idol if it assumes a place of ultimate importance in life.

- Marriage is good, but marriage can become an idol.
- Work is good, but work can become an idol.
- Expert knowledge is good, but such knowledge can become an idol.
- Children are a blessing from God, but they can become idols to us.
- The church is good, but even the church can become an idol.

Anything good can become an idol if we love it more than God.

Unlike ancient Athens that was full of idols in the form of images and altars made by human hands, we in Singapore have idols today in the form of what consume our heart and passion in life. Paul will be just as distressed when he looks at our city as he was when he looked at Athens. He was so distressed in Athens that he immediately set out to speak for the Lord.

To exercise an outreach mindset to people around us, we need to similarly display one thing just as Paul did when he was in Athens. It is this—*we need to have a compelling and compassionate conviction to speak readily to people’s loss without God.*

But we need to know and deal with the modern-day idols first in our own lives and then in others. There are at least two categories of modern-day idols we need to come to terms with:

- One, idols of power. Idols of power are those things that give us a sense of significance and personal worth. When we have them, we feel able to control others to one degree or another. In that sense, a job title, or a high position, or a large personal office can become an idol. Note that none of these things are evil in themselves, but any of them can become an idol when we love them too much.

- Two, idols of pleasure. So many things fall into this category. It could be something that seems harmless—like playing golf, or watching television, or buying a new car, or getting a new home. Remember, anything good can become an idol if it becomes too important to us.

Let me comment briefly that just as television can become an idol, so can the computer. In the future, our culture will turn to “computer system idols”—i.e. virtual reality gods that will advise us exactly as the gods of ancient Greece instructed their devotees. In this age of information explosion, you can get all kinds of answer from the internet. But beware! Many of the answers there are both wrong and bad. So, be careful and discerning.

Idols of pleasure are the ones that make us happy. Many people today adopt this as the bottom line on personal morality. If it makes us feel happy, it's OK to go ahead and do it. And so we break our commitments simply because we can't find happiness. We abandon our promises and walk away from family and friends in search of that thing called happiness. We do wrong yet excuse ourselves by saying, “God understands that I just want to be happy.”

It should be clear by now that idolatry lies in the worshipper, not so much in the thing worshipped. A golden calf is not an idol by itself. Left to itself, a golden calf is just a lifeless thing. It becomes an idol only when we begin to worship it as if it can give us the good and happy life. Thus, it is often an idolatrous attitude that turns something amoral into something immoral; even turning something good into something bad.

An outreach mindset goes beyond our mind to our lives. We must show with our lives that happiness comes from a living relationship with Jesus Christ. He alone can satisfy our deepest needs and looking anywhere else for ultimate happiness is really just a form of idolatry. Once we have shown that to the lost with our lives, we can then have enough credibility to ask them to deal with the idols in their lives.

The Lord calls us to develop an outreach mindset in where He has placed us. Paul has a second pointer for us.

## **II. Acts 17:22-34**

22 Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. 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. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you. 24 The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. 25 And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. 26 From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. 27 God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him 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 some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’ 29 Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man’s design and skill. 30 In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. 31 For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.” 32 When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, “We want to hear you again on this subject.” 33 At that, Paul left the Council. 34 A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

By now, the teachings of Paul were creating some uneasiness in the public square. He was taken to the Areopagus (called Mars’ Hill by the Romans)—this was where the city rulers would convene as a council to decide who would be given permission to give public lectures in the city. The council wanted to hear Paul to



determine if he indeed could be given the credentials to continue his preaching in public.

Paul began his address before the Areopagus by calling them as “very religious”. That they were religious was obvious from the thousands of statues all over the city.

While walking around Athens, Paul found an altar to “an unknown god” (v. 23). In fact, there were many altars in ancient Athens with this inscription. The people of the day wanted to make sure they didn’t miss any god lest someday this god should show up and be angry at them for not being worshipped. They would be able to point to one of these altars and say, “This is your altar. We have been worshipping you.”

Paul used his knowledge of Athenian culture and custom as his starting point. He knew that some 600 years earlier, a plague had struck Athens. The early Greek poet, Epimenides, had suggested then that a flock of black and white sheep be released. Each time a sheep stopped in front of an idol, that sheep was to be slain and the god worshipped. But if there was no idol at the place where a sheep sat down, the people were to erect an altar to an unknown god, and then slay the sheep.<sup>1</sup>

Paul dramatically identified the “Unknown God” by saying, “Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you” (v. 23). In vv. 24-28, Paul made known the “Unknown God” to the assembled council. He made known to them two attributes about God.

- One, God is above His creation. This God has made everything and is the Lord of heaven and earth. This God also cannot be contained in any man-made temple. And this God requires nothing from those whom He has created as if He needs their help. Rather, this God supplied all the needs of the Athenians—they needed His help. The religions of that day were based on what people could do to please or appease their gods. Similarly, that is the basis of all man-made religions in our own day. But Paul’s word to the

---

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.biblehistory.net/newsletter/the\\_unknown\\_God.htm](https://www.biblehistory.net/newsletter/the_unknown_God.htm)

Athenians (and to us today) is that we need God to help us; He doesn't need us to help Him.

But when Paul said that God is above His creation, he was not saying that God was behaving so high and mighty that He considered it demeaning to have anything to do with us.

Yes, God is above His creation. But no, He is not so high and mighty that He refuses to come near us or to have any interest in us.

And that's why Paul went on to tell his audience in the Areopagus a second attribute about God.

- Two, God is personal. He is intensely interested in you and me. The Athenians were not atheists. In fact, they not only believed in an ultimate god, but also in many lesser gods. However, they believed that the ultimate god had no personal interest in human affairs. Paul corrected this thinking by affirming that God is personally interested in humankind and all creation.

A Sunday School teacher was trying to teach little Howard to say the Lord's Prayer. She asked Howard to repeat after her and then prayed, "Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be thy name."

Little Howard prayed, "Our Father in Heaven, Howard is my name."

The teacher corrected, "No, not like this." She prayed again, "Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be thy name."

Little Howard tried again, "Our Father in Heaven, hello! What's your name?"

God is not so fed up with the slowness to learn He sees in us that He says, "I give up!" We do that when we become fed up with one another and exclaim, "I give up!" But God never gives up His personal interest in us no matter how difficult it seems for Him to teach us.

Paul dealt with the superior attitude of the Greeks. He informed them that the one, true God made all peoples “from one man”. No race is superior to another, not then or now. This God also determines the course of human history and nothing would be left to “fate”. This God “is not far from each one of us” (v. 27)—He wants people to “seek” Him and “find” Him so that they can have a personal relationship with Him.

Paul also borrowed two quotes from two early Greek writers—“For in him we live and move and have our being” (*Epimenides*) and “We are his offspring” (*Aratus*). He used Greek wisdom sources to point to the Living God as man’s source of “life and breath” (vv. 25, 28).

Paul’s use of these quotes raised a couple of important points about outreach to the Athenians.

- When Paul addressed the Athenians, he made it clear that he had studied them and that he was listening to them. What was Paul’s purpose in quoting from the Athenians’ own early writers of wisdom? Well, these writers had taught that they were dependent on God and had been created by Him. But an important part of Greek religious tradition involved making idols to worship as gods and taking care of them.

Paul was pointing out the inherent contradiction here. In essence, he was asking, “If you are dependent on God, how can you make a god who is dependent on you? If you were created by God, how can you create a god?” Paul was showing them the inconsistency in the basic presuppositions of their religion.

- Paul used their worship as a bridge to bring the true God and His work in Jesus Christ to them. Paul started with the Athenian understanding of divinity. He did not start with the true God or Jesus Christ. But he did end with a call to turn to the true God and to believe in the Person and work of Jesus Christ.

What resulted from Paul’s sharing of the gospel in Athens? The responses were varied. Some sneered at Paul’s remarks, saying, “We’ll hear you again.” Others like Dionysius who’s a member of

the Areopagus, a woman named Damaris, and number of people believed.

God has empowered believers through the Holy Spirit to break down the strongholds of idolatry and vain philosophies in their own lives and society. Paul saw beyond the beauty, art and culture of Athens, and saw a place where people were being held captive by idolatry.

God has similarly called you and me to confront the strongholds of idolatry we encounter in our daily lives. Notice that Paul was provoked at the idolatry he encountered in Athens, not at the victims of that idolatry. He was willing to meet lost people where they were.

To exercise an outreach mindset to people around us like Paul, we need to similarly display a second thing just as Paul did when he was in Athens. It is this—we *need to get to know where people are before getting them to know who our God is.*

Three things we can do to work towards this:

- One, love. Ask God to help us cultivate a sincere friendship with someone and demonstrate love. When this happens, our talk about grace will have meaning and context because of our own example of love for that person. Our responsibility is to be a sincere friend even if he doesn't believe in the gospel. However, if we truly love that person in Jesus Christ, we will desire God's best for him and that includes a relationship with Jesus Christ. But our job is to demonstrate love, cultivate a spiritually attractive life, and clearly communicate the gospel. And we pray for God to convict and convert.
- Two, listen. One of the great needs of effective communication is to learn how to listen. Just look at the bookstores and count the massive number of books on speaking and compare that with the miserable few on listening. When we genuinely listen to people, we let them know that they are important to us. Listening communicates healthy regard for both the one speaking and his thoughts. When we listen to people, they will in turn give us the right to speak to them.

- Three, learn. Our learning should begin with how to bridge the gap between the Word of God and the world in which we live. Personal Bible study, church worship, church ministry and prayer are all essential. But they should not be the ends in themselves. They should be means for spiritual growth and a way to allow God's revelation to bear relevance in our world. It is important to pray not only for the lost, but also for ourselves as we try to reach out to the lost—pray that we will better understanding them and their world; that our words and works will not be stumbling blocks to them as we take opportunities to build relationships with them.

## **Conclusion**

To recapitulate, we need to work on two things in order to exercise an outreach mindset:

- We need to have a compelling and compassionate conviction to speak readily to people's loss without God.
- We need to get to know where people are before getting them to know who our God is.

Pray for this mindset as we go to the highway and byways of life, witnessing for the Lord with our words and works. Amen!