

\*Our series on Paul’s call from God continues this morning with Paul in Athens. He went to Athens after being run out of Berea, and that’s what makes the story of his experience in Athens so compelling. Here he meets resistance of a different sort. Up to now, he had appealed to the Jews to accept Jesus as the Promised Messiah of the Jewish faith. That got him in trouble time and again. While some believed, others were openly hostile. They’d drive him out of town and, on one occasion, they stoned him to within an inch of his life.

Not so in Athens. Here Paul makes his appeal, not to a Jewish audience, but to the most learned, well-educated, sophisticated scholars of the day. Paul was prepared to debate, but they were cordial. They listened to Paul’s arguments without being argumentative. If anything, they are curious to know more. But here’s the catch: Most of them have no interest whatsoever in committing to any higher power than the gospel of their own intellect and reason.

And that’s what I’d like for us to think about this morning—how the gospel calls us to decide between the wisdom of the world and the love of God made known to us in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. To be more specific, I can think of at least three big differences:

- The difference between being religious and being faithful;
- The difference between having knowledge and knowing; and
- The difference between curiosity and commitment.

It’s not too hard to imagine why Paul wanted to go to Athens. It was the cosmopolitan center of the world in the first century. “Classical Athens was a powerful city-state. A center for the arts, learning and philosophy, home of Plato’s Academy and Aristotle’s Lyceum; Athens was also the birthplace of Socrates, Pericles, Sophocles and its many other prominent philosophers, writers and politicians of the ancient world. It is widely referred to as the cradle of Western civilization and the birthplace of democracy...” so says Wikipedia.

Going to Athens in Paul’s day would be like going to New York City or London or Paris today. When he got there, the first thing he saw was that “*the city was full of idols.*” There were statues and monuments inscribed to every Greek god and goddess of the day and, if you know anything about Greek mythology, there were a bunch of them: Apollo, Aphrodite, Ares and Athena, to mention a few. If that weren’t enough, Paul noticed that the Athenians had even erected an altar to an “unknown god.” Just in case they missed one, they wanted to cover all the bases. For someone who believes in “God, the father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth,” it must have been *culture shock*.

Now, the Areopagus was the intellectual center of Athens. It was situated on a craggy hill overlooking the city and named after the Greek god, Ares. In Latin it was called Mars Hill. For Paul to be invited to speak at the Areopagus was the opportunity of a lifetime. Think of it as a musician being invited to give a performance at Carnegie Hall. It was show time. He began like a seasoned diplomat. He said, “*I see that in every way you are very religious,*” referring to all the idols down below. But it was the truth—the Athenians weren’t heathens. If anything, they were super religious.

Then, referring to the statues and monuments, Paul pointed out that one was to an unknown god. This gave him the chink in the armor he was looking for. He proceeded to give that “god” a name. He said: “*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. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you. “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 human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else”* (Acts 17:23-25).

Then he called the great philosophers to repent and accept Jesus as Lord and Savior, lest they be caught short on the Day of Judgment. And notice how he put it. He said, “*In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. 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 everyone by raising him from the dead”* (Acts 17:30-31).

And that’s the crux of the matter. The gospel of Jesus Christ flies in the face of reasoning and common sense, so that you have to decide whether to follow the wisdom of the world or walk by faith in the footsteps of Jesus. I said up front, there are big differences here. *The first has to do with being religious, as opposed to being faithful.* The Greeks were super religious. They bowed down to many gods, but they were oblivious to the saving grace of Jesus Christ.

In his lifetime, Jesus spent little of his time with religious people. In fact, it was the religious people of his day that gave him the most grief. He showed mercy to prostitutes, lepers and tax collectors; he even referred to Samaritans and Gentiles as models of faith; but he had nothing but harsh words for the religious people of his day.

Another big difference between the gospel and the world is the difference between *knowledge and knowing*; between knowing *about* something and having first-hand experience. One of my favorite little sayings from Benjamin Franklin goes like this: “Tell me, and I forget; Teach me, and I remember; Involve me, and I learn.”

Technology today may enable us to know more about Jesus than Jesus knew about himself. Seriously, we can read volumes about every miracle he performed and every word he said, but that’s not the same as *knowing him* as Lord of your life. To *know* Jesus as Lord and Savior is to have a relationship with him. It’s to experience his presence through the indwelling of his Holy Spirit; it’s to see him in the faces of others; it’s to speak and act in his name. In the words of a great old hymn: “*And he walks with me, and he talks with me, And he tells me I am his own; And the joy we share as we tarry there, None other has ever known”* (by C. Austin Miles). God calls us, not simply to know *about* Jesus, but to know *him* as the Lord and Savior of our lives.

The third difference is the difference between *curiosity and commitment*. If the Greek philosophers were anything, they were curious. Given time, they might’ve developed a whole curriculum about Jesus and the

atonement work of his death and resurrection. But they were unwilling to yield to the authority of his grace and love, and that made a difference.

In many ways, Paul was no match for the mighty philosophers. Luke says, *“Some of the people 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”* (Acts 17:34). To be generous, let’s say Paul convinced a half-dozen listeners that day that Jesus was the Christ. Big deal. But it was a big deal that Dionysius happened to be one of the most revered men of Athens. He had a home on the Areopagus! And so, after Paul went on to Corinth, it was Dionysius who took Paul’s message and, in time, brought the whole city to faith in Jesus Christ. A plaque standing on the Areopagus today reads: *“Sometime in the middle of the first century A.D., the Apostle Paul is said to have converted a number of Athenians by teaching the tenets of a new religion from the summit of the hill. Among the converts was Dionysius, the patron saint of the city of Athens, who, according to tradition, became the city’s first bishop.”*

Paul dared to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ in opposition to the wisdom of the world and we might think he failed. But he didn’t. He planted seeds that continued to grow and bear fruit, to this day. There are big differences between the wisdom of the world and the truth of Jesus Christ, and when you recognize those differences and consciously choose to walk by faith, God will not only bless you, he will use you to bring others into a saving relationship with his son, our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

\*Parts of this sermon are taken from a sermon by Philip W. McLarty © 2009.