



**WESTLAKE HILLS**  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## "Is the Gospel Relevant on 6<sup>th</sup> Street?"

Sermon Series: "The Way of the Spirit"

*Acts 17:16-34*

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### **Introduction.**

Pastor Heidi Husted has written<sup>i</sup> that today many sociologists suggest there is one place or institution that characterizes our culture more than any other. What do you think it is? The sports stadium? The megachurch auditorium? Schools? No. They say the place that characterizes our culture more than anything else is the shopping mall.

One report claims that the United States actually has more shopping malls than high schools, and the number of malls is projected to increase at a rate of 2,000 per year. In the last few years, a whole complex of stores have popped up out of nowhere at the Galleria at the end of Bee Caves Road, and whenever I drive by the Barton Creek Mall the parking lot is packed. More and more, our lives are centered around malls. It's not only where we shop, it's also where we hang out and where we gather to socialize. Malls tell us what's important, what our world values the most.

A number of years ago I was in Minneapolis, and I visited the mother of all malls – the Mall of America in Bloomington, MN. It may be hard to believe, but the Mall of America is the size of 88 football fields put together! You can get married there. You can go to college there. You can book a flight there. When it opened, the Mall of America was projected to attract more visitors every year than either Mecca or the Vatican! Indeed, for many people a trip to the mall has become a modern-day pilgrimage of sorts.

Does the gospel have anything to say to people at the Mall of America? To the people at the Barton Creek Mall? Does it have anything to say to folks down on 6<sup>th</sup> Street here in Austin? I believe it does, and so did the apostle Paul. We find him here in Acts 17 sharing the gospel in the city of Athens in what we would call their version of an intellectual shopping mall. Let's take a closer look.

### **I. What Paul Experienced.**

After a mixed response in the cities of Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea, and after experiencing opposition and persecution, Paul was escorted by friends to the city of Athens, some 300 miles away. They left him alone there with instructions for Silas and Timothy, who were back in Berea, to join him as soon as possible.

Five centuries before, Athens had been at the height of its glory as a center for art, literature, and philosophy. Even though some of that glory had faded by the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, Athens retained her reputation as the intellectual center of the Roman Empire. It had been the home of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, as well as lesser philosophers like Epicurus (341-270 BC) and Zeno (335-263 BC) whose disciples are referenced in our passage.

Athens was the site of the great architecture of the Parthenon, whose ruins still stand today. It was home to numerous temples, shrines, and statues for the whole Greek pantheon –

the Greek gods such as Athena, Apollo, Jupiter, Mercury, and others. The statue of Athena, for whom the city was named, stood in the Parthenon and was 40 feet tall. It is said that the golden point of her spear could be seen 40 miles away in the sunlight.

Walking around the city, Paul must have been struck by the beauty, the heritage, and the brilliance of the city. But the text tells us that the apostle was also struck by something else. His spirit was grieved at how lost the people were in their idolatry. Growing up as a devout Jew, he had been taught the Ten Commandments which said there is but one God, and no one should ever attempt to make a graven image of Him. Paul was troubled, because he knew that God did not live in these temples and statues that had been made by human hands. Seeing all these idols created a profound sadness in his heart, so he took it upon himself to share the good news of God's love with anyone who would listen.

## **II. Where Paul Went.**

There are three places we find Paul in this passage sharing his faith. The **first place was the synagogue**. You will recall this was his regular practice whenever he went to a new city. He would go to the synagogue first and share with the Jews that the Jesus of history was the Messiah of Scripture, so we find Paul proclaiming the gospel first in the synagogue.

**Next** we find the apostle in **the agora or the marketplace**. The Agora was the heart of the city in ancient Athens. It was the focus of the commercial, political, administrative and even social activity for the city, and it served as the religious and cultural center, as well as the seat of justice. The area would always have been crowded with the hustle and bustle of life in Athens.

The text tells us that a group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with Paul there in the marketplace, and Luke adds the side note that the people of Athens loved nothing better than to talk about and listen to the latest ideas. Paul loved a good debate, and he enjoyed the challenge of matching wits with the thinkers of his day. The apostle had been educated in the finest schools in his hometown of Tarsus as well as in Jerusalem, and he had a keen mind that could engage the brightest of people.

The *Epicureans* believed that the gods to be so remote as to take no interest in and have no influence upon human affairs. They thought the world was the result of chance, a random collection of atoms, and they were convinced that there was no life after death. Therefore, they believed that humans should pursue pleasure in this life and seek to be detached from pain, passion, and fear. "Eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we may die" was their philosophy of life.

The *Stoics*, on the other hand, acknowledged the supreme god but only in a pantheistic way. They confused him with what they called the "world soul." The Stoics believed that the world was determined by fate, and human beings must pursue their duty, resigning themselves to live in harmony with nature and reason, however painful this might be. It's like the guy who fell down a flight of stairs and said, "Well, I'm glad that's over with!" The Epicureans emphasized chance, escape and the enjoyment of pleasure, while the Stoics emphasized fatalism, submission, and the endurance of pain. Two very different ways of looking at life.

The reaction of many of these philosophers was a rejection of Paul ideas. They called him a babbler, which literally translated mean "seed picker." They saw Paul as one who picked up

little scraps and pieces of thought here and there and put them together. It was like calling him a plagiarist, not an original thinker. However, others were intrigued, so they invited him to present his ideas at the Areopagus, or Mars Hill as it is sometimes called in Scripture. (The name means “hill of the god Ares.) **This is the third place** Paul went in Athens. **The Areopagus** served as a sort of council of education for the city of Athens which sought to regulate the things that were being taught in the community. They were the intellectual elites of the city, and some scholars believe this was some kind of tribunal before which Paul appeared. It was one thing to bat around ideas and shoot the bull down in the marketplace, but now the apostle was being asked to give a presentation in the halls of academic power to the best and the brightest of the city. And these people had the authority to shut down his teaching.

John Stott points out that in the course of his speech, Paul made 5 points.<sup>ii</sup> We don't have time to discuss these in detail today, but I do want to point out two things about Paul's speech at Areopagus. **First**, notice how he sought to connect with his listeners by applauding their interest in spiritual things, and he referred to the statue to the unknown god. He tried to build a bridge over which he could connect with them and present the gospel.

**Second**, notice that he didn't quote any OT Scripture. Rather, he quoted two of their own poets – the 6<sup>th</sup> century poet Epimenides of Crete, and a 3<sup>rd</sup> century Stoic author by the name of Aratus. Paul made an effort to use something from their own culture to make a connection and take them deeper into the things of God. Paul accommodated the culture while never compromising the integrity of his message. This is a good thing to remember as we think about the ways in which we try to share our faith with others.

However, despite the bridge he built to his audience, when Paul mentioned the resurrection of Jesus, it was enough to bring the meeting to an abrupt end. Both the Epicureans and the Stoics rejected a belief in the afterlife. Some people sneered and even laughed out loud, but others said they wanted to hear more at a later time. A few of the people, including a member of the Areopagus itself named Dionysius and a woman named Demaris, responded in faith and became followers of Jesus Christ.

### **III. What Paul Teaches Us.**

As I reflect on Paul's time in Athens and the places he visited, I am struck by the parallels between his experience in Athens and our lives here in Austin. I note at least four.

**First, there is the parallel of spiritual blindness.** Whenever I drive over the hill on Redbud Trail which leads to Lake Austin Boulevard and I see the panorama of the city of Austin, sometimes my heart is heavy over what I perceive is the spiritual blindness of this city. Austin, like Athens, doesn't see the true light of God in Christ, and there is a spiritual blindness which plagues our community.

**Next, there is the parallel of idolatry.** When I read of Paul grieving over the city at its worship of idols, I can't help but think of the idolatry of Austin. Let's be clear. Idolatry is not just about bowing down before little pagan statues. Idolatry is false worship of any kind. It is seeking power from something that cannot deliver. It is taking a good thing and making it an ultimate thing in your life. That's also idolatry

I heard someone say, “Austin is a very spiritual city; it's just not very religious.” I disagree. I think Austin is very religious, but the altars at which we worship are college sports, success and

power, and fitness and good looks. Still others worship at the altar of academia, and we have sold our souls to the academy in a desire to find acceptance. What is your idol? What is it that displaces your worship of God today?

**Another parallel I see is the opportunity to be missional.** Paul went to the marketplace to share his faith. He didn't wait for people to come to church (or in his case the synagogue); he met people on their own turf. He didn't quote a bunch of Scripture to them; he tried to hook them with their own poets and philosophers. He was incarnational, and he was missional.

Where can you be missional like Paul? Where does God want you to go and take the initiative? It might be at your school, or your place of work, or even down on 6<sup>th</sup> Street. I was there several months ago for a friend's birthday party, and we met at J. Black's bar. It was quite the scene! The music was loud, people were dressed to the nine's, and the place was hopping. Kent Redding and I fit right in. I think I raised the average age by like 10 years when I walked through the door!

When I was at J. Black's bar, I wondered, "Who is reaching these people for Christ? Who is building a bridge to them?" Then I remembered some members of our church who a couple of years ago led what they called a "pub crawl" with some non-Christian friends, and they talked about theology and science over pitchers of beer. That's the kind of thing Paul would have done! Paul had a burden for the lost souls of Athens. Do you have a similar burden for the people of Austin?

The **final parallel I see is the opportunity to make Christ known in a citadel of great learning.** Paul preached the gospel at the Areopagus, and you and I have the privilege of making Christ known in a town which is home to one of the great universities of the world. Like the apostle Paul, you and I have a chance to impact this citadel of learning and higher education, and we can affect the next generation of leaders by reaching out to students with the love of Jesus Christ. A holy opportunity right before us.

Paul's experience is very instructive for us here in our town because of the remarkable parallels between Athens and Austin.

## **Conclusion.**

There is one last thing I want to mention from this text. Paul concluded his message by focusing on the resurrection of Jesus as proof of the truth of the gospel and the promise of coming judgment. In our world, one's experiences often function as the chief authentication of belief – if you experience it, it must be true. But Paul chose to focus instead on something else entirely – the resurrection of Jesus. Why focus on the resurrection? In contrast to what the Epicureans and the Stoics thought, Paul believed in the afterlife. Death is not the end. The soul lives on. And the resurrection makes Christianity the religion to follow.

All of us have been at points of doubt in our lives, wondering if it is all a hoax. How do we know Christianity is true? There was a time when I was in seminary that I experienced a crisis of faith. I wondered, "How do we know we're right and everyone else is wrong? Isn't it arrogant to say Jesus is the only way?" In my struggle with doubt I talked to professors and friends, but I couldn't get answers which satisfied my mind. I'm sure Lorie started to wonder about me and the future of our relationship if I ditched the faith.

One day I was shaving in the men's bathroom in the dorm with another student named Dick Feaser. Dick was a little guy who was very animated and fretful. He was upset that I was having intellectual doubts about the faith, and he said, "Pete, there's got to be something that can answer your questions. What about the resurrection?"

I said, "Dick, that's it!"

He answered, "What's it?" He didn't realize what he had said.

"The resurrection! That's the verification point of Christianity. It's what proves the exclusive claims of our faith.

Sometimes I ask myself why I believe. But then I return time and time again to the bedrock of my conviction which is if Jesus rose from the dead, then it proves He was who He said He was, and I can say with confidence, "I know that my Redeemer lives" and I'm not following a false god.

Paul's message of salvation turns on the historicity and the truthfulness of the resurrection of Jesus. And it is up to each of us to marshal our resources to make every effort to share this glorious Good News in a way people can understand it, just like Paul did in Athens. Is the gospel relevant on 6<sup>th</sup> Street? You better believe it is! Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Taken from a sermon Heidi preached at Columbia Presbyterian Church in Vancouver, WA, October 1, 2000.

<sup>ii</sup> John R.W. Stott, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World*, pp. 285ff.