

August 7, 2016

Church Planting  
*Does God Exist?*  
Acts 17:16-23

**Opening words:** Today, we find ourselves in the seventeenth chapter of Acts. Paul is on his second missionary journey. If you have been with us in the past month, then you know their trip was filled with both challenges and success. In every community souls were saved and resistance was experienced. In Philippi, Paul was imprisoned. In Thessalonica, he faced the ugly mob. In Berea, he was rushed out of town. Undaunted, Paul pushes on to the city of Athens. That is where we find him today. By the time Paul arrived, Athens was a shadow of her former self. Five centuries earlier, the city was at the height of her glory, leading the world in the areas of art, philosophy and literature. That was no longer the case. Time has a way of changing things. However, that does not mean her glory was completely gone. The city was still the home of one of their world's leading universities.

This is sermon number forty in my sermon series, *Church Planting*. Do you remember my goal? I am preaching through the Book of Acts. I am doing this for one reason. I am hoping to reconnect with the Holy Spirit. It was the Holy Spirit who created the church in the very beginning, and it will be the Holy Spirit who revives the church again. Human effort and determination are not enough. Our scripture reading for today is Acts 17:16-23. Let me call this message *Does God Exist?*

**Acts 17:16-23** While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. <sup>17</sup> So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. <sup>18</sup> A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbling trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. <sup>19</sup> Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?" <sup>20</sup> You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean." <sup>21</sup> (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.) <sup>22</sup> Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "People 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. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

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*What are you most afraid of?* That was the question a panel was asked during the early 1960's radio show, *Conversation*. The panel was made up of famous personalities of the day. Each one was an expert in a different field. They were to debate the question of the evening and come up with one single answer. The question for that

evening was *what are you most afraid of?* After much heated debate, the answer was, nuclear annihilation. Everyone agreed, but one panelist remained silent. His name was Bennett Cerf. Do you remember Bennett Cerf? He was a Christian writer who was known for both his quick intellect and humor. He sat quietly and never tried to persuade the others. Later, the master of ceremonies inquired about his silence. Cerf said, "My answer to the question, *what are you most afraid of*, seemed silly next to the rest." He finished by saying, "What I am most afraid of is not being loved." I think it was a good answer. Can you imagine not being loved? That is one of things that makes the faith so attractive. Everyone knows it. God loves everyone! And all of God's loved people said, "**Amen!**"

As I said earlier, we are in the seventeenth chapter of Acts. Paul is alone in the city of Athens. He is waiting for Silas and Timothy to arrive. As he waits, he explores the city and finds a great number of idols. Those idols troubled him. In my home, we have a little saying that is very true: If Momma isn't happy, nobody is happy. Perhaps you can relate? It isn't just true of Momma. It is true of Paul. If Paul isn't happy, then nobody is happy. He is upset about the idols and shares his concerns with anyone with ears. He goes to the synagogue and complains to the local Jews and God-fearing Greeks. He goes to the marketplace daily and addresses whoever happens to be present. He also tells everyone about Jesus. To be more exact, he tells everyone about the resurrection of Jesus. The crowd had heard many things through the years, but this was new. To say the least, it rocked their philosophical world. In the crowd on one particular day, were representatives from two philosophical groups, the Epicureans and the Stoics. Both groups strove for happiness. The Epicureans promoted happiness through a sensual system of thought. The Stoics believed that happiness came from self-sufficiency and independence. The two groups did have one thing in common. Neither group was particularly impressed with Paul's teachings. Verse eighteen tells us, they called Paul a "babbler". For some unknown reason, they invited Paul to Areopagus. It was a place of great importance. Ares was the Greek god of thunder and war. It held authority over all the religions and moral activity in the area. Some have called it Mars Hill. It was a make or break moment in Paul's evangelistic efforts in Athens. It was not enough to convince them that the Jewish God, now Christian God, was just another god. He had to convince this critical group that God was the only god. In other words, he had to prove to them that God existed. Some things don't change. We are still trying to prove to our world that God exists. Do you know of anyone who questions the existence of God? If you can think of someone, say, "**Amen!**" You really can't blame them. The present state of our world does create a lot of questions. The absence of God does seem to answer them.

The other day on the news, came the horrible story about the sixteen people who were killed in the hot air balloon ride. Stories like that trouble me. From my perspective, they were all young people with their entire life to live. There was nothing sinister about their intentions. They just wanted to have fun. Is there anyone here who doesn't want to have fun occasionally? Each one expected to resume their lives once the ride was over. Not one of them expected to die that day. The problem is, they did die. The

balloon hit power lines. The people in their lives are looking for someone or something to blame. I am sure they will find someone. Many are blaming God. Why would God let this happen? Why didn't God have the wind blow in another direction that day, away from the power lines? The truly critical will say there is no God. It is easy to watch the news and question the existence of God.

It is also easy for the truly logical to question the existence of God. That is the story in the scripture lesson. The resurrection of Jesus meant nothing to them because they didn't believe in miracles. Our entire faith is built on a miracle, the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Your presence here tells me you are illogical. To the logical mind, scientific law always trumps the truly miraculous. I understand why the purely logical struggle with the existence of God. From a certain angle, God is illogical. However, the question remains. Does God exist? If you are illogical and believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, say, "**Amen!**" If you believe in the existence of God, say, "**Amen!**" That is a good thing!

Beyond our reading for today, Paul proves the existence of God to those logical minds. He uses creation itself to make his point. Verse twenty-four tells us that God created both the world and the universe. Paul says it clearly. God is not limited to stone manmade objects. Human energy and effort was not required. Creation itself testifies there is a God. There must be a God because creation is so perfect. How many examples do you need?

At creation, the Earth was perfect. It was the perfect size. If it were smaller, like Mercury, there would be no atmosphere. If it were bigger, like Jupiter, there would be too much hydrogen in the atmosphere. Consider this fact. Earth is the only planet that has the right mixture of gases to sustain plant, animal and human life. Take it one step further. The Earth is located in the perfect position. Any closer to the sun and it would be too hot sustain life. Mercury's average temperature is 332 degrees Fahrenheit. The average temperature on Saturn is minus 288 degrees Fahrenheit. Even the tilt and rotation of the Earth is perfect to sustain life. At creation, the Earth was perfect. It was too perfect to just happen. There must be a God! Do you need another example?

The human body was created perfectly! Just think about this for a moment. The human brain processes more than a million messages a second. (You may know someone who is a little slower!) The brain processes and categorizes that information as to what is important and what is not so important. Your brain enables you to function in this world. Your brain enables your eyes distinguish between seven million different colors. Your brain is perfect. It is too perfect to just happen. There must be a God! I do not know how you can hold a newborn and question the existence of God. There must be a God. These arguments must be convincing, since most people in our society do believe there is a god. Did you know, according to the *Pew Research Group*, only 3.1% of Americans call themselves an Atheist? (Another 4% call themselves agnostic.) Yet, simply believing in the existence of God is not enough. You must believe in the perfect

reflection of God, Jesus. If that makes you think, say, "**Amen!**" That is what this text teaches us.

Let me end this message with two Bible stories. The first story comes from the fourth chapter of Matthew, the temptation of Jesus. You know the story. Jesus has just been baptized by John the Baptist and God has identified him as his one and only son. Jesus is just about to begin his ministry, but he must endure one thing first, the temptation. According to the text, Jesus fasted for forty days. Remember, forty is considered a sacred time period. It rained on Noah's ark for forty days and forty nights. Moses led the people in the wilderness for forty years. The resurrected Jesus taught for forty days before he ascended into heaven. In our story, Jesus fasted for forty days. I don't know how he did it. When I don't eat breakfast, it ruins my entire day. It is safe to say Jesus was in a weakened state when Satan came to him. He tempts Jesus three times. The first time, he tempts Jesus by asking him to change the stones into bread. The second time, he takes Jesus to the highest point of the temple and asks him to throw himself down. The third time, he takes him to the highest mountain and offers him all he can see. They are the same temptations we face: security, popularity and power. There are two things about that story you should never forget. The first is, Jesus resisted the temptations and remained sinless. That is why Jesus was the perfect sacrifice for our sins. The second is, Satan correctly identified Jesus. Satan knew Jesus was the son of God. Listen to what I am about to say. In other words, Satan knew God existed. It is not enough to believe there is a God. Even Satan believes in the existence of God!

The second Bible story comes from the nineteenth chapter of Luke, the story of Zacchaeus. You remember him, because he was vertically challenged. In other words, he was short but he had a big job. He was the chief tax collector, and the scriptures say it clearly. He was wealthy. Through the eyes of his generation he gained his money dishonestly. Like Benedict Arnold, he had betrayed his country. Zacchaeus heard that Jesus was coming, and he wanted to see him firsthand! His options are few. To stay out of the crowd who wanted to hurt him and to see over the crowd, he climbs a sycamore tree. When Jesus saw Zacchaeus' determination, he called him and announced to the crowd his intentions to stay in his home. The crowd muttered after these words, because God is supposed to hate the rich. However, God loves everyone, even the rich. Zacchaeus heard the negativity and announced to the crowd he had changed his ways. He made amends and gave away a great amount of money. Jesus saw that Zacchaeus believed in him. His message had altered the tax collector's life. Do you remember Jesus's parting words? "*Today salvation has come to this house.*" Zacchaeus believed in the existence of God but, more importantly, he also believed in Jesus.

As we come to the Communion table, let me ask you this question: Are you more like Satan, who simply believed in the existence of God? Are you more like Zacchaeus, who believed in Jesus? The question is not if you believe in God. Even Satan believed in God. The real question is, do you believe in Jesus? There is only one right answer. Your answer must be YES!

Will you pray with me?