

May 1, 2005

Easter 6

*"Helping Agnostics See the True God"*

## **ACTS 17:22-31**

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**P**aul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. <sup>23</sup> For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you. <sup>24</sup> "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. <sup>25</sup> And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. <sup>26</sup> From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. <sup>27</sup> God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. <sup>28</sup> 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.' <sup>29</sup> "Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone-- an image made by man's design and skill. <sup>30</sup> In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. <sup>31</sup> For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead."

I will give you several names and ask you to tell me what these names have in common. Mars, Jupiter, Venus, and Mercury. You recognize them as names of our planets, but they were also the names of Greek and Roman gods. When Paul walked through the streets of ancient Athens he saw temples and altars throughout the city erected to these different gods. Let me give you more names. Tuesday. Wednesday. Thursday. Friday. You recognize these as names for the days of the week. They were also names for the different gods of the ancient Germans and Scandinavians.

Polytheism, the belief in many different goes is well and alive in our world as well. You have heard people refer to God as "The big man upstairs" or "Mother Nature" or "The force" or the "Ground of Being." One woman named Sheila said, "I have not gone to church in years, I have my own little god inside of me and I call it 'Sheilaism.'" Recovery groups tell their people to trust in any god, whatever it might be, even if you have to take a rock such as this rock in my hand and pray to it as your god.

How do we witness to the true God in a world that holds to many different views of God? The agnostic says I cannot be sure who God is. The skeptic says I cannot my God is the only true God? Seeing how Paul witnessed to the agnostics in Athens will help us bear witness to the true God, especially in a postmodern world that says the only thing I can be sure of his what I feel inside of me.

### **1) By understanding their small view of God**

We are living in a world similar to ancient Greece where people have a small view of God. Listen to how Paul addressed this small view of God on the streets of Athens. "Men of Athens! I see that you in every way you are very religious." He uses a word for religious that could also be translated "superstitious" in fact the word in the Greek is the basis for our word, "demon." The evidence of their superstitious views was obvious. There were idols, and altars and shrines everywhere to the different gods and even an altar to the Unknown God in case they missed one. They consulted these gods and gave them gifts and libations for parties, for war, for sickness, for love, for travel, whatever they were doing. The Greek even believed there was a force more powerful than the gods. That force was "The fates" or luck.

Have you ever heard someone say today, "She sure is lucky" or "I can thank my lucky stars" or "I will try and do my best when it comes to God and hope in luck for all the rest?" And what about the agnostic belief in different gods? The docent at the sea aquarium in Monterey says that sharks and other creatures took millions of years to develop, but then she proceeds to tell the kids how wonderful Mother Nature was in developing this creature as if Mother Nature were some force in the universe guiding the development of the creatures through the process of evolution.

Stephen Jay Gould, leading paleontologist, once gave this glowing tribute to the sacred cow of evolution that is his god. "We are here because one odd group of fishes had a peculiar fin anatomy that could transform into legs for terrestrial creatures, because comets struck the earth and wiped out dinosaurs, thereby giving mammals a chance not otherwise available; because the earth never froze entirely during the ice age; because a small and tenuous species, arising in Africa a quarter of a million years ago, has managed, so far, to survive by hook and by crook. We may yearn for a higher answer to the meaning of life- none exists." The evolutionist would argue that your concept of God is something in your mind that developed in time and was passed down to you by your ancestors.

What does God's word have to say about such false gods that people make for themselves and even create in their own minds? The prophet Jeremiah said, "For the customs of the peoples are worthless; they cut a tree from the forest, and a craftsman shapes it with his chisel. They adorn it with silver and gold; they fasten it with hammer and nails so it will not totter. Like a scarecrow in a melon patch, their idols cannot speak; they must be carried because they cannot walk. Do not fear them; they can do no harm nor can they do any good." (Jeremiah 10:5) Romans chapter 1 says, "They worship the created things rather than the creator."

Be careful about pointing many fingers at the ancient Greeks for the small view of God, or Stephen Jay Gould the paleontologist, or Sheila who has her own little god inside of her, or the recovering drug addict who says, "My god is this rock I hold in my hand," or the person who plays golf on Sunday and says he is perfectly content to find god in his own way. If we honestly look at our own hearts we will discover that our view of God is sometimes quite small, especially during our hours of discouragement and disappointment. How many times have we not fervently prayed, "Lord I believe, help mine unbelief," simply because our view of God has been too small. How many times have we asked for the fleece to be wet or dry because our faith in the true God the creator of the universe was simply too weak? How many times have we failed to see the awful condemning consequences of our sin and holiness and righteousness of God that ultimately must punish all wickedness and

ungodliness of people? How weak and small we are at fully comprehending the astounding truth that the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanses us from ALL sin! Only by God's grace are your eyes privileged to see what you see this morning about your God and sing as we just did in our hymn, "How great thou art!"

## **2) By letting them know our big view of God**

Paul was not ashamed of the gospel of Christ and he was not ashamed to tell these Greeks the truth about the true God. "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands." He told them that God does not need to be served by human hands, because "He himself gives life and breath and everything else." Evolution says that God is the product of human hands and hearts and minds. Paul witnessed to the truth that we are the product of God's hands, God's heart and God's mind. Read Psalm 104. It says of God, "You are clothed with splendor and majesty" and "He set the earth on its foundation" and "He waters the mountains from his upper chambers." The question that we need to raise to the agnostic is this: "Did human hands create God or did the hand of God create human beings?"

Let's hear more of Paul's witness to the one true God. "From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth, and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live." God made all nations of people from one person, whom he formed from the dust of the ground and breathed into him the breath of life. He also put people in their places. God placed certain people into places where there was more sun and gave the beautiful dark skin and light skinned people where there was less sun, because that is where God wanted them to be. "Yellow black and white, they are precious in his sight..." God enters the affairs of world history. "He breaks the bow and shatters the spear" and then tells the world, "Be still and know that I am God..."

Paul cannot let these ancient Greeks go on with their tiny little myopic views of God. He steps into the huge abyss and the yawning gap and tells them what God's plan is for their lives personally. "God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him., though he is not far from each of us." God wants people to reach out and touch him and feel his love for them. Have you ever reached out to touch someone and feel their love for you? A little child touches a cat and it begins to purr. The child smiles. Your dog wags its tail when you reach out to it after coming home from work. God wants people to touch him and experience personally the love he has for them. In the Sistine Chapel Michelangelo pictured the hand of God reaching down to touch man, and the hand of man reaching up to touch God. God wants to take people who are determined to go on in life with their little tiny views of him, and turn their hearts around to receive his blessings and reach out and touch him.

Paul pleads with these people to not think of God as a statue of wood and stone, but to think of him as the God who has commanded people to repent or change their ways in life and accept who he truly is. Finally, we need to challenge people and tell them the truth that God is a lot bigger than they are and someday they will have to answer to him, especially on judgment day. Maybe we simply need to ask the skeptic or agnostic, "Have you ever considered that your view of God may be way too small?"

What Paul tells these people next somewhat surprises us. He says, "For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed." Justice. The Greeks must have laughed to themselves. There is no justice. Even the stories of their gods revealed lives where there was no justice. Then Paul speaks about a Man, a Man who lived among us who was appointed to do the judging. How scary to be judged by someone who is your peer, who knows what temptation is like, who has been tempted in all parts as we are yet without sin. Then Paul delivers the clinching argument. All this will happen because God raised this person from the dead. As long as these Greeks lived they would wonder to themselves, "What about that person who was raised from the dead? What if he knows us better than we know ourselves? What if he is Lord and God who is greater than all our gods? By witnessing to the resurrection Paul was backing up what he said with ultimate proof and witness to the truth.

What do we tell the agnostic? We give them the facts about the true God who created heaven and earth, we tell them to turn to the love that God has for them, and then need to trust this love before judgment day comes. And if we are at a loss of words, we simply fall back on what Jesus once told a skeptic who came to him at night, "God so loved the world he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life." Then we back up this witness to the true God by witnessing to the resurrection from the dead as Paul did. This witness to the resurrection is the most powerful tool we have to change hearts and turned them away from their worthless idols. Amen.