

Religious?

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[0 : 00] Good morning everyone, have Acts 17 open in front of you, this is where we're going to be today. And here's what I want to do as I start, I want to tell you about my good friend called Gordon.

Gordon is a pastor in another part of the city. Gordon and his family just live around the corner from us in Libertin. Gordon's a really good friend and here's why I love Gordon, I love his passion for Jesus.

And here's what he started doing on Tuesday afternoons over the last couple of months. He gets on a bus at Libertin, jumps on it, he pays the fare and he makes his way all the way down to Edinburgh University campus.

And here's what he's doing, he's talking to people. So no agenda really, he's just talking to people. He's lovingly interested in what is going on in people's lives. So he asks them, tell me about some of the biggest problems that you're facing in your life right now.

What are they? Tell me about some of your biggest fears. It's amazing, he was telling me the other day what's coming back. I'm sure it won't surprise you. Mental health concerns, the pain of loneliness, the worries about the cost of living.

[1 : 08] Am I going to be able to finish this degree? What comes after it? But here's what he does. He concludes every single conversation with this question. He says, would you consider yourself a religious or a spiritual person?

So he's telling me the other day, he's spoken to 25 students over the last couple of months. Which I think is pretty good going actually, 25 students. Question for you, how many of them do you think identified as Christian?

None of them. None of them. I wonder how that strikes you this morning. Maybe it's something you identify with.

Maybe you're here and you would say, that's exactly where I'm at. I just want you to know you're so welcome here. I love that you're here. Or maybe you listen to it and it causes you to despair.

Here's my reaction to it. I heard Gordon say it and immediately I'm asking the question in my mind. I wonder if it's the one that hit you. That when it comes to reaching people in our city, for whom Jesus just isn't even on the radar.

[2 : 13] Can Christianity cut it? In the book of Acts, last week, do you remember where we were?

Here, flick back to the first half of 17. We can kind of get our heads around the fact that the gospel, the message of Jesus, made a big splash in a place like Thessalonica.

I can kind of get your head around that one, okay? Because verse 2 of chapter 17, come with me. What do these people know? What do these people have? What do these people know inside out? What do these people devote themselves to? Do you see the words? Scriptures. The Scriptures.

This is what the people in Thessalonica have. So if you like, the religious kindling was already there for Paul to kind of use it and place it and pray that the Holy Spirit would take it and get the Jesus fire started, yeah?

But Athens, this is a different ballgame completely. This is the intellectual capital of the world we're talking about here. This is the place where culture is shaped, just to throw some names at you.

[3 : 21] This is Plato. This is Aristotle. This is Socrates. All these years later, we've even heard of these guys. This is Athens. This is where the leading thinkers of the day all come together to do their thing.

And I think somebody rightly compared the Athens then, everything that it represented, to the Oxford and Cambridge of today. I think that's a pretty good comparison if you're trying to get your head around it.

So can Christianity cut it in a place like Athens? The message of Jesus, the gospel, will it run out of gas?

Has the gospel made its match? Here's why whoever you are here today, whatever you think about this God, whatever that survey would find you, I want you to listen to what this passage is telling you.

It's telling you that nothing is going to stop the Spirit of God doing the work of God as he takes the Word of God, where we read about the Son of God, and he applies it to the hearts of people all over the world despite their background.

[4 : 30] This should give us confidence, I take it today, that the gospel works. And it's because of who this God is, and it's because of who you and I are as human beings.

Here's what I loved being reminded of this week. Ready for this? One truth to carry with us through this. Everyone's a worshiper. Everyone's a worshiper.

Everyone's worshipping something. What was that Bob Dylan song? We have a certain era. You've got to serve somebody. Right? Maybe the Lord, maybe the devil, but you've got to serve somebody. Everyone's worshipping something. So there's that inbuilt desire, one that's hardwired into the DNA of every single human being that longs to find something to live for.

You see, in Athens, hardly anybody's heard of Jesus, and yet the local comics in the day used to joke about the fact that it was a city where it was more likely that you were going to bump into a god than you were to a man.

[5 : 36] These gods, or as the passage says, to get into it, it says idols. Now, what's an idol? Try not to think miniature Buddha.

Get it way bigger. Way bigger. What's an idol? It's something that I'm ploughing myself into because I'm convinced that that is the thing that will in turn provide me with satisfaction and meaning and pleasure in my life.

It's an idol. It's an idol. You've got to see before it's a physical thing. It's a heart thing. There was a female American tennis player years ago called Chris Avert.

She was one of the greatest singles players the women's game has ever seen. She gave a fascinating interview towards the end of her career. A journalist asks her, how are you feeling about retirement?

And she said she was petrified. Why? And this was her line. Because tennis makes me feel like I'm somebody. Isn't it fascinating?

[6 : 41] Tennis makes me feel like I'm somebody. You take the word tennis out, insert in it whatever you will. Is that not what we're all longing for? Is that not the thing we're all searching for, that we're pursuing?

Is it not why people in our city are throwing money at cars? Is it not why people in our city are queuing outside the Apple store to get the latest iPhone?

If you get caught up in that trap, when it comes out, got an iPhone myself, nothing wrong with an iPhone. Is it not why people plow themselves into showing themselves in the best light on social media?

Is it not why the house market in our city right now is bonkers? Because people are throwing money at things, thinking if only I get that, then that will provide me with the lifestyle that I want to get the things that I need in my life.

Is it not why the magazines at WH Smiths are full of celebrity magazines? Because we want to know what that life is like. Is it not why the magazines are also full of self-help and image?

[7 : 37] Is it not why we still talk about this thing called midlife crisis? Because people hit post 45, having run hard at life for a season, and get to a point, they think to themselves, when the monotony of it kicks in, that they stop and say, what on earth is my life all about?

Edinburgh's full of idols. Our hearts are full of idols. Everyone's a worshiper. The question is not if we're worshipping. The question is what we're worshipping.

I love C.S. Lewis. This is the most over-quoted thing I've ever heard, but I tell you it because I think he gets it bang on the money. Here's what he says about human beings. And I love C.S. Lewis because he just makes observations about human beings that we know are true.

He said this, we are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us. Like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in the slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea, we are far too easily

pleased.

What he's saying is that we were made in the image of God. We were made to know him. We were made to enjoy him forever. But what's happened is the sin in each of our hearts has bent us in on ourselves so that we take the good things that God gives us and we make them God things.

[9 : 07] The tragedy of humanity is that we prefer to worship the created rather than the creator. And that's idolatry. Athens is a city full of gods because its people's hearts are full of idols.

And so here goes Paul into this city with the message of Jesus. Really quickly Paul, Luke tells us four things happen to Paul when he hits Athens.

We'll run through these really quickly, okay? Here's number one. His heart breaks. Verse 16. He's waiting for Silas and Timothy to come from Thessalonica. You see?

And he goes sightseeing. So verse 16. Luke wants us to know what's going on in Paul's heart. Are you going to come with me and see the words here? He wasn't impressed. Do you see the words? He was distressed. Because the praise that God alone deserves, the people of Athens are taking it and they're giving it to something else.

[10 : 14] The word distressed, it's almost like, it's like a jealous yearning for. Remember, Paul's grown up steeped in the scriptures. God has consistently said all the way through the Old Testament, I will not give my glory to another.

You will have no other God before me. I will be number one in your life. Long to be number one in your life. And you can imagine Paul then he's with each passing idol saying to himself, God alone should get that praise.

the God alone who has made you so that you would give him that praise and you would enjoy him forever. You see the idolatry that's going on in Athens, it breaks Paul's heart.

And you've got to understand it brings God's judgment. And so the question I think we've got to ask ourselves as we respond to this is do our hearts feel the same? Do our hearts long that the people of our world lovingly would take their eyes off their idols and give praise to God alone that he deserves?

You've got to say who's Paul emulating here? Where's he got this from? He's got it from the Lord Jesus. You know, I love it when reading the Sporn in Mark chapter 10 where the rich young ruler comes to Jesus.

[11 : 36] What must I do? He says, I've kept the commands and Jesus says, sell all that you have and give it to the poor and the young man walks away empty. Why? Because he had tons of stuff. And I love it there.

Why did Jesus speak to him? Why did Jesus tease out the idol in his life? Because he loved them. I love it. And then the same Jesus would sit on the cusp of the city and would say, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often I would have gathered you like a hen gathers her chicks but you would not come.

His heart breaks for the idolatry in people's hearts. And that's why he goes to the cross. This is the gospel. Jesus, the perfect worshiper, goes to the cross to die the death and to take the punishment that idolaters like you and me deserve.

He takes our hell. He dies and he takes it on himself by grace alone. His heart breaks and I take it that's what's going on here with Paul.

His heart breaks. His heart is distressed for what's going on in people's lives. His heart breaks and his eyes look.

[12 : 49] Number two, where does he go? Verse 17. He goes to the synagogue and he goes to the marketplace. You see?

So what's he going in search of? He's going in search of people. Verse 17. He reasoned. He spoke. Presumably he listened.

What's he doing? I think he's just listening for clues as to what makes people think. What are they doing? What do they value? Where are they? Where are they?

What are they believing? How are they living? He's spending time with people so much so that he can get up in front of the Areopagus which I guess in this day is like a mashup between a debating chamber, a high court, and a university teaching department.

And he can say verse 22, 23. People of Athens, I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship.

[13:54] Do you see what he's doing? He's saying I walked around, I listened, I looked. He talked, he observed, he engaged. Do you know what I love? I love how ordinary that is. It's not like he's enrolled in night classes at the Athenian college.

Would you teach me how the locals think? He's not got one of those tapes listening to how the locals speak, has he? He doesn't bring his PhD game to the floor. He just spent time with people. You know, comedians today they always talk about observational comedy. I take it this passage challenges us and calls us to be observational evangelists. You know, I was spending time with people.

I was spending time lovingly listening to where people are at, what's going on. You know, I've got a friend called Pete who lives in Glasgow. He's a fellow pastor and also a parent. He was telling me the other day what he does to help him get good at this is he just blocks out in his calendar 8.30 to 9.30 every Monday to Friday blocks it out. Do you know why? School run time. He says, I make time, we get there early so we can spend time with the parents.

[15:07] I want to know them. I want to listen and when I've dropped the kids off I give myself a good half an hour just to be available for people if they want to talk. Are you walking that route? I'll come that route with you. Just speaks to them.

Take it, that's the heart behind our evangelism cards. Just writing names down of people. Who can we care and serve this week? Who can we invite to come and see?

Who can we go and get to know and go and tell? This is about people. Long to hear people, what makes them tick. Do you know a wonderful way of doing it is you're going to work tomorrow listing what makes people tick?

What did you do at the weekend? Wonderful opportunity. I always find it on a Friday what do people ask you? What are you doing at the weekend? On Monday what do they ask you?

What did you do at the weekend? Two wonderful opportunities. You miss the boat on a Friday get in on a Monday. Telling people what you did. Listening to people what they did. What's going on in their lives. But do you see how Paul looks?

[16:07] He looks. And number three his mind thinks. How can I connect these people with the Bible story? He's got a grasp of a biblical world view.

You know I love how he convinced this morning that the world the Bible describes as the world that you're living in. Are you convinced that the biblical world view is the best? It makes sense of life.

That God by his grace has opened our eyes to see it. I was thinking this week but for the grace of God what are the things that I would be pursuing in my life?

By his grace he's opened my eyes to see that this Bible story this world that I'm living in he helps me understand it. The world that the Bible describes I'm convinced that it makes sense of the world in which you and I live every day.

And so what he does is he takes Athens and he tries to connect them into the biblical world view. Do you see it's in verse 23 he spots an idol with a line on the front to an unknown God.

[17:19] This is what he quotes. I take it what's going on here the Athenians are just spreading their bets. They set up an idol to a random God just in case they've accidentally missed one out and they offend them.

Your hearts are so full of idols says Paul that you worship a God you don't even know. And here's his end. How much more then should you worship the God of the Bible the creator of the world who has made himself known?

And I take it this is the whole point of what Paul does here is he just talks about the God who has made himself known. And it's such an important point that we understand what he's doing.

You know one of the toys that's been passed down through our children is Mr. Potato Head.

Remember him? Mr. Potato Head a classic timeless toy. Why it's so much fun?

It's Mrs. Potato Head as well isn't it now? You can make Mr. Potato Head look however you want him to look can't you? Take his nose out put it where his arms should be. Mustache on or off.

[18:26] Angry eyes or normal eyes. You can make Mr. Potato Head look however you want him to look. But you can't do that with God. It's like a WhatsApp chat isn't it?

Where you can see but you cannot comment. You cannot make it fit to your own image. God has made himself known. Right? He's revealed himself in creation.

He's revealed himself in his words. He's written because we're made in his image. Our consciences. What we understand to be right and wrong.

Again it comes from the fact that God has made himself known and he's revealed himself supremely in the person of Jesus. If you hear today and you wonder what is this God? Who is this God? What is he like? You look at Jesus Christ. He's the image of the invisible God. What Paul does in verse 23 is he connects Athens to Genesis.

[19 : 28] You spend your time trying to make a home for your God so that they can live in your world. But let me tell you about the God of the Bible who made you and you're living in his world. You spend your time making your own gods, making gods in your image.

But let me tell you about the God of the Bible who made you and made you in his image. That yes, I was reading a stat this week that if the chemical elements of your body were lumped together and sold you wouldn't have enough money to buy two flat whites.

But make no mistake that you're matter that matters. Why? Because you're made wonderfully and beautifully in the image of God. And it's why it's so important isn't it when we look at stuff that's going on in America that will probably come here that we understand that from the moment of conception every life matters.

Every life matters. And you can't help but not get involved in that. That every life whoever you are has value, has dignity, has worth. Not because you earned it.

Because this God made you in his image. Paul is saying the very breath that you breathe, God who created all things, gave you that breath.

[20 : 45] The very food that you eat, God who makes all things and sustains all things, he's given you life. You see what he's saying? It's what scientists today, I take it they observe when they call what's going on in the world, they call it fine tuning.

And as a result, because you're made in God's image, you're accountable to him. You see, he even quotes some of their own poets to help them see that deep down you all know this to be true.

Something in you that clicks with what I'm saying. But you see what he's doing? He taps into what they are doing and he unearths their inconsistencies and he lovingly and logically connects them to the Bible story.

So simple and yet so brave to do it. You know, comedian Frank Skinner, who from what I can tell has got some kind of belief in God.

I love this story. He was debating with a friend of his who refused to believe that God created the world. So the two of them are going back, back and forth and his friend said, we're getting nowhere with this, listen, do you fancy a cuppa?

[22 : 01] So his friend goes away and puts the kettle on, turns around and gets back into the saddle of the conversation and they chat some more and all of a sudden they hear the kettle, it pings and his friend comes out with the line, I better go and see to that cup of tea because that cup of tea won't make itself, will it?

To which Frank Skinner simply said, why not? You know, there's a simple logic to what Paul is doing here. He's taken something unknown, something people haven't quite thought about and he's just bringing out the simplicity of it.

his mind thinks and then lastly, his number four, his mouth speaks. You see verse 18, Paul's taken to the Areopagus and you see how he's been taken there by the people who heard him speak in the marketplace.

I was thinking about this week, this wasn't part of the script, this wasn't part of the plan, this wasn't the diary that Paul would end up getting this opportunity to speak and yet to see how God is sovereign over every single incident.

Becky Manley Pippert in her wonderful book, Out of the Salt Shaker and Into the World, she calls these kind of things the divine appointments, love that, as if to say there is no such thing as chance.

[23 : 25] Every single person that we come across in our lives is somebody who God has ordained would be there and it changes how you think about your life, doesn't it, what you do. Paul preaches the cross, I take it Luke's focus here is on the resurrection because that's the thing that brought the sneers, you see verse 32, quite literally they burst out laughing, that's what that sneering word means, they burst out laughing.

Who is this babbler? The image there, I think the word is of a little pigeon going around just picking up little seeds, different seeds and trying to cobble it together in its mouth, that's what they're saying of Paul, he's just picking up threads and nonsense and trying to patch it together and make something.

The Greeks thought that any notion of an afterlife was laughable, but what does it prove? It proves the resurrection that this Jesus, we will all need to give account to him for how we've lived before him and God has raised this Jesus and seated him in the place of all authority and one day he will return and I want you to hear those words and perfect justice will be done when this King Jesus returns.

Perfect justice. We've seen in the world this week, haven't we? Soldiers being caught and the only reason they were caught is because we happen to see it on the CCTV. Makes you think, doesn't it, what on earth is going on in the world right now in that part of the world that we will never see and no one will know about except those who've been murdered.

But this God sees, he sees everything and one day perfect justice will be done by King Jesus. The fact that he has not come yet is nothing to do with his incompetence as we thought about a few weeks ago, it's to do with his mercy.

[25 : 07] He longs for people who are lost in idolatry to come to know him. People sneer, others mull, we want to hear you again in this, I take it that's what that means.

People think there might be something in this, can I rethink it through? Let me just say we flagged this book last week and it really hit with a lot of people which is wonderful and I bought 25 copies that are out the front, just grab your own, put a little donation in if you want, it's just called Are You 100% Sure You Want to Be an Agnostic?

And it's a wonderful little book that just takes you through some questions. If you're in this category of mulling, we might want to hear you again on this, is there something in this Christianity business will really help you think through some big questions you might have.

But as we draw this to a close, do you see how other people join? verse 33, people believed. Have a look at the two people who Luke specifically mentions at verse 34.

And again, nothing is, no name is wasted here. Don't just skip over the names, think about what's going on, right? The two people, Damaris. So Luke's dignifying her by mentioning her name.

[26 : 14] Again, what we saw about the counter-cultural nature of the gospel, because Athens in particular, a woman's role was to serve her husband and her home, whereas the man, I take it, was expected the boys will be boys.

And Luke is saying, Jesus rescued Damaris, and I'm honouring her by telling you about her response of faith. But talking to which, who's the other guy?

Dionysus. This guy who was named after the Greek god of wine and revelry. And maybe he lived right up to that name, we don't know.

Maybe he was caught up in the worship of those gods, thinking that those things would fulfil and satisfy him. Because that's essentially what an Epicurean is, if you're wondering about that. What's life about? It's about squeezing as much pleasure as you can out of it.

Right? I take it as what young people today call YOLO, right? You only live once. I've got to squeeze as much pleasure out of life as I can, possibly, because time is short.

[27 : 19] God, I've heard that one before, people living for that. But his story, I take it as he comes to believe, is that of Psalm 4. That God, you filled my heart with greater joy than when their grain and new wine abode.

There is a greater pleasure in Dionysus' life. But more importantly, do you see what he's part of?

And Luke wants us to see this. What is he part of? He's part of the Areopagus.

Can Christianity cut it? The Dionysus says, yes it can. I've heard no message like the risen Jesus. You know, just as we close, let me take you back to my mate Gordon.

Remember him? He's doing his thing down Edinburgh Uni campus on a Tuesday afternoon.

Spoken to 25 people. And he has spoken to 25 people. One said, no sorry, none said they were Christian.

Question, I've given away the answer. How many people do you think said they were atheist? One. Now in my day when I was at university, that would have been at least double digits there.

[28 : 21] But one person said they were. Which means that the other 24 he told me said they were open, curious or agnostic. Is that not interesting? Is that not interesting that all these years later, when you ask people what their lives are all about, what they believe, what they're doing, that people still go, I don't know.

I don't know. Friends, what an opportunity we have right now to display the countercultural nature of who our God is. Because what does Paul do?

He says to people who said that they worship an unknown God. He says, let me declare to you the God who's made himself known. Everyone's a worshipper.

the question is, what are you worshipping? Just close with this lovely line from Richard Chevenot Trench.

An Anglican Archbishop from way back in the day said this, none but God can satisfy the longings of an immortal soul that as the heart was made for him so only he can fill it.

[29 : 29] So let us just be quiet then, just as we close and sing our song and then we'll spend time together. I take it as God's word has gone forth. His spirit will be taking it and moving amongst us.

So why don't we just be quiet and now is a wonderful opportunity to think about the things we've been speaking about this morning. Where do you stand before this God? And then I'll pray. And so Father, I pray particularly this morning for those who would not know you.

Oh Father, I pray that by your spirit as your word goes forth today that you would make yourself known. That as the old hymn says, flowers unfold, hearts unfold like flowers before you responding to the sun of day.

Lord, would you shine on hearts today and open blind eyes and unblock deaf ears to understand who you are. Just thank you for your word, Heavenly Father. give us confidence today that wherever we are in the world, whoever we're rubbing shoulders with, that your gospel is sufficient and your word is true.

And Father, I pray that you would help us to compassionately love the people of our city, in our offices, in our universities, in our homes, in our streets, in our communities.

[30 : 54] Father, would you help us display the compassion of Christ. Christ. So Father, I pray that you would be with us as we finish this morning, as we spend time together.

Lord, would you glorify yourself. We pray these things in Jesus' worthy name. Amen.