

SERMON: THE UNKNOWN GOD

Acts 17: 22-23

(22) Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars' hill, and said, Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious. (23) For I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, Him declare I unto you.

Introduction

Paul is in Athens, the central city of Greece. Although it was five hundred years past its Golden Age, it was still considered to be the intellectual and artistic capital of their known world. It was still known for great philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. It was still revered for great playwrights such as Sophocles and Aristophanes. Its major historians, such as Herodotus and Thucydides, were still considered authoritative. The mathematical principles of Euclid and Pythagoras were implemented all over their known world. Greek culture was still pervasive. Remember, the New Testament was originally written in Greek.

Like any first-time visitor to famous Athens, Paul toured the city. He wandered around the city streets, which were full of magnificent marble temples, columns, sculptures, and statuary. He was taken aback by the number of idols representing pagan deities. He was hardly a stranger to Greco-Roman cities, being well traveled and a native of Tarsus. However, for Paul, Athens was over the top. The more he observed, the more exasperated he became at a city virtually dedicated to idolatry. On every corner, on every hill, on every promenade, were representations of or dedications to Greek gods and goddesses. Petronius, the Roman satirist, remarked, "It was easier to find a god than a man in Athens."

Serving and petitioning many gods had to be a taxing lifestyle. A person had to have a god for each aspect of life: a god for the home, a god for travel on land, a god for travel on the sea, a god for the crops, a god for the herds, and even a god for romance—we all know about Cupid.

While taking in the sights and sounds of the city and observing the stunning variety of objects worshiped, Paul came upon an altar with the inscription ***Agnosto Theo***, "TO AN UNKNOWN GOD." Historians tell us that Athens had many of these altars addressed to

unknown deities. The reason the Athenians placed these altars in various locations around the city was as a practical safety precaution in response to their polytheistic beliefs. These altars were an “insurance policy” against invoking the wrath of any slighted god or goddess whom, out of ignorance, they had neglected to worship.

Paul used the idea of the unknown god to segue into witnessing about the One True Living God. Paul affirmed that the Athenians had been correct in this practice. There was indeed a God of whom they had been ignorant. Paul explained this God to them. He is the God of all time dimensions. He is the God of the past, the Creator. He is the God of the present, The Redeemer, through the saving work of Jesus. He is the God of the future, the Righteous Judge.

Exposition

1. When God Is Directing, The Right Person Is At The Right Place At The Right Time.

(Paul Was The Right Person To Interact With The Athenians.)
(It Was Tough Going, But He Was The Right Person.)

2. You Can Do A Lot Of Things, But Still Miss The Most Important Things.

(“You Can Do A Lot Of Banging With Your Hammer And Still Not Hit The Nail On The Head.” Quote from Walter Ward, Pastor’s Granddaddy.)

3. Intellect Alone Is Insufficient.

(Intellect Unbridled Can Lead To Horrific Results.)
(History Is Full Of Examples-Nazi Germany Is One.)

4. Take Advantage Of Teaching Moments.

(Don’t Let Them Pass Without Sharing Your Wisdom & Knowledge.)

5. Make The Unknown God Known To The Lost.

(Start Where They Are And Take Them Where They Need To Be.)

Closing Thoughts

Theologians have speculated for centuries as to whether Paul was pleased with his results in Athens. Verse thirty-four reads: “Howbeit certain men clave unto him, and believed: among the which was Dionysius the Areopgate, and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.” By the standards of Pentecost and other evangelistic actives the results were meager.

Athens was a “tough sell,” but that did not deter Apostle Paul. Even today, witnessing can be a tough sell in our secular, it’s-all-about-me, corrupt, contemporary world. We should not refrain from spreading the good news. We must remember God allows His Word to bear fruit in one form or another. Historian record that a Christian congregation was established and a house of worship was built later on the seeds that Paul planted.

We should all be able to answer affirmatively the call and response question embedded in this spiritual.

“Are you a witness for my Lord? Are you a witness for my Lord?”
Yes, I’m a witness for my Lord? Yes, I’m a witness for my Lord? Yes, I’m a witness for my Lord?”

Give God Glory! Give God All The Glory!

Related Scripture

Acts 17:1-34

End Note

The Greek word that the King James Version translates as superstitious, means to be “religiously frightened” or “divinity-fearing.” They were constantly on pins and needles to make sure no small gesture or the absence of one would offend the gods and bring on “divinely initiated misfortune.” So, in a sense they were similar to people who are superstitious today. You know those who make sure they do not walk under a ladder, or make sure they do not break a mirror, or don’t let a black cat get in their path, or don’t let a post come between them and a walking companion, or place a hat on a bed. Here’s how I would translated that passage: You are religiously paranoid and have still missed the One True Living God. Let me tell you about Him.”

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