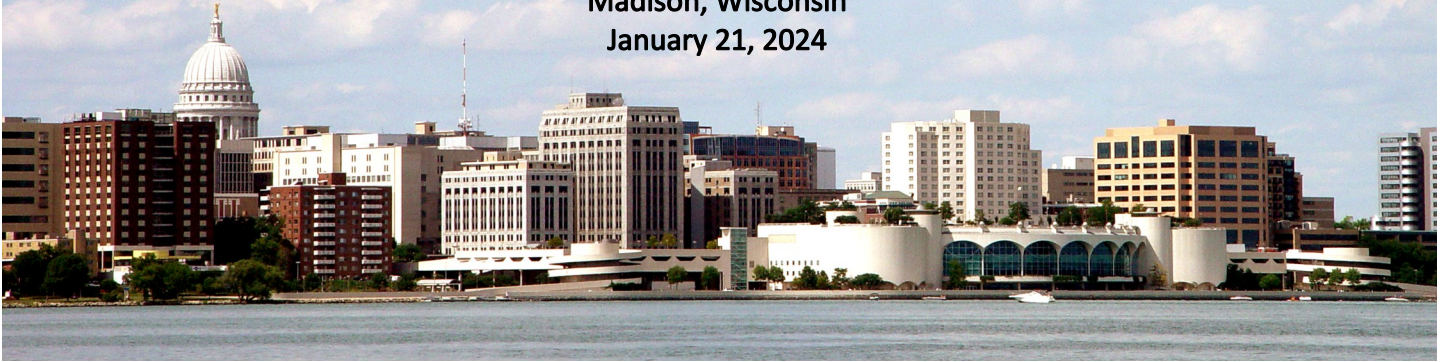


# Preaching Jesus to the World

Part 1: Acts 17:16-21

Baxter T. Exum (#1722)  
Four Lakes Church of Christ  
Madison, Wisconsin  
January 21, 2024



Good morning, and welcome to the Four Lakes congregation! If you are visiting this morning or joining us online or on the phone, we are glad to have you with us. We'd like to ask that you fill out a visitor card online if you can, or you can use one of the cards from the pew in front of you. Whatever works for you, we would love to hear from you, and we invite you to pass along any questions or prayer concerns.

As we get started, I'd like to give one more reminder concerning our efforts to collect t-shirts before my upcoming trip to Tennessee next week. We learned about this several years ago, but there's a church in Illinois that helps out a Christian orphanage and home for young mothers in Nicaragua by taking old t-shirts and turning them into diapers. Their preacher attends the Freed-Hardeman University lectures, and several years ago, he put out a call for old t-shirts, "Hey, our church does this thing, and we are running low on raw materials!" So, we gathered up a ginormous bag, I dragged those to Tennessee, and they were extremely thankful. Well, they are in need again, and this is an ongoing project, so we have been collecting these downstairs for a few months. What we have is up here, and if you would like to add to the pile up here, go for it, and I will take those down south with me after worship next week. Thanks for your help with this!

We are here this morning to worship God and to encourage each other, but we are also here to preach the love of God who sent his Son to die in our place; he was buried, but he was raised up on the first day of the week. We obey this good news by believing it, by turning away from sin, by confessing our faith in Jesus as being the Son of God, and by obeying the Lord's command to be buried with him in baptism (an immersion in water for the forgiveness of sins). And as a part of our invitation to you, we've been sharing examples of what this looks like. And today, we have several, starting with an update from Matthew Morine, who preaches in Castle Rock, Colorado (just south of Denver). He posted a few days ago and says, "So proud of Elton for being baptized today for the remission of his sins. Great young man and top 100 Brazilian Jujitsu fighter in the world for his age. Future one of David's mighty men." I think this is a first for us, and we hope this young man always uses his skills for good! Welcome to God's family!

This next update comes to us from the Lord's church down in Paintsville, Kentucky (Shelby's home congregation). They posted recently, and they say, "Rejoice with us! There is joy in the presence of the angels! Everyone welcome our new brother and sister in Christ, Cam & Missy Price. God's family worked as a team today to accomplish God's will! After completing multiple Bible studies with one of our Shepherds, Johnnie

LeMaster, Cam and Missy made the decision to be baptized for the remission of sins. The Lord added them to His church (Acts 2:38-47)."

This next one comes to us from Mark Posey, and he simply says, "Praise God! Another baptism in Nikopol, Ukraine. Larisa Alekseevna! She is 84 years old! To God be the Glory!!" It is so good to see this!

And then the last two come to us from the Lord's church over in the Philippines. This is from a gospel preacher by the name of Edwin-Blenda Inso. He says that "After more than a month of regular Bible Studies at their home, [Realyn and Jelita] finally decided to accept salvation by accepting Christ through Water Baptism. Glory God. Let's include them both in our prayers in their new journey in life with the Lord. These are our two new sisters in the Faith." So good to see this! And we share these examples by way of encouragement. If you have not yet done what these people have done, we invite you to get in touch. Pull me aside after worship this morning, or give me a call, send a text, or send an email using the contact information in our bulletin or on the website, and we would love to study together.

As I've continued looking through the sermon request cards that have come in over the past year, I've noticed a theme in some of those questions and concerns. One of you asked for a lesson on "How to share Jesus at work." Someone else asked for some thoughts on "remaining respectful in disagreements." One of you asked for some thoughts on "how to talk to those who are living in sin." Someone else wanted some advice from scripture concerning "how to approach spiritual disagreements (differing Biblical interpretations or beliefs) with other Christians." And someone else was asking, "At what point does bringing up the Bible with coworkers become more of an annoyance than an effective effort to convert?" And, "How can we balance being polite and really advocating for God?" Those are some awesome concerns, and many of these have come from our young adults, those who are facing a world that is much different from the world many of us grew up in.

I don't know whether we realize this, but the world is changing. Even just a few decades ago, we could have a discussion about God with unbelievers, and they would most likely have at least some concept of some very basic Biblical principles. In most cases, we at least had a somewhat similar worldview. In most cases, the people around us would have at least some basic knowledge of God and his word. They might have at least heard of God, and Noah, and Abraham, and Moses, and Peter, and Paul; however, this is no longer the case. So now, instead of starting with scripture (as we might have done in times past), we may be even more reluctant than before to start these discussions about spiritual things. Where do we start? And does the word of God give us any guidance on this? It's awesome that you guys are asking these questions.

So, this morning and next Lord's Day morning, I'd like for us to take a few moments to learn from Paul's approach in the city of Athens. I want to invite you, then, to be turning with me to Acts 17 (p. 1734). In Acts 17, Paul is on his Second Missionary Journey. He's been through the Roman colony of Philippi, where he and Silas are beaten and imprisoned (and where they end up baptizing the jailer and his family). They leave Luke behind and continue on to Thessalonica, where they are once again run out of town quite violently, escaping by night to Berea. Paul preaches in Berea for a short time before some of the leading Jews come down from Thessalonica and chase him out of town once again. Paul leaves Silas and Timothy behind in Berea, and Paul continues on all by himself to the city of Athens, where he interacts with the locals, and where he ends up being invited to speak on the Areopagus. The Areopagus, by the way, was a gathering place for philosophers and is pictured in the bottom half of the image on the wall up here, basically in the shadow of the Parthenon, which is up here on the Acropolis, overlooking the city of Athens. And even the name "Athens" reminds us that Athens is named for the goddess Athena. The Parthenon (honoring Athena) was completed in 432 BC, and parts of it are still standing today.

Before we get to our study of the word this morning, I'd like to encourage you: If you ever pass through Nashville, Tennessee, try to take a few minutes to go take a look at a full-size replica of the Parthenon, right there in the city of Nashville. It was built for Tennessee's centennial celebration in 1897. I have been there several times, most recently with our own Bryor and Silas, as we were down there to attend the Freed-Hardeman University lectures together. These two young men may give you some sense of scale. This place is huge! But we were also able to look around on the inside, and based on some drawings, and paintings, and coins from the ancient world, artists have reconstructed the statue of Athena – more than 42 feet tall and covered in 8 pounds of very thinly pounded gold leaf. To give you some sense of scale, in Athena's right hand is a statue of Nike, the goddess of victory, and Nike is 6'4" tall (so about three inches taller than I am)! But again, I share this to give us some sense of what Paul would've seen as he arrives in the city of Athens. Athena, the main goddess, is honored in the Parthenon, and Paul will speak on the Areopagus, a nearby hill dedicated to Ares, the Greek god of war. And by the way, if your translation refers to "Mars Hill," they have Romanized it. Mars is the Roman god of war, but this takes place in Athens, not Rome, so the Areopagus would be a more accurate reference. We know more about this now than we knew when some of the older translations were made.

So, Paul is preaching and escaping from city to city, and he lands in Athens, all alone. Let's pick up by looking at Acts 17:16-21,

***16 Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him as he was observing the city full of idols. 17 So he was reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and in the market place every day with those who happened to be present. 18 And also some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him. Some were saying, "What would this idle babbler wish to say?" Others, "He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities,"—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. 19 And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is which you are proclaiming? 20 For you are bringing some strange things to our ears; so we want to know what these things mean." 21 (Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new.)***

As we think about this passage, obviously, we can look at this and the sermon that comes in the next paragraph, and we could very easily focus on God; we could focus on the text of Paul's message. And we will look at it next week (and we did this the last time we studied this passage back in 2010), but this time I'd really like for us to step back a bit, and I really want us to focus on how Paul reaches out to this culture that was incredibly different from his own. This morning I'd like for us to learn from his initial approach to this city, and next week I'd like for us to learn from what he actually says to these people. But first of all, this morning, let's think about some basic principles from Paul's initial outreach to this city.

And I hope we can try to imagine being in Paul's position here. He's highly educated, he's coming out of a Jewish background, he's preaching the gospel, he's being beaten and imprisoned as he travels through the Mediterranean world, and as he just barely makes it to Athens, he has maybe a few days to recover and process through what's happened over the past few weeks, and he finds himself in this amazing city, all alone. And this is a place he's probably heard about all his life. This is the home of Plato and Socrates and Aristotle. This is practically the home of all the Greek gods. In terms of art and culture and philosophy and architecture, Athens is it! Athens is the center of learning. Like Madison, we might even say that Athens was a university town. Athens was special, and they knew it! So, how does somebody like Paul handle all this? What are some principles we might apply to reaching out to the world around us today?

- I. Well, as we look at this passage, I want us to come away from this text with the idea that as we look at the world around us, we need to first of all, **THINK SOULS!**

And I say this because of Paul's reaction here. Notice, in verse 16, ***"Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him as he was observing the city full of idols."*** Here he is in this city of commerce, and philosophy, and art, and culture, and Paul is ***"provoked"*** by what he sees when he sees how this city is ***"full of idols."*** He's mad! I think the word goes back to the idea of being "poked." He looks around, and he's angry at what he sees. And don't we also have a tendency to look around and get mad as well? We look around, and we might ask, "What is the world coming to? These people don't know God!" Or maybe we get mad at some sins more than others. Several days ago, I saw that the NFL would be hosting a "Pride Night" in the week leading up to the Super Bowl. And I think to myself: I'm not too into football, but I don't remember the NFL sponsoring "Pride Night" just a few decades ago. And maybe we're ***"provoked"*** over that. You know, as Christians, we look at the world differently. We look around us, and we realize that we're not even on the same page, we're not in the same book, we're not even speaking the same language. We think about music differently. We think about what we eat and drink differently. We think about the human body differently. We think about relationships differently. And sometimes, like Paul, we get ***"provoked."***

I mean, think about Paul, this highly educated Jewish rabbi (basically). His whole life is built around the Ten Commandments, and the first two commandments are, 1.) You are to have no other gods before me, and 2.) No idols. And here he is, walking into Athens, Greece. Like David facing Goliath, Paul is mad, ***"For who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should taunt the armies of the living God?"*** Like David, Paul could hardly stand seeing God being disrespected like this. But I think we'll find this morning that instead of taking a sledgehammer to this idols, instead of shaking his fist at the Pride parade going by, instead of screaming at the abortion clinic, Paul is provoked to see the people of Athens as living souls. And we will find this morning and next week that Paul treats them with the utmost of respect and compassion. In this chapter, Paul is moved to do something, but in verse 16 we find what got him going, his motivation. Instead of shrugging his shoulders, instead of shaking his head at how terrible this is, instead of noping his way right back out the way he came, Paul is ***"provoked,"*** and he is provoked to do something, because he realizes what this means for these people.

Here in this first verse, then, I think we need to look at the world around us and ask: Are we broken for the lost? And are we provoked enough to care? Are we provoked enough to do something? And are we just mad in general, or are we upset because we see souls? Based on what comes next, I would suggest that Paul is motivated by his love for the people of Athens, and it changes his approach here. This heaviness in his heart is caused by his love for these people. This is Step #1, and we cannot skip Step #1.

- II. As we continue, let's notice (in verse 17) that Paul **TAKES THE MESSAGE TO THE PEOPLE.**

***"So he was reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and in the market place every day with those who happened to be present."*** I hope we notice here that Paul goes in two directions. On one hand, he takes the gospel to the synagogue. This is what Paul has been doing for years. In fact, if you have an actual Bible open, you may want to back up to verses 2-3 here in Acts 17, where Luke (the author) says that Paul went to the synagogue in Thessalonica, ***"And according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ.""*** This is what Paul was familiar with. He could open the word of God, he could say, "This is what God says in Genesis, or Deuteronomy, or whatever, and this is how we know this passage applies to Jesus." And the Jewish people

and the God-fearing Gentiles would respond to that. Some obeyed, and some got mad, but they responded. They could understand. They knew who Moses was. They agreed on the basics. They had a similar worldview.

But what I also want us to notice in verse 17 is that in addition to teaching in the synagogue, Paul also went to the ***“market place every day with those who happened to be present.”*** And I would suggest that the people he met in the marketplace did NOT have a similar worldview. And in those cases, Paul would NOT have been able to appeal to Abraham, and Moses, and Isaiah, and the others. In fact, many of these people would not have known God at all. And so, he goes out into the city and he ***“reasons”*** with these people. Again, he’s not ranting and raving, he’s not screaming at people, but he’s having conversations.

Later in this passage, we find that the people of Athens seem to be aligned with either the Stoics or the Epicureans. The Epicureans live for this life only. There’s nothing else coming. Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die! The gods don’t care about you, and so the best way to live is to enjoy yourself. If it feels good, do it. The Stoics, on the other hand, suggested that the gods were at one with the Universe, and the best way to live would be to live a calm and orderly life. Don’t get too worked up about stuff. Que sera, sera; what will be will be. Grin and bear it, because there’s not much you can do about it anyway.

We could study this for years, but the point here is: Paul didn’t limit himself to the synagogue, but he went out into the marketplace to reason with these people, with the Stoics, with the Epicureans, with anybody who might be interested. Now, as we apply this to our situation today, don’t we see a parallel between what Paul did in Athens and what we can do here in Madison? On one hand, there is a value to studying together here as a group. For the most part, those of us here this morning have a similar worldview. Generally speaking, those of us here today believe in God, we know what the Bible is, and so on. But there is also a huge value in having these spiritual discussions with people in the world who do NOT think like we do. We can’t stay locked up here in this building, but we have to put ourselves out there – in the marketplace, on the ball field, in the pool, in the workplace, in the neighborhood, wherever we might be. In today’s scripture reading from 1 Peter 3, we had Peter’s reminder that we are to ***“...sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence.”*** This is what Paul did in Athens. He gave a ***“defense”*** of the gospel, but he did so with ***“gentleness and reverence.”*** he was ***“provoked”*** by what he saw, but that anger caused him to take the gospel to the people, to the synagogues and beyond. Those who need the message most may never set foot in this building. And those who need the message most may know nothing of the Bible, other than, ***“Judge not, that you be not judged.”*** For the most part, that’s all people know about the Bible these days. So, we have to take the message to the people.

And we may need to get creative. You know, there was a time (several decades ago) when you could put up a sign for a “VBS” outside a church building, and people would actually send their kids. Today, I don’t think most people even know what a VBS is. We talked about this several years ago, and my conclusion was that as a dad, there is no way I would send my kids to some church basement these days. Too much has happened in the world. And so we kind of merged our clothing give-away with craft stations for the kids who may attend. And it’s been interesting. This is why we have spent so much time cleaning the parks in this neighborhood. This is why we’ve done so much to help the kids at Kennedy with school supplies and snacks. Trying to get these conversations started. At my sister’s congregation out in Washington, I think they tried offering after-school tutoring services to some of the kids in the neighborhood. Down in Janesville, back in the 1950’s and 60’s, they would have gospel meetings with preaching at 7 p.m. but also at 5 a.m. for those who worked at the GM plant. That’s what worked back then. I’m just saying that we may need to get creative in getting the message out of the synagogue, so to speak, and out into the marketplace. What worked in one generation may not

work in the next. If you have more ideas on how to do this as a congregation, let me know. But we also need to be doing this personally.

The other part of this is that we really need to be talking TO people instead of ABOUT people. It does no good to sit here in this building talking about how terrible all those idol-worshippers are out there, “Woo hoo! We are good and they are not!” That’s not good at all. That’s the tax collector in Luke 18 thanking God that he is not like those *“other people.”* Not good! But being *“provoked”* should cause us to take the message out into the marketplace. Paul put himself out there, and so should we.

**III. As we come to the next few verses, I’d also like to suggest that when we head out into the marketplace with a message from God, we should probably just go ahead and EXPECT OPPOSITION.**

Notice (in verses 18-20) that once he runs into these Stoic and Epicurean philosophers, they push back, *“What would this idle babbler wish to say?”* And others, *“He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities,”* since he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. When we look into the background of *“idle babbler,”* we find that it comes from a word meaning “seed picker,” and it seems to be a reference to birds who would peck around all over the place and pick up one seed from over here and one seed from over there, and so on. In a way, they were accusing Paul of intellectual plagiarism. Or, it might have been their way of calling him an intellectual dumpster-diver. Or, in other words, “This guy is nuts!” They were talking down to him. This is an insult. Thankfully, though, they are too refined to beat him and throw him in prison as had been done to Paul previously on this trip! So, they make fun of him for a bit, and they ultimately invite him to explain himself. And we will get to that next week. But for now, the lesson we learn is to expect opposition.

You may remember when I preached on dinosaurs and dragons a few weeks ago, I realized as I was working on the lesson that I was talking like a crazy person. And most science-types here in Madison would agree with that! When you start suggesting that dinosaurs and people co-existed at some point in the past, you start winning awards for being nuts. So also with Paul speaking in ancient Athens concerning Jesus and his resurrection. That will get you a very special “please make fun of me” certificate. And that’s what happened. Paul, though, stays calm and accepts that invitation. Again, more on that next week. But for now, imagine the courage it would take to speak in a place like that. Today, when I ask somebody to preach here when I’m out of town, and if they’ve never done it or if they are really nervous, I will often say, “The church here is on your side. They are cheering for you. They want you to do well. As you speak, they will be praying for you.” Not so with Paul on the Areopagus! So, the lesson is: When we take the gospel into the market place, let’s just expect opposition. And when we expect it, we prepare for it, we brace for it. And later, by the way, Paul addresses this in 1 Corinthians 1, explaining that the message of the death, burial, and resurrection seems foolish, when he says, *“Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God”* (1 Corinthians 1:20-23). Paul acknowledges here that to the Gentiles, to the Athenian philosophers, the message of the cross is *“foolishness.”* So, expect opposition.

**IV. As we come to the end, I’d like to very briefly point out (from verse 21) that we need to realize that THE CULTURE AROUND US IS CONSTANTLY CHANGING.**

And with this, I think it’s funny how Luke (the author) basically tells us who the real “seed-pickers” are! The philosophers are the ones who are truly pecking around aimlessly. The philosophers are the intellectual

dumpster-divers. I just love how the NASB has this in parentheses, *“(Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new.)”* Their job was to latch on to the latest new theory out there. But they had completely missed Jesus and his resurrection. And doesn't that sound familiar? Here we are, nearly 2000 years later, and as a culture we are still chasing after anything that's new. As a culture, we will believe anything but Jesus.

So, I want us to understand how this fits in to preaching Jesus. It's so easy for us to look around us at this culture that doesn't get it and to long for some time from the past when things were better. But here's the problem: First of all, we can't go back. And secondly, the past isn't always all it's cracked up to be. There was a time, for example, less than 200 years ago, when we actually owned people here in this country. And yes, we fought a war over that and more than 600,000 people died in the process to make things better. But as recently as 50 years ago, my parents grew up in a city that had “whites only” water fountains. And we could go on and on with some of the problems we have with the past, but the point is: We're not in the past. Culture always changes.

And so, we need to keep on looking for new ways to connect. Years ago, I was preaching a series of lessons down in Nashville, Tennessee, and on the way to the church building one night, we stopped for gas literally right down the street from the church where I'd be preaching. There was nobody else in the gas station when I went in to pay, so I invited the cashier to worship with us, and I just briefly explained who we were as the churches of Christ. This woman said that she had never heard of the churches of Christ. She had just moved to Nashville from Ethiopia. If she had stuck her head out the door she could have seen the church building. I'm just saying that since the culture changes and doesn't know Jesus, we have opportunities, just like Paul did in Athens.

### Conclusion:

As we think about what we've learned from Paul's approach in Athens, I want us to close by remembering that we are not at war with people. We are not at war with those who celebrate Pride Month. Yes, we need to be *“provoked”* at the idolatry we see around us, but we are not mad at people; we're upset that God isn't being honored as God. That's where this starts, by thinking of people as souls. This then moves us to get the message out into the world. People may not come here, but we can go there. And as we go, we might as well expect opposition. Jesus said so. This doesn't mean that we go run and hide or that we fight back by returning insult for insult. But we brace for it. We prepare for it. And all through this, let's just remember: This is not a new problem, because culture always changes. We don't have time to be longing for some version of the church the way it used to be. The world is past that. Our job is to take Jesus to the world, as it is right now.

Next week, if the Lord wills, we will take a look at Paul's sermon on the Areopagus, and we will look at what he actually says. And I think we'll learn something about the message we need to be preaching to the world around us.

In just a moment, John will lead us in a song, but before we sing, let's go to God in prayer.

Our Father in Heaven,

You are Lord over all the earth, and this morning we pray that we would be a church that sees everybody around us as souls in need of salvation, as the people you sent your Son to save. Be with us as we take your message into the marketplace. Protect us from harm, but if necessary, we pray that you will bless us with the great privilege of being ridiculed in your name. This

world seems so strange sometimes, so as everything changes around us, we pray that you will keep us aligned with your word.

We love you, Father, and we come to you today through Jesus. AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: [fourlakeschurch@gmail.com](mailto:fourlakeschurch@gmail.com)