

“Sermon on Mars Hill”
(Acts 17:16-34)

I. Introduction.

A. Orientation.

1. When we left Paul last week, he was waiting in Athens for Silas and Timothy, because the Jews had run him out of Berea.
 - a. Not all the Jews:
 - (i) Many in Berea had received the Gospel:
 - (ii) The Lord had opened their minds and hearts to receive the Word with “great eagerness.”
 - (iii) They were willing to search the Scripture to see if what they were being taught agreed with it, something, we saw, many today don’t want to do.
 - (iv) The Bereans knew God had spoken in the Word and before they would receive anything new, they wanted to make sure it agreed with that standard.
 - (a) Luke thought this was a commendable attitude, so does the Lord, which is why He draws our attention to it.
 - (b) If we are ever to be grounded in the Scripture, confirmed in the faith, be sure of who we are and where we’re going, we must anchor our beliefs in the Bible.
 - (c) It is the only standard of truth the Lord has given us – we must learn to use it.
 - (v) The Bereans did, which is why their future was now bright and glorious.
 - b. But there were many Jews who were not willing to receive the Word and so ran Paul out of Berea, namely, those of Thessalonica who tried to arrest Paul, whose hearts and minds were closed to the Gospel.
 - (i) When they couldn’t find him in Thessalonica and heard he was preaching in Berea, they made the forty mile trip to stop him.
 - (ii) And so the Berean brethren removed him from that city and took him to Athens in order to keep him safe, while they concealed Silas and Timothy.
2. After Paul arrived, he gave orders to have Silas and Timothy to join him.
 - a. They were to come as soon as possible.
 - b. And when they received the order, they also left.

B. Preview.

1. But now what was Paul to do in the interim while waiting.
 - a. I think we understand by now that Paul was not one to stand around doing nothing.
 - (i) He was very energetic, working with his own hands to meet his own needs, as well as doing everything he could to promote the Gospel.

- (ii) And so that's what he set his heart to do.
- b. While he was in Athens, it wasn't long before he began to get irritated.
 - (i) The city was full of idols that provoked his soul because:
 - (a) Not only would it lead to the destruction of those who worshiped them.
 - (b) But it was an affront to God's honor for which Paul was jealous.
 - (ii) And so Paul did something to rectify the situation:
 - (a) We should note that he didn't pick up a sword to fight.
 - (b) Nor did he run for election in the civil government, though there certainly isn't anything wrong with doing this as long as you are committed to doing things God's way.
 - (c) But he took up the sword of the Spirit and began to fight using the Gospel.
 - (d) He preached first to the Jews and God-fearing Gentiles.
 - (e) But he also reasoned with those who had been entirely outside of the reach of the Scriptures: the pagans in Athens.
- 2. It's really with this latter group that Luke's account has to do this morning – with the idolaters and philosophers of Athens. And, as we might suspect, there are certainly things for us to learn about his approach with them. Let's consider three things from this passage:
 - a. First, that zeal for God's glory should motivate us to evangelize.
 - b. Second, that reasoning with others about the Gospel is what evangelism is all about.
 - c. Finally, our approach in evangelism must differ according to our audience.

II. Sermon.

A. First, what should motivate us in evangelizing the lost?

1. The first and most obvious answer to this question is jealousy (love) for God's glory. "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" (v. 16).
 - a. We saw this in the introduction and should consider it at least briefly.
 - b. We should find some zeal in ourselves for God's honor.
 - (i) This follows from our love to God – if we love Him, it will injure us when He is injured.
 - (ii) How do you feel when someone insults your spouse or your children or someone you admire and respect – protective, somewhat upset or provoked?
 - (iii) This is what we should sense in our hearts at least to some degree when God is offended.
 - (iv) Paul was provoked by their idolatry because it was dishonoring to God:
 - (a) What about our culture?
 - (b) It's largely offensive to God, the lives we live as a nation are offensive to God – if you receive the American Family Association newsletter,

you know there are things going on all the time that are offensive to God.

(c) If we love God, these things should move us to do something towards vindicating His honor and seeking to give Him glory.

2. The second motivation should be love to our neighbor.
 - a. Concern for their lost condition, for the end of their lives, for the endless agony they will endure if they are not saved.
 - b. If we are to do what Christ commands and love our neighbor as ourselves, how can we not be concerned for their danger?
 - c. Richard Baxter: “Oh, if you have the hearts of Christians or of men in you, let them yearn towards your poor ignorant, ungodly neighbors. Alas, there is but a step between them and death and hell; many hundred diseases are waiting ready to seize on them, and if they die unregenerate, they are lost for ever. Have you hearts of rock, that cannot pity men in such a case as this? If you believe not the Word of God, and the danger of sinners, why are you Christians yourselves? If you do believe it, why do you not stir yourself up to the helping of others? Do you not care who is damned, so you be saved? If so, you have sufficient cause to pity yourselves, for it is a frame of spirit utterly inconsistent with grace. . . . Do you live close by them, or meet them in the streets, or labor with them, or travel with them, or sit and talk with them, and say nothing to them of their souls, or the life to come? If their houses were on fire, you would run and help them; and will you not help them when their souls are almost at the fire of hell?” Richard Baxter.
 - d. Love to our neighbor will be a motivation.
 3. And of course, we are duty bound to evangelize.
 - a. The Lord has given us a commission: to take the Gospel to every nation.
 - b. This we will also submit to and do, *if* we love God.
- B. Second, what method should we use in evangelizing the lost?
1. This isn't too difficult to figure out:
 - a. Paul used the same method wherever he went: “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” (v. 17).
 - b. Wherever he found an audience, he would begin to talk, give evidence, reason with them, finding a way to communicate the Gospel in terms they could understand.
 - c. The Gospel does not bypass the mind, but comes through the mind. We must learn effectively to communicate the Gospel.
 - d. There are many ways of doing this – tracts, books, Gospel blimps (?) – but the simplest and most effective way is to talk to others about it.
 2. As we are faithful to open the doors of opportunity and speak, the Lord will be faithful to open further doors.
 - a. Apparently, Paul's conversations peaked their curiosity.

- (i) The Epicureans and Stoic philosophers found him in the marketplace and began to dispute with him (v. 18).
 - (a) The Epicureans were those who made pleasure their highest goal in life – especially the pleasure that food and drink could bring.
 - (b) The Stoics made virtue their highest goal, wanting to live according to their reason and natural law instead of sensual pleasures, and trying to detach themselves from their emotions. They were the ascetics of their day.
- (ii) For both groups, their first reaction was that of unbelief:
 - (a) They were trying to interpret what Paul was saying in their own false worldview.
 - (1) Some didn't think he was making any sense (idle babblers).
 - (2) Others thought he was proclaiming a strange deity – other than those they were used to – since he was proclaiming Christ's death and resurrection.
 - (b) But they wanted to hear more.
 - (1) So they invited Paul to the Aeropagus, or Mars Hill – a natural amphitheater, with a flat area from which to speak and a very large rock that could be used for the audience to sit – so that they might find out more exactly what he was talking about (v. 19).
 - (2) They had never heard this before and so were intrigued (v. 20).
 - (3) Even if it was out of mere intellectual curiosity, since the Athenians didn't seem to have anything better to do with their time than talking about new things (v. 21), Paul saw it as a Providential opportunity that he wasn't willing to pass up.
 - (4) Paul's faithfulness led to greater opportunities: if we are willing to be faithful in the small things, the Lord will open the door to greater things.

C. Finally, what should our approach be specifically to those who don't come from a Judeo Christian background?

1. The first thing we notice is that he doesn't deal with these Greeks as he does with Jews.
 - a. He doesn't begin with the Scriptures – with Special Revelation, although this is where he wants to lead them in his argument – but he begins where they are – with General Revelation – which is where we must begin our argument.
 - b. He begins by pointing out their religious nature: “So Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, ‘Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects’” (v. 22).
 - (i) This is one point of contact with fallen man.
 - (ii) We are all religious by nature.
 - (iii) We are all aware of our dependence on something else for our existence and continuance.

- c. But what is that something else? Paul says it is a deity, but not one they were familiar with. “For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you” (v. 23).
 - (i) There was an altar set up to an unknown god, just in case the Athenians missed one – they didn’t want to incur that god’s wrath.
 - (ii) But they had missed one, the only One, the true God.
 - d. Paul tells them who He is: He is the Creator, “The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands” (v. 24).
 - (i) He the God who made the world and all things.
 - (ii) Being the Creator, He is Lord over what He made.
 - (iii) And being the One who made all things, and therefore greater than all things, He does not dwell in temples made by the hands He created – He is too great for them to contain.
 - e. He is also the great Benefactor: “Nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all *people* life and breath and all things” (v. 25).
 - (i) Being the infinite Creator, He doesn’t need His creatures.
 - (ii) Instead, they need Him, since He gives to all life, breath and all things.
 - (iii) We are His children (v. 28) and depend on Him.
 - f. He is sovereign, bringing about the rise of nations from one man, as well as their demise: “And He made from one *man* every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined *their* appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation” (v. 26).
 - g. He is infinite: “For in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we also are His children’” (v. 28).
 - h. And He desires the worship due to Him: “That they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us” (v. 27).
 - i. This is the God he wants to introduce them to: that God that all men see and know from the Creation – the same One we must point men to who have no knowledge of the Scripture.
2. But we then need to bring our argument to the Scripture: we see this in how Paul brings his point back to how it bears on their idolatry:
- a. God is not an idol. He says, “Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man” (v. 29).
 - (i) If God made us, then we did not and could not have made Him.
 - (ii) If we are His offspring, we shouldn’t think that He is like gold, silver, stone, fashioned by man.
 - (iii) This demeaning belief about God must be discarded.

- b. They must repent of the sin of idolatry, as well as all their sins:
 - (i) “Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all *people* everywhere should repent” (v. 30).
 - (ii) Now that the Gospel is being preached and the light is shining in the darkness, the darkness no longer has ignorance as an excuse.
 - c. And they should prepare themselves for the Day of Judgment: “Because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed” (v. 31).
 - d. As to the fact that it is coming, God has raised Him from the dead: “Having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead” (v. 31).
 - (i) Christ’s resurrection was His vindication from the Father that all He said was true, and this is what He told us was coming (John 5).
 - (ii) But His resurrection is also proof that God is able to raise the dead – resurrection to judgment is coming.
 - (iii) You see how Paul uses the coming judgment as a means to awaken them to their danger. Remember John the Baptist, “Flee from the coming wrath.”
3. Finally, we see the two possible reactions: belief and unbelief (vv. 32-34).
- a. First, unbelief, “Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some *began* to sneer, but others said, ‘We shall hear you again concerning this’” (v. 32).
 - (i) There were those who ridiculed the truth – we have plenty of these today.
 - (ii) There were those who suspended judgment – just another way of rejecting Christ.
 - b. But second, belief/true faith: “But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them” (v. 34).
 - (i) When Paul left (v. 33), it became apparent they weren’t all left in darkness.
 - (ii) There were some who believed: and this is remarkable considering how much exposure they had to the Gospel: just Paul’s sermon.
 - (iii) The Lord sometimes converts quickly, but most often over a period of time and several exposures to the Gospel.
 - (iv) The important thing is that we expose them to that Gospel.
 - c. And so,
 - (i) Let’s pray that the Lord would give us a zeal for the Gospel.
 - (ii) That He would give us the ability to communicate it well.
 - (iii) And that He would give us wisdom in the right approach, according to our audience.
 - (iv) We need God’s grace for this, so let’s prepare to receive it as we prepare for the Lord’s Table. Amen.