

=THE BOOK OF ACTS=

Lesson 17

Paul at Athens - Acts 17

AIM: to teach my pupils the facts concerning the time Paul spent in the city of Athens and also to teach the sinfulness of idolatry in any shape or form.

POINT OF CONTACT: Bring several items to class that would be the usual items that you would carry. For instance, a lady could have a coin, a pen, perhaps some item of makeup or a medicinal item. Set each one of these before the students, explaining that the Athenians had gods for every conceivable need. For instance, they had a god of shame who took care of them when they were shamed. They had a god of health, a god of wisdom, a god of light, a god of darkness, a god of material things—a god for every conceivable purpose. Explain to the students that these items represent gods that the Athenians would carve in the very image of what they considered the god to look like.

INTRODUCTION: The city of Athens was the seat of learning or the seat of philosophical learning in all the world. It was a city that prided itself upon being composed of the most learned, most witty and most intellectual of all the world's people. They considered themselves to be better than the rest of the world. Their city was beautiful and one that had great broad thoroughfares. The distinguishing mark of the city was the fact that every thoroughfare was lined with statue after statue sculptured by the world's greatest artists. The people revered these artists as gods. It has been said by many of the authors that it was easier to find a god in Athens than it was to find a man. Athens originally had been settled on a great stone hill rising out of a smooth, level plain. It was a city whose primary deity was Minerva, from whom the city received its name. As the city gradually grew, the plain was taken over with the homes and business places, and the hill rising out of the city came to be covered with the places of their religious services. It was capped with a great temple built to the god, Mars, for whom the hill was named, "Mars' Hill." It was a place where the people enjoyed philosophical discussion, and it might be compared to some of the more intellectual of our cities today where the people are interested primarily in intellectual discussion but are not really seeking any answers.

- I. PAUL WORKED ALONE. Read Acts 17:13-16. We find in this sequence of verses that Paul had been dispatched to Athens and, for some reason, he had to go by himself. We find that Silas and Timothy had stayed in another city; and Paul, in the heart of this great intellectual center, was by himself. (Here is a good place to dwell upon the fact that many times God puts one person in the place of service. There is one student in your class, perhaps, who is the only Christian in his home. There is one student, perhaps, who is the only Christian on his job or in his class, if he attends a public school. Dwell for a good period showing that the one person that God puts in this place of service is the instrument that God uses to work on all the rest of the people. This would also be a good place to remind our pupils that many times we are the only Christians in a restaurant, the only Christians at a store, etc. God wants us to be a witness for Him.)
- II. PAUL WORKED IN ANSWER TO HIS BURDEN. Acts 17:16 begins with the words, "Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was stirred in him..." This literally means he was "boiling inside." There is one thing that has always burdened Christians. There is one thing that has always caused them to react. Notice these Scriptures: Exodus 32:19, 20; Numbers 25:1-11; Psalm 119:136, 158. Paul's spirit was stirred within him, for he saw people who were not giving God what rightfully belonged to Him. Our reason for serving, our reason for working, our reason for witnessing is not basically to assure people that they can have better things in life and so they can have a home in Heaven, but to see that people who are not giving God what is His will begin to do so! Our function and privilege is to lead others to give God the service that they would not be giving under normal circumstances. Of course, a secondary result of that is that people are put in a position where God can bless them. Our reason for working is not just that they can be blessed but that God can receive what is rightfully His.
- III. THINGS THAT BURDENED PAUL SHOULD BURDEN EVERY CHRISTIAN. Acts 17:16b says, "...his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry." The whole city was sold over into idolatry. When a Christian sees people in idolatry, the Christian should be stirred also. Idolatry

is defined as follows: (1) worship of idols; (2) paying divine homage to images; (3) adoration of created or imaginary beings, natural objects or forces; and (4) to hold inordinate affection. Any time a Christian sees such situations, it should stir within that person a desire to see that God rightfully receives what is His. Idolatry in the Bible is defined in Exodus 20:3-5; Exodus 34:13-17; and Deuteronomy 5:7-9.

1. Having any god before Him.
2. Making any image.
3. Bowing down to any image.
4. Having anything to do with an image.
5. Spending all your time in eating, drinking and playing. See I Corinthians 10:7.
6. Attempting to escape from temptation in a way other than God's way. Notice I Corinthians 10:13, 14.

Each of these, whether it be a person who carves a statue and sets it in his front yard, or a person who is attempting to escape from the temptations of the day by using worldly methods, is an idolater. One is just as much an idolater as the other and should cause a stirring within the heart of every Christian who observes it.

IV. PAUL WAS OPPOSED IN HIS LABOR. Of course, any time a person begins to do things for the Lord, there is opposition. Paul had the following specific opponents:

1. The philosophers. They believed that everything that a person did had to have a logical reason for it being done.
2. The Epicureans. They believed that this life is a life of "eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow you may die," and that our only reason for existence is pleasure, the pleasure being an end within itself. They believed that anything was right as long as it brought a personal joy. This could be likened unto the people today, such as lovers of rock 'n' roll, the liquor and dope crowd, and the many, many people who profess to be Christians but who spend more time doing things that bring joy to themselves rather than attempting to do things that would bring pleasure to the Lord.
3. The Stoics. They believed that this world had been set in order, and that God, if there was a God, was a god of wrath. They believed that primarily man was to spend his time living in such a way that he could be an example to the community. His time was to be spent in self-analysis, bettering himself in the eyes of the people about him, etc.

Though these people had the height of learning and all the earthly pleasures and beauties, and though these same people had a system of morality, they still had no peace within their hearts. In Acts 17:21, we are told that the Athenians "spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing." If reason would bring peace of heart, they would not have to look for some new thing. If pleasure would bring peace of heart, they would not have to look for some new thing. If the Stoics' self-analysis and self-repression brought peace of mind and heart, they would not have to look for some new thing. This would be a perfect place to spend time with your pupils, making them realize that peace of mind, joy, etc. come not from what we do, what we learn, or what brings momentary pleasure. This peace of mind has to come from Someone Who knows what we need, for we do not know what it would take to bring pleasure. Impress upon the pupils that education will not bring them peace of mind without having Jesus.

V. PAUL LABORED AS A CHRISTIAN SHOULD.

1. He was kind. It would have been very easy for Paul to start speaking rudely to these people and be very caustic, very nasty. It would have been easy for him to have poked fun at them about their idols. Rather than doing such, he told them he knew of Someone Who would give them what they need so that they could do away with these idols. He was courteous. If there is anything that Christians should be when witnessing to others, they should be courteous. They should be careful with their language. They should be careful not to offend the person to whom they are speaking.
2. He was fearless. Here was a place where all the townspeople were lined up, and he was speaking before the governing body of the city; yet, he spoke to them without hesitation. He took advantage of the opportunity. Here is a good place to remind our own people that a Christian is to be a Christian whether other people regard him as such or whether other people oppose him.

- VI. PAUL TURNED THEIR OWN ATTITUDES AGAINST THEM. In this city, as we have mentioned, there were gods everywhere. There was one statue that was to the unknown god. The Athenians said, “Even though we believe there is this god, and another god, and another god, etc., there is one god that we just can’t figure out. We cannot categorize that one.” In the case of some, they would say, “With all of the gods that we have, we might have missed one, so we will build a statue to that one.” Paul looked at these people and said, “This unknown God that you talk about is the One that I would like to describe.” This is the situation when we go into hospitals and the person says, “I just don’t know why I am here.” This is the situation when we go into a home of a person who is a devout member of a denomination that does not know salvation and that person says, “I go to church, and I do all that the church says, but there is still something lacking.” Paul took the opportunity of using in his preaching the very things that the people said, for he recognized that in spite of all their attributes and characteristics, there was a hunger within them.
- VII. PAUL HAD RESULTS. Note in Acts 17:19, they brought him unto Areopagus, which was the ruling body of the city. They met on Mars’ Hill to pass judgment on situations that were delivered to them, much as our Supreme Court does. Notice at the end of the sermon, Dionysius, who was a member of that ruling body, became a believer. See Acts 17:34. (This is a good place to impress upon our own people that no matter how hard the situation may look, never is there any situation too difficult for the Lord, and faithfulness will bring results. This is proven time and time and time again at our altar and by our soul winners.)
- VIII. PAUL WAS ASHAMED OF HIS EFFORTS, BUT HE KEPT ON WORKING. See I Corinthians 2:1-6. Theologians are divided on their opinion of the Mars’ Hill sermon. Many believe that Paul should have been more dogmatic. Many believe that he did the right thing. The results were not as great as they had been at other times. Paul said when he wrote the letter to the Corinthians that he came to them feeling fearful, shaking, nervous, trembling, but with one determination, and that was to preach Jesus and Him crucified. You will remember that he went to Corinth directly from Athens. It would seem that he is humbly saying, “I wish I had done differently on Mars’ Hill.” The thing that is worthy of note is that the results were small, and whether he thought it was his fault or not, he kept on going. Most any of us would serve the Lord and witness if a hundred people were converted every time we spoke. Most any of us would do what the Lord wants done if we did everything perfectly. Many times we do make mistakes, and many times we do things that are wrong, but we should keep on going and keep on going. This is the test of a person! We should impress upon our pupils that the blessings of God come not so much because we are perfect, for we are not, but because we are persistent.

QUESTIONS:

1. When Paul was working in Athens, he had _____ with him.
2. Paul’s spirit was stirred within him when he saw the city wholly given to _____.
3. In the city of Athens, it was easier to find a god than a _____.
4. The philosophers believed only what they could understand by _____.
5. The Epicureans believed that man’s life was to be one continual round of _____.
6. The Stoics believed that man’s life engaged continually in self-_____.
7. The Athenians spent their time seeking to hear or tell some _____.
8. They had many gods and one altar inscribed to the _____.
9. Idolatry is not only buildings, statues, images, idols and altars, but it is putting anything before _____.

MEMORY VERSE: “Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold or silver,” Acts 17:29a.