Text: Acts 17:24-31
Title: Paul's Sermon at Athens, Parts 2 and 3
Truth: Every person must repent of their idolatry and turn to God.
Date/Location: Wednesday Prayer Meeting 10/16/2013 and 10/23/2024 at FBC

Introduction

We continue our study of Paul's sermon which we introduced in the study of Acts 17:22-23.

Last time I mentioned the idea of starting at a place that the audience has in common with you. If they have more in common (suppose they believe the Old Testament) then that gives you a great launching point for evangelistic work. If they do not, then you have to "back up" to the beginning and establish true Biblical history and theology with them from the very beginning of creation.

As I thought about this some more, I realized that I could say it better this way: perhaps we start our proclamation with as much "common knowledge" as we share with the audience about God and then take them to the next level. For instance, if they have no belief in God whatsoever, we need to begin like Paul does with Genesis 1:1. However, if the audience already has a decent understanding of who God is, then we move on to the revelation about Jesus Christ. And if they know God and Christ, and are presumably saved, then we move on to the revelation of the person and work of the Holy Spirit, the doctrine of sanctification, etc. In other words, we don't start with the Holy Spirit when we are teaching an unbeliever. The Spirit will work as the Word is proclaimed about God and Christ; we don't have to say anything about Him to have Him working in the background. Later, for a person growing in their understanding of the Christian faith, you will unfold what the Bible teaches about the Holy Spirit and other important doctrines.

II. The Nature God, v. 24-25

Remember, Paul is telling them about the "unknown God." The altar with that inscription was a good "launching point" for teaching about the true God. The Athenians did not know Him and in their empty ritual they were not actually worshipping Him. Who is He?

Strong, p. 52: "God is the infinite and perfect Spirit in whom all things have their source, support, and end."

The Westminster Catechism: “God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.”

A. Creator, v. 24 – God made the world and everything in it. The Bible tells us exactly what He did, and leaves us in awe at the power He exercised to do so.

B. Sovereign – “Lord of heaven and earth.” He is and has supreme authority or power. He is omnipotent. It can be boiled down to the idea that God is King of the Universe.

C. Infiniteness – God does not dwell in temples made with hands. This reflects the thought of 1 Kings 8:27. God is not limited in space or time, with space being the emphasis here. He is before, above, under, outside of these realities that circumscribe our existence. He has no outside limitations. His infiniteness in time is His eternity; with respect to space it is his omnipresence or immensity.

D. Independence, v. 25 – God doesn’t need anything but rather is the giver of all things. God cannot be “improved” by worship from men’s hands, as in physical objects or food or incense or something. God’s independence highlights our utter *dependence*. Everything you have comes from the Lord—the shirt on your back, the home you live in, the money you have, the skills and intellect you possess, your life, the air you breathe—*everything*.

E. All four of these attributes confront the Athenians with their mistaken notion of the unknown God.

1. They are mistaken to make offerings to him with the thought that he needs them to survive or be happy.

2. They are wrong to worship God as if he resides in a statue or a small building.

3. They are incorrect to think there is a pantheon of gods, some competing with others or over various sub-realms of creation and none of them sovereign over the others.

4. Their thinking is 180 degrees out of phase with the reality of creation, whether they thought it was the result of one or more gods’ actions, or that it always existed, or that there was a spontaneous creation that sprang itself into existence.

III. The Acts of God Toward Humanity, v. 26-28

A. Unity of humanity created by God, v. 26a. One blood, one race, which is the human race. Skin color or national origin is irrelevant as to our standing as humans, in sin, in need of salvation, whether we can be saved, our worth before God, etc. Be assured that though your anthropologist and paleontologist friends will assure you that there have been multiple species of humans, in effect different races, that is not the case. There is one "kind" of humanity, and that is it.

B. Sovereignty of God over humanity, v. 26b. Paul teaches the Christian doctrine of God's control of the existence of people groups and their international boundaries. This means that he permits wars and the rise and fall of kingdoms, as predicted in Daniel, for example. Nebuchadnezzar is a great example of this in Daniel 4. Not only are our times in God's hands, but the times of our nation and all nations are in His hands. Our integrity as a nation, our geographical borders, ethnic make-up, etc. are all under God's control. We do not hold our destiny in our hands. Rather, God holds it is in His hand. We are responsible to live as God would have us to live—obviously.

C. God has set all the above up (Himself as creator, sovereign ruler, sustainer) in order that people would seek and find Him, v. 27. God made people and peoples under His sovereign control, that they might reach out to Him and find Him. This is not a hard proposition because God is near—immanent. Although He *is* not *everything*, He *is* everywhere nearby.

1. We know that He is everywhere near because very life itself comes from Him. He not only planned and created, but He also sustains and guides all of creation. Our breath comes from God above.

2. God is our father in a general sense, as human offspring of the divine. He is the adoptive father of believers only.

3. How do we reconcile this with the reality that no one seeks after God? Sin has broken us and we focus on things other than we should. But all the "information" is "out there" for us to ponder and consider.

D. Verse 28 adds that in Him we live and move and have our being. We are sustained by God—we said that already—but without Him we are dead. We are the offspring of God, as even some of the Athenian poets said in their writings. Paul referenced one or more of their familiar poets in order to show that even non-Christians thought of themselves as descending from God, a God different than the images they worshipped.

We are not the progeny of rocks or gold images, or dead idols or figments of people's imaginations. Our nature as intelligent, moral, spiritual beings means that God's constitution cannot be inanimate. We can't think of ourselves as descended from a rock, can we? (I guess we can…evolution says we can from pea soup or a rock or nothing!)

IV. The Command of God, v. 29-31

A. Do not think about God like He is an idol! We must not think of God like gold or silver or stone images made by artists. When Paul says we ought not think about God in this way, I think he is speaking of a logical oughtness, that it is unreasonable and bad thinking to consider God this way. But there is also a moral oughtness—we are morally wrong to think of God that way, not just logically wrong. If we are thinking like that, we must stop. We cannot think of God the Father or the Spirit in anything other than spirit-terms; we can legitimately think of Jesus in the same terms as well as in human terms, but we must not "idolize" him somehow (by that, I mean to turn Him into a physical idol).

In the first century, state of the art for man was to build images like those Paul saw in Athens. Man's "devising" could only produce that likeness of what was supposed to be a god. God's "devising" produced man, and man produced statues. Quite a difference! Toay, man's devising produces AI and humanoid robots. Perhaps someone will worship that someday as an all-knowing thing that is capable of tremendous intellectual and physical feats. But it will still only be inanimate, with no soul. It will be a complex machine but no more.

B. God overlooked such ignorance, namely by patiently bearing with the sins of the people. He does not overlook sin in the sense of just ignoring it. It is still sin and upsets His holy character. But He suffers long, patiently waiting, graciously extending the unbeliever's time when he does not deserve it. See Romans 3:25. He allows the problem of evil so that He can make known the glory of His grace amongst those who are being saved.

C. Despite this earlier overlooking of the ignorance of mankind, God has issued a clear and present command for all men to repent.

1. From the time of the cross, it is presently in force: *now*. It is urgent.

2. This is a divine decree: God *commands* it.

3. This command is universal in scope: *all men everywhere*.

D. The content of the command is to repent. The command is to *turn* from idols and sin to the living and true God and His son Jesus Christ (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10).

1. The definition of repent is to change one's mind or course of action; to change belief or course of conduct; to change direction (BDAG). Used in a Christian religious context such as this one, it means to change ones' mind away from the direction of sin and to the direction of God. It is a heart-felt realization of the need to change and a resolve in that direction. "I cannot keep on sinning. I need the Lord!"

2. A true change of mind will result in a change in course of action, but it is not the change in action *per se* that defines repentance in Christian theology.

3. Repentance is different than the feeling of remorse or regret. "I wish I had not done that." Regret is focused on self and consequences and sometimes other people. Repentance is focused on God and what is right in His sight.

4. Examples: Acts 3:19, 14:15, 15:19, 26:18, 28:27, 1 Peter 2:25. Most definitely repentance is part of the Christian message!

5. The doctrine of repentance is also found in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. For example: Deut. 30:10, Jer. 3:14, Hosea 14:2, Joel 2:13.

6. This is important because it is for every person who has ever lived or is alive today. **Have you *repented* of your sins, turned to God away from your unbelieving mindset and way of life, and really trusted in Jesus rather than in yourself or a false god?**

E. The reason for God's command is that the day is approaching in which he will judge the world. Acts 24:25 also mentions God's coming judgment, but this text gives some more detail. It will be a specific day, a real event.

1. Just as *repentance* has to do with sin, *judgment* has to do with sin as well. It has ultimately to do with your reception of Christ, but if you are rejecting Him, *that itself* is missing the mark of God's desire for your life.

2. The judgment encompasses the entire world. No one from all of time, Adam forward to today and all humans in the future, will be excused from the Lord Jesus's evaluation.

3. Note well that God has given plenty of time for people to repent. He issued this command through His human representative, the apostle Paul, nearly 2,000 years ago. The appointed day is still in the future as

of 10/30/2024. God has graciously given warning way in advance of the actual judgment. This is not a surprise!

F. The judgment will be carried out in righteousness. See Deut. 16:18; Psalm 9:4; Romans 2:2, 2:5-6; 2 Thess. 1:5. Whatever "fair" is, that is what this judgment will be. It will be just in the eyes of God, whose eyes see everything, whose mind knows everything, including every motivation. People will not be able to hide behind "good intentions" or excuses.

G. The judge appointed to the task is the Man who arose from the dead. The Athenians would now understand the man to be Jesus, and they would grasp that "resurrection" is not a goddess, but an event in the Lord's life. It seems that they did not grasp this before (v. 18).

H. The assurance that this judgment will really happen is the resurrection of the dead, a key ingredient to Paul's message because only a *living* judge can execute judgment.

1. Jesus' rising from the dead is the guarantee that He will judge—you. There is nothing that can stop Him, not even death! You will not be able to stiff-arm Jesus from judging you. Read John 5:22-23.

2. Resurrection is diametrically opposed to Greek and most modern systems of belief, but it is true nonetheless. We know because of the testimony of God's word. We know because of the evidence of the empty tomb. We know because of resurrections that occurred like Lazarus and Dorcas and the eyewitness testimony passed down to us. We know because we trust God and His power to do it.

Conclusion

Next time we will see the three-fold response of the audience. But what really matters at this moment is *your* response to it. God is speaking directly to you and me, not go a theoretical group of people "out there" somewhere. He is speaking to you, here, right now, warning you of impending judgment and telling you of the wonderful provision of forgiveness in Christ if you repent.

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