

“Storming the Gates”
Acts 17:16–34
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June 26, 2016 – Morning sermon

We will start by looking at Acts 17. I want to look at this passage from a little bit of a different angle. It is one that I hope will be very encouraging. Acts 17:16–34 says [16] *Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. [17] So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. [18] Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, “What does this babbler wish to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities”—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 that you are presenting? [20] For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.” [21] Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.*

[22] So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. [23] For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. [24] The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, [25] nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. [26] And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, [27] that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, [28] for “‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, “‘For we are indeed his offspring.’ [29] Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. [30] The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, [31] because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

[32] Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, “We will hear you again about this.” [33] So Paul went out from their midst. [34] But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them. Here is the reading of God’s Word and may He continue to use it to bless us as we study it today.

Recently I saw a picture that gave me the willies. My son-in-law is on the bottom and my granddaughter is on the top. My son-in-law is a missionary in Ukraine and he is 6 feet 2 inches. In this picture my granddaughter is being tossed way up in the air. I showed this picture to Benny Youngblood and he began to focus on my granddaughter. Looking at that picture it was a picture of tranquility, of confidence, of assurance and a little grin. I understand she was laughing at the time even though she was high over my son-in-law. Why did he do that? She trusted her daddy. She trusted that he would take care of her and not drop her. She was completely relaxed.

I thought of that when I read this passage and what we Christians face in the world around us because we live in a scary world. It is filled with uncertainty and instability. We have foolish leaders that lead. We live in a society filled with violence, unbelief, immorality, pain, fear that is unprecedented and increasing amounts. In other words we all feel like we've been tossed up in the air. It's not the world we're used to live in. We look to our heavenly Father at a time like this. Sadly, though this fear often causes many Christians to develop somewhat of a fortress mentality. They circle the wagons and build walls of protection and isolation that sometimes can breed disgust for what is going on in society and hatred for those who don't agree with us.

For example, watching the media reports on television can sometimes play with your mind and heart. Sometimes those media reports from outlets that you might sometimes agree with can play with your mind and heart. Sometimes we're very undiscerning as Christians. We need to realize when we get our news from media, newspaper and TV no matter how conservative they might be it might be incentive for attracting your attention. They have one motive and that is money. They are a business and unless they make money or a profit they will go under and vanish so they present it to you as incentive in showing you the news and that is money. That's okay because that is the way it work.

We need to be concerning that they are not caring about the Gospel or loving the lost or heaven or hell or marital faithfulness unless it is part of program that they can sell advertising for. They don't care about most of the priorities that we share and unless we're careful they are presenting stuff that will fire you up, make you angry and more importantly will make you watch for another 30 minutes. That is their incentive and that is normal. We need to be vigilant and turn off what we shouldn't be watching because often it will cause us to act in unbiblical ways to what is going on in the world.

We forget Jesus' explanation to Peter in Matthew 16:18 that says *[18] And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.* Christians read that imagine that is described there and they think in terms of the church being a fortress and that the world around is attacking. Sometimes we just want to gather ourselves and circle our wagon, come together with our friends and protect what we believe but that's not what Peter is being told. Jesus is saying that it is those with the Gospel that are being on the offensive and can break down the fortress of hell behind which people are trapped in ignorance and skepticism. We who are armed with the Gospel are to be the rescuers to people in our society who are in bondage to sin as God works through us and the Gospel.

So often we think of ourselves as needing to stay in the fortress and that is sad. Perhaps we have developed attitudes that might make us unappealing to the world around us so that we begin to dislike the very people we are called to present the Gospel to. When we do that we have to be very careful. I had a seminary professor that shared an interesting story. He said that one of his neighbors used a pickup truck to haul junk to the dump or to transport furniture into one of his rental units. The pickup truck sports a bumper sticker which caught my attention one day as he drove down the alley behind our houses that said 'save me Jesus' and there were some smaller words at the bottom that said 'from your followers.' Ouch! I don't know if he had met some ornery or angry Christians or just had it in for Christians. It was a very poignant bumper sticker that serves as a gentle reminder to us that people are watching and people are evaluating who Jesus is when they look at us.

This can be very discouraging and the world may seem like it is going way out of control and I'm not exactly sure what to do. We need to take heart for this is exactly what the

Apostle Paul was facing in Acts 17 when he walked into Athens. It was a pagan society that in many ways was far more gone than ours is. It was filled with all kinds of immorality, chaos and religions. There was a lot of cruelty and human trafficking. There were all kinds of pagan things in this city of Athens. The Apostle Paul serves as a wonderful example to us of how he dealt with ministry in this area.

He started preaching in the usual places – the synagogues, the market place and eventually he went to the Areopagus. That is a hill near the market place in Athens. It sits under the Acropolis. I've been there and Acropolis dominates the skyline in Athens and on top is the Parthenon. Down beneath it is a 400 foot hill called Mars Hill or the Areopagus as it is called in Scripture. They would exercise supreme authority in religious matters. It served as a criminal court, where leaders discussed educational, philosophical and political issues. When some of the teachers heard Paul's teaching they said 'we need to take him to the Areopagus' where his words could be truly evaluated. The Apostle Paul was thrilled with the opportunity of speaking there.

We find three things in this open forum about Paul. First we can see the evidences of what Paul knew in Scripture. Paul knew certain Biblical truths about people, whether male, female, rich, poor, powerful, peasants, educated, ignorant, wise, or foolish. He knew at least three things about people he was talking to. First, is that they were made in the image of God which set them off in creation from all other things in creation. God was connected with them. That gives us our spirituality in the image of God. It gives us our eternity because we are eternal beings. Everyone will live forever. Some think when the end comes that will be it but that's not true according to Scripture. Paul also knew that it meant they had inherent value because they were made in the image of God. It's easy for us to think in our society to think people derive value from their work, role or successes. That is not true for you derive your value from being made in the image of God. Christians above all must understand the image of that.

A second thing Paul knew when he came to Athens is that people hear from God in creation and in their conscience. We hear from God all the time when we look at creation like the stars for creation proclaims God's glorious handiwork. That's why Christian camps love to gather young people from their homes, towns and cities to these camps and build a bon fire at night as they look up to the sky because people are instinctively drawn closer to God and His reality there. It's a beautiful implication of this. God has placed in us a beautiful testimony of His creation. Our conscience does this as well. We have a conscience of right and wrong but people work hard to eradicate that. I'm not saying we understand Biblical morality but it is a sense of right and wrong.

The third thing Paul noticed is that people hunger for love. Deep down inside people want to be appreciated. They want to know that people care about them or are concerned about them and loves them. We see it in media, movies, TV and all around. Sometimes they'll do drastic things to earn that love and bring that love in their own lives. God is amazingly sneaky here. He wired into everyone elements that can be used to attract them to Christ. There are three elements wired into us that give us an interesting advantage out of the shoot because people are in a way set up to be receptive. Not all are but many have that magnet of the image of God, a desire for love that wise Christians can use very effectively to share the Gospel. Neighbors sometimes don't need to hear our words but to see and feel our love. That can sometimes open wide the door to being receptive to what we would like to share. God is wonderful to give us this head start as we interact with some of the hardest people. God is at work.

There is a second thing to notice. It wasn't just what Paul knew but what he did when he was there in Athens. We can learn from the pattern of what he did. First we see he is very honoring and respectful of these people. In Acts 17:22 he says [22] *So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious.* He didn't agree with their religion but made that comment as an offhanded compliment. He honored their limited interest in religion and it would be a building block to build discussion in that relationship. We all need to figure out ways to be respectful to those around us who don't know Christ or have had a bad relationship with the church or other Christians in the past.

Secondly, Paul is observant. Acts 17:23 says [23] *For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To the unknown god.'* *What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.* He took time to find out who they were. We need to take time to appreciate people around us. Find out what makes them tick, what they care about and their interests. Those are things we can be observant about.

Thirdly, Paul finds a common ground. In Acts 17:23 he addresses the unknown God and that will be something he will use. He says 'I'll tell you who the unknown God is.' He wasn't saying their pagan gods were right but he used that little hook to begin to share about who God really is. He quotes their own poets in Acts 17:28 which says [28] *for "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we are indeed his offspring.'* Paul didn't know that instinctively. He must have been studying their culture, discussing with them some of their ideas. In other words, he found common ground with them. That's really important. We may have people around us that we share common ground with and that's really important.

Fourthly, Paul frames the message for them. God is Creator and Ruler. Acts 17:24 says [24] *The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man.* God does not live in temples. A person can stand on the top of Mars Hill and point to the Parthenon. Perhaps Paul was looking at the Parthenon when he was saying that in verse 24. As magnificent as the Parthenon is that is not where my God resides, Paul says. This might not be something we have in common with a friend. They might need to hear more about a God of love or forgiveness. We don't change the message but we frame it so they will understand it.

The Apostle Paul is still very sensitive but he calls for repentance, speaks of judgment and the resurrection of Christ. He doesn't water down the message or backs up in sharing the Good News for he was just doing it carefully. He did it in a way that would be provocative and provoke these people to listen and respond. The beauty is that some believed. A few rejected but perhaps more importantly for the Apostle Paul is that some wanted to hear more so he worked in such a way that he would have other opportunities to share. Perhaps when he was back a few weeks later there might have been some of those initial rejecters who could have been standing in the back and decided to come. Then by the third time they are beginning to be persuaded and seeing the behavior of other Christians and perhaps over a course of time they might have come to Christ. Who knows when I get to heaven I may talk to someone who tells me they came to Christ on Mars Hill under the teaching of the Apostle Paul. They might say to me 'I hated it at first and thought Paul was a nut case but his compassion just kept bringing me back and I'm here today because of Paul's witness.' That may not happen but it would be cool if it did because there are people in heaven today that responded to the Gospel there.

Now I want to show you what Paul demonstrates as we see how he focuses in, in a real wise way as he talks with these people. If we believe that people are made in the image of God

and that God is at work in those around me then we should show similar concern. What does that look like? An apologist named Francis Shaeffer wrote in this area quite often. He started a retreat center in Switzerland called L'Abri. I know some from this church many years ago went to the L'Abri campus either in Switzerland, Sweden, England or in the US. On these campuses skeptics could come and discuss what it means to be a Christian and perhaps have their questions answered. He was also a teaching elder in a PCA church and when he died in 1984 our denominational seminary, Covenant Seminary, started the Francis Shaeffer Institute. As part of that organization they have outlined eight principles which not only reflected the priorities of Francis Shaeffer but the Apostle Paul in passages like this.

These eight principles should guide us as we interact with others, especially those non-Christians that may live a much different lifestyle than us and perhaps we'd find it easier to just stay away but the Lord doesn't necessarily let us always do that. The first principle if I truly believe my neighbors are created in God's image, I will not be dismissive of them, their ideas, lifestyle, choices or values. I'm not saying that we necessarily agree with them but we just don't dismiss them outright. We never want to underestimate their ability to think for we want to challenge their thinking. We want to take away the notion that they have to become like us or do better to come to Christ and we call that heresy. We cannot improve our image or earn our way into God's presence. We may find their lifestyle repulsive or nonsensical but because they are made in the image of God we are not to be dismissive of them because Jesus is not dismissive of them.

The second principle is if I truly believe my neighbors are created in God's image, then I will seek to never misrepresent what they think. In other words, I won't summarize it unfairly. I will listen and seek to understand. It's easy to assume all kinds of wrong things about people because of the way they dress or their tattoos or where they live or what they claim to believe or the way they vote. This requires us to listen and understand as much as we can and not misrepresent them. We hate to be misrepresented and especially when the media says 'all Christians are dummies or ignorant or believe a narrow way.' This frustrates believers and non-believers the same way when we tend to misrepresent what they believe. So we need to be careful.

The third principle is if I truly believe my neighbors are created in God's image, then I will seek to learn from them. There is a lot of knowledge out there. There are some non-Christians that know more about some things than I do. One avenue that can be very helpful is to ask their counsel and learn from them. Perhaps you have a wayward child that is becoming a specialist in a certain area and you can learn from them in that area. You can authentically seek the heart of someone who knows more than you in an area to find out where they are coming from but we can learn.

The fourth principle is if I truly believe my neighbors are created in God's image, then I will remember the difficulty of being mistaken. I had the incredible blessing of growing up in a Christian home. I was a preacher's kid. I remember from early on going to church and being sympathetic toward Christianity praying to Jesus as a young child but many didn't grow up in that environment. Some lived decades in a non-Christian lifestyle. They lived as pagans until they were confronted with your witness of the Gospel and we need to realize what we are asking of them. We are asking them to recognize that their whole life has been a mistake. We are asking them to admit that they have been wrong in many ways for many years. We need to be humble and understand the magnitude of that in some people's lives. Don't take for granted that

it will be easy. We pray, seek the Spirit that we do understand what we are asking and be willing to understand that difficulty.

The fifth principle is if I truly believe my neighbors are created in God's image, then I will be willing to recognize repentance in my life. I am a sinner in need of grace. I still sin. There are times that I need to say that I'm sorry because I've done something or said something wrong. I have hurt them in some way. Repentance is one of the greatest gifts given to believers to keep our relationship with God strong. It doesn't hurt for a non-Christian to see this in us because then we are demonstrating precisely what we are asking them to do. That may be part of an opportunity we have. Never be unwilling to say 'I'm sorry' if you need to.

The sixth principle is if I truly believe my neighbors are created in God's image, then I will treat those with whom I disagree with respect. This can be hard especially if someone doesn't appear to earn our respect. They may have a lifestyle or say certain things that we don't find respectful. We respect others not because they are respectable. We respect others because they are created in the image of God. Our respect is based on how God views them and if God sees them as important then so should I. If you started trashing one of my children in my presence I might tentatively agree but if you keep it up I may then say 'wait, you have made your point but this is my child you are talking about. You are getting to be offensive.' I sometimes wonder if God may call me on the carpet and say 'Mark, I know you may not like him but this is potentially My child you are talking about.' That degree of respect is very important.

The seventh principle is if I truly believe my neighbors are created in God's image, then I will take our talk or conversation seriously and not just as a means to an end. When we are engaging with people we need to listen and take seriously what they are saying – their objections and circumstances. We need to pray about things in their lives. It can be especially effective when interacting with our non-Christian friends if we take note of things they are concerned about and then later ask them about it. Perhaps share that you have been praying for them to know what to do. Can you imagine what would happen in their life? Imagine this happening with children. Not only do you remember what they said but you thought about it, prayed about it and now you're curious about it in their lives. We may be dealing with a potential believer one day. Take what they say very seriously.

Lastly, if I truly believe my neighbors are created in God's image, then I will make every effort to love them as Jesus loves them. We don't understand in the decrees of God if someone before us is going to come to Christ or not. We don't understand God's relationship with this person in eternity but we do know from John 3:16 that Jesus laid His life down for the world and this person standing before us perhaps could be someone that we need to love just as you love Jesus. We need to recognize how precious this person might be yet perhaps at this stage they might be disgusting and hard to love.

Consider John 4 and the woman at the well. She didn't know who Jesus was but came out and started talking to Him. He responded to her in such a way that it not only brought her to Himself to saving faith but it also had a profound effect on other Samaritans in her area. Think about Zacchaeus in Luke 19 for he was just a little man who wanted to see Jesus. Jesus called him down out of the tree, had a meal with him and then he announced with great pride that his life had been changed by his interaction with Jesus. Jesus indeed was a friend of sinners. I pray that as this world spins out of control where we see things we never thought we would see that we wouldn't allow this world to conform us into its hatred and bitterness of those who are not like us but He would continue to give a love for those whom He loved.

In conclusion, as we share we realize that unbelievers around us are not the enemy. They are slaves of the enemy. They are being duped and tormented by the enemy but they're not the enemy and they are we except by the grace of God. We were once like them. We were living in the same bondage as them except for the grace of God. The beauty of it is that because we were there God can use us to bring other people out of despair. I want to close with a story from Jones. He is from Andy Andrews, The Noticer.

He said there was a couple of large shoe companies back in the early part of the last century who sent two salesmen overseas to Africa, exploring the possibility of expanding the market on the dark continent. They had a long sea voyage to get there. When they arrived one of the salesman quickly evaluated the situation and he telegraphed home saying 'This is terrible. My trip has been a waste. Bring me home as soon as possible because no one here wears shoes.' The other salesman likewise quickly evaluated the situation and sent a telegram home saying 'This is terrific. My trip has been a huge success. Please send more salesmen as soon as possible because no one here wears shoes.'

Here were two different perspectives. In a few minutes you'll be done reading this and you will evaluate what you see and you could say 'This is terrible. Take me home Jesus because no one knows the Gospel anymore.' Or perhaps you could be like the other and you evaluate what you see outside in this world and say 'This is wonderful. What an opportunity for I can't believe in my short life I can have an eternal impact because no one knows the Gospel anymore.' It is a matter of perspective sometimes. If we're not careful as believers we can be kind of ground into an isolationist fortress mentality and then just waste the few years that God has given us on this earth. We might safely step into eternity saved in Christ but perhaps have missed many opportunities to take people with us into the Kingdom.

As I shared those two perspectives which do you think was the perspective of the Apostle Paul in Athens? Which do you think was the perspective of Jesus when He came to Israel 2,000 years ago? It wasn't the first, I can promise you. They understood what they were getting into and they saw unbelievable opportunity to serve God in their circumstances. As Jesus was passing the city of Jerusalem one day in Luke 13 He said in Luke 13:34 says [34] *O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!*

Our problem may not be the world around us but the problem if we're resistant may be our relationship with Christ because He was filled with grace and extended it to me and He wants to use me to extend that grace to the world around me. Jesus is filled with mercy and He showed mercy to me. He wants me to extend that mercy so the world around can know the mercy of Jesus. Jesus is filled with forgiveness and He forgave me much. He wants the world to know a forgiving God through me as I interact with others in our society. Jesus was never scared by this world. He loves me and wants other around me to know that love as I love them. We might all be in circumstances that might be very difficult to love particular non-Christians but start with Jesus. Say 'Jesus, before I start considering my buddy over here can I consider You, Your mercy, grace, forgiveness, and love that You demonstrated to me? Lord, change my heart so I might be the representative before a watching world that You want me to be.' Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, I thank You so much for Your mercy and grace that is extended to each one of us. I thank You that we have been given this privilege to be Your testimony, Your witnesses for a

very brief time that we're on planet earth. I pray that we wouldn't squander these opportunities but that we are willing to carry Your heart to others. Just as You were gracious, merciful, forgiving and loving with me, may I be that way with others and not to glorify myself but so that those people around me can come to know You. Sometimes this will require very difficult decisions and sometimes we're not going to know how to respond but I pray that because You are in us and we're walking in step with the Spirit that You'll continue to guide us and use us for Your glory. We pray this in Jesus' Name and for His sake, Amen.

Power Point

A. WHAT PAUL KNEW...

- People are made in the image of God.
- People hear from God in creation and conscience.
- People hunger for love.

B. WHAT PAUL DID...

- He is respectful; (v. 22)
- He is observant; (v. 23)
- He finds common ground; (vv. 23, 28)
- He frames the message for them. (v. 24)

C. WHAT PAUL DEMONSTRATES...

1. I will not be dismissive of them, their ideas, lifestyle, choices, or their values.

If I truly believe my neighbors are created in God's image ...

2. I will seek never to misrepresent what they think.
3. I will seek to learn from them.
4. I will remember the difficulty of being mistaken.
5. I will be willing to demonstrate repentance in my life.
6. I will treat those with whom I disagree with respect.
7. I will take our talk seriously, not just as a means to an end.
8. I will make every effort to love them as Jesus does.

OUR CONCLUSION

As we share our faith, we realize that unbelievers around us...

Are not the enemy, and are we except for the grace of God.