

Westover Baptist Church Virtual Sunday School Lesson

Lesson text: Acts 17:19-32

Paul in Athens

¹⁶ While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷ So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸ Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, "What does this babbler want to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities." (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) ¹⁹ So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?" ²⁰ It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means." ²¹ Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

²² Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³ For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. ²⁶ From one ancestor^[i] he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷ so that they would search for God^[i] and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed 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 too are his offspring.'

²⁹ Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. ³⁰ While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

³² When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, "We will hear you again about this." ³³ At that point Paul left them. ³⁴ But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

Reflection:

In our scripture lesson for this Sunday, we find Paul in a foreign place, Athens, where he waits for Timothy and Silas to rejoin him. While he is there he can't seem to help himself – he must tell others about the God whom he serves. The people of Athens loved philosophy, spirituality and discussing current trends and new ideas in these areas, and so they were most likely eager to engage with Paul.

The city of Athens is similar to our own society with its interest in new trends and religious pluralism. Today, many people like to explore religion and spirituality, even if they don't make a commitment to any one particular faith tradition. Paul's approach to sharing the gospel with the Athenians can serve as a good example for us today.

When Paul speaks to the Athenians as reported in the book of Acts, he does so not with condemnation of their religion, spirituality and/or values, but rather with affirmation. He highlights their authentic interest in knowing God and even quotes from one of the Athenian poets! He shows them what they are doing that is good and then goes on to reveal the fullness of the gospel message. In other words, Paul relates with them and meets them where they are.

Question: As we seek to live out the gospel message, how can we relate with others who do not share the same faith as we do? How can we meet people where *they are* without trying to force them to meet us where *we are*?

Paul reminds us that God has created the entire world and everything in it. Yes, that means mosquitoes too! Paul tells the Athenians and us that God gives life and breath to every living creature and that all things come from God. This means that the air we breathe is God-given. Every time we breathe we are receiving a gift from God. Every piece of food we eat, is given to us by God. Earth helps grow the food we eat, but it is the spirit of the living God that gives life to the plants that grow our food.

The Sun in the middle of our solar system constantly pours out energy for all life to absorb and grow strong. The Sun's energy is a good metaphor for God's spirit. It is constantly shining on us! Wherever we go, whatever we do, it all happens because of God with us, Emmanuel!

Question: How can Paul's reminder of these things help us to better appreciate the life we have been given? How can it change the way we look at the world from scarcity to abundance? How can it help us live with gratitude and share God's love?