

### **Acts 17:22–31**

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said,

‘For we too are his offspring.’

Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

## **The Advantages of Knowing God** - May 17, 2020

*Acts 17:22–31*

I think it is safe to say that at long last, spring has arrived! Watching the weather reports, I was a bit surprised to learn that the average temperatures for April were more like those of February and February more like April! Imagine that! But on Friday we cracked 80 for the first time this year and, as much as we can, start enjoying the beauty of nature.

At least the parks are open, providing we social distance. Getting out of the house is so important. Even opening the windows and letting some air in!

It is times like these, these “isn’t nature beautiful moments so there must be a god” that people do get a bit spiritual. Spring, with its gorgeous moon, blossoming trees, baby ducks, new-mown grass all have the power to transport us beyond ourselves and start thinking about the “Higher Power” responsible for all this.

That’s what’s nice about believing in a higher power. Faith in a higher power is like the Splenda or Equal of the religious world — all of the pleasure, none of the guilt. I mean, why do we use artificial sweeteners? Because we like the taste of sugar but don’t like the calories and potential for aggravating diabetes that real sugar brings.

Believing in a so-called “Higher Power” gives all the spiritual warm-fuzzies of thinking that someone or something out there is responsible for creation, but none of genuine responsibility of knowing what the creator expects of us, the created.

And that’s the question, isn’t it? Many of you have told me that it’s difficult to have a conversation with friends or family about your faith in Jesus because they are quite content with the “God of the golf course.” The happy feeling experienced in a newborn’s cry. The awe and wonder experienced in seeing a whale spring out of the water. I agree, that talking to someone whose spiritual foundation is rooted in crystals and essential oils is going to be difficult to talk with.

In a way, that’s similar to the situation Paul faced when he visited the city of Athens. Paul, as you probably know, had the remarkable experience of meeting Christ after Jesus ascended into heaven and felt strongly that the Lord was calling him to be the evangelist to the gentiles — in other words, everyone who wasn’t Jewish. Paul set out on a journey that took him over much of the Roman Empire, from Italy to Turkey where he did indeed start and encourage the formation of many new Christian churches. Some of letters he wrote to these churches are recorded in the New Testament — letters which sometimes praised, sometimes taught, and sometimes criticized what was going on.

But in today’s scripture, Paul finds himself in Athens, the intellectual capital of the Roman Empire. Athens was both a place of great learning and great religious faith. People there were very curious about the world and how it worked. In the process they had devised a faith system which ascribed the workings of nature to a huge variety of beings they called “gods.” There were sun gods and moon gods. Gods of weather. Gods of fertility. Even lakes and rivers had spirits of various kinds associated

with them. In a way, this system made sense. After all, when so much of life seemed inexplicable, having a whole bunch of gods around to make life a bit understandable brought some kind of comfort.

Human beings back then, as we are today, are very uncomfortable with the idea of pure randomness. We very much want to know how things work. We want explanations for the events of our lives. We want to know why wars, famines, and diseases happen. Today, science and the study of history and economics offers some explanation of why things are the way they are now. If you believe science is rooted in truth, then you can believe what Dr. Fauci says about the Covid-19 pandemic growing if we relax the social distancing rules. If you think that science is just a fancier way of guessing and that rolling dice is equally reliable, then you will ignore the advice of epidemiologists and hang out in restaurants without even bothering to wear a mask, or go to protests in state capitals linked arm in arm with your fellow protesters. We'll see what the infection rates are like in a few weeks.

We need certainty. We crave certainty. We desperately want to believe that someone, something is in charge. When I lived in Africa, there were literally millions of people who awoke every morning with insufficient food, inadequate health care, and a whole host of other problems. You can bet that in Africa, religious faith is very, very strong. People lived in extreme uncertainty. Even among wealthier people, faith was strong because they know that their wealth and material possessions could vanish in an instant. There are few atheists in Africa. Or for that matter, India, or Latin America. Or any place where we simply don't know what is going to happen today, let alone next week or next month or next year.

That's the choice humanity has faced since the beginning: believe that there is some structure or order to the universe, or that everything is random and there is nothing reliable about anything we can perceive with our senses.

Most people choose to believe in a level of certainty, a higher power, a unifying force. Few people, while full of doubt, can say with absolute certainty that there is no such thing as a creator or a purpose for the universe. Such people reason that while there may be no absolute proof that there is a God, there is also no absolute proof that there is not a God.

Such is the situation Paul faced in Athens, two thousand years ago. It was a city full people who were convinced that they were governed by some kind of higher power. They divided that higher power into small chunks, easily digestible, easily understood chunks they called gods who could sorta, kinda, explain why things were the way they were.

The problem with the Greek system — what they followed in Athens — was that their system was devoid of any kind of personal relationality. In other words, people viewed their gods as outside forces of nature — entities which had their own purpose and reasons for acting, but no need to explain their reasons to or relate to regular people. The role of priest was extremely important back then because the priest was the individual who supposedly had the ability to connect with the gods and therefore possibly influence them. If you needed a favor from a god, you would go the temple dedicated to the

worship of that god and ask the priest to speak to the god on your behalf — usually by paying money or bringing an animal to sacrifice. In other words, people back then viewed their relationship with the gods or higher power or whatever you would like to call it as almost entirely external. There were the gods and there was me and we dealt with each other on an “as needed” basis.

This “god from a distance” way of looking at the world seems remarkably similar to the people who believe in the “god of the golf course” or find god in pyramids and crystals or in a warm breeze. To many, god is simply something other — something totally outside ourselves — something we really cannot understand or directly relate to, maybe reaching the point of being a nice feeling.

This friends, is the core of the Christian message, a message that no other religion of faith system quite captures. As Christians, we assert that God, yes, God is very much otherness. Our God is the creative purpose in the universe and, as such, is well beyond human comprehension. In a way, when we look out on the world, we are looking at and into the mind of God because we are looking at things we cannot and never will fully explain. So yes, Christians can share with all people all over the world the feeling of utter awe and mystery in encountering God in nature, whether in the forest, or desert, or river.

But then, here is where Christians part ways with the rest of the world. As Paul said during his visit to Athens, we worship a God who, “is not far from each one of us. For it is “in [God that] we live and move and have our being.”

Christian faith offers a way of relating to God that nothing else really does. We make the claim that God became a human being, a particular human being named Jesus of Nazareth. Of course, religions back then and even today do indeed call particular humans to be “gods” and demand that humans are to give them worship and praise. However, such human “gods” are always kings or priests or other people of power and influence.

Jesus is startlingly different. He was not a king, in the human sense of the word. He had no power to command individuals to do his bidding. Yes, the gospels tell stories of his ability to work miracles, but back then all the human gods were said to have been able to do miracles. Most of all, this Jesus, the human we say is god, lived in poverty and died in poverty. He had no possessions. He had virtually nothing. He died as a criminal, killed using the worst punishment ever invented: crucifixion.

Unlike any god before or since, Jesus is all about relating to us and loving us simply because he is one of us. This is a twist. This is a question you can ask friends and family who worship the “god of the golf course.” Yes, we can agree that God is very much present in nature and that is how we can be introduced to God. However, the issue is not knowing that there is a God, but how should we relate to this God?

That’s what it is all about, folks! Yes, God exists! So what? Is it enough knowing that God exists, like knowing the sky is blue or water is wet? If that’s all there is to God, who cares? What difference does it make whether God exists or not?

But if God does exist and we claim that God can and does make a difference in our lives as individuals and in our world, then the next question is how do we know who this God is and what this God is about?

Yes, friends, it is easy to ignore God. It is easy to just pretend that we can go through life without really encountering and understanding who God is and what God is about. But then, then, then how do we live? On what basis should we make our choices in life? How do we determine what is wrong, or what is right? How can you demonstrate that, as we spoke of last week, love and human dignity are vastly superior to money and power. On the other hand, perhaps they are equal. Perhaps we are fools for not spending our lives trying to obtain as much money and possessions as possible. Perhaps we should pursue pleasure at any cost and be willing to sacrifice anyone at any time to get what we want. Perhaps love is just an illusion that only serves to get in our way.

What Paul brought to the Athenians back then, what you can bring to your friends and family is not just the idea that Jesus was a nice guy who said a lot of nice things so we can live nicely with each other. No, Jesus is much, much, more than a good example. Jesus instead is the very definition of goodness. Jesus is not about showing us the way to live, Jesus is the way, and the truth, and the life.

Faith in Christ, as opposed to faith in the sky or green grass does come at a price. The price is that of replacing God's ideas of living and living with your own. It means that you will face choices. Choices that are sometimes hard. Choices between doing the right thing or just ignoring it all and keeping silent.

However at least you will have a foundation on which to make a choice. Following the god of the golf course is all well and good when the sky is blue and your table is full and your house is neat and clean. But just let something, anything, interfere with your perfect world and everything can vanish and your perfect world can dissolve into a morass of uncertainty.

What Christianity offers, as sometimes promoted by the church — but sadly often not — is a comprehensive way of looking at life, making decisions, and knowing that you are not alone, even when the world is putting you down.

I said at the beginning that human beings crave certainty and stability. Jesus Christ offers far more certainty and far more stability than any system of gods, any set of feel-good moments, or any ideas of looking out for number one ever can.

In Athens two thousand years ago, Paul asserted that the unknown god is indeed knowable and that God's name is Jesus Christ. You and I, we know who God is. We can state with confidence that we know what God wants for us and for the world. And we can say with certainty that God knows us, God loves us, and God only wants the best for us. This day and every day. Tell that to your friends.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.