

“The Intellectual Approach” – Acts 17:16-34

Welcome to “Cries Fellowship” where it’s not uncommon for somebody to be crying and it is usually not because we are sad. Most of the time when somebody around here is crying it is because we feel God at work in our lives as individuals and as a church. For most of us, it’s difficult not to cry when you are in the presence of All-mighty, All-powerful, All-knowing God, the Creator and Sustainer and Deliverer, our Savior. It can be scary and intimidating and it should be. But, there ought to be some things that break your heart and make you cry.

In his retirement, Thomas Jefferson founded the University of Virginia. Because Jefferson trusted that students would take their studies seriously, the code of discipline was lax. Unfortunately, his trust proved misplaced when the misbehavior of students led to a riot in which professors who tried to restore order were attacked. The following day a meeting was held between the university's board, of which Jefferson was a member, and defiant students. Jefferson began by saying, *"This is one of the most painful events of my life,"* was overcome by emotion, and burst into tears. Another board member asked the rioters to come forward and give their names. Nearly every one did. Later, one of them said, *"It was not Mr. Jefferson's words, but his tears."* (Today in the Word, March 29, 1993.)

In our continuing sermon series on the different approaches to evangelism, none of these methods of sharing the Gospel are going to work if you don’t love people and if you don’t feel absolutely broken-hearted at the thought of them going to Hell. Let’s not mince words here because that is exactly what happens when someone dies without having a life-changing relationship with God through His Son Jesus. There is a real Heaven but there is also a real Hell and I don’t wish Hell on my worst enemy. So, it doesn’t matter if God made you more relational or service-oriented or He made you intellectual, if you don’t have a passion for people, this is a waste of time for you.

We know Paul had a passion for people and a passion for Jesus and in **Acts chapter 17**, we see Paul coming as close to a vacation as we ever see him. He is actually on one of his mission trips and he has some stories to tell already. He has seen lots of people come to know the Lord but he has also been run out of town, put in jail and nearly killed several times. You know, that’s just another Tuesday for Paul.

But in **Acts 17**, he is by himself and he is waiting for his missionary buddies to meet him in Athens. So, he has some time to kill. He doesn't have anything on his schedule and I find myself thinking, "C'mon, Paul, why don't you just go to the beach or something. Get some rest. Heal up a little, maybe rent a jet ski or something and have some fun." But no, he has to be about the Lord's work and so as he walks around town, he is making mental notes about what he wants to say to be able to lead these people to Jesus. He has such a passion for Jesus and a passion for people, he can't take a break.

Now, you have to know that Athens was the hotbed of intellectual reasoning. It was THE place to go to be a philosopher. For thousands of years people like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle met right here in Athens to do what they did best: talk. Talk, talk, talk all the time. They even had a main place to go to talk and that was the Areopagus. The Areopagus was where they had court and city meetings and basically the place to go to hear and be heard on any number of subjects.

In Paul's day, this was the place that two groups of people met and discussed their philosophies, the Epicureans and the Stoics. These are like Republicans and Democrats but with some intelligence. Anyway, the Epicureans believed in the pursuit of pleasure and comfort and living well. They were complete atheists. Today, if someone is called epicurean, it probably means they like to eat well. The Stoics, on the other hand, thought there was a different god for everywhere and in everything and were big on self-discipline.

Now, Paul shows up and is concerned for the eternal life of both groups and in **verse 16**, we see his concern for the city as a whole. Let's start reading at **verse 16** and go to the end of the chapter.

Acts 17:16-34 says, *"While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. 17 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. 18 A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, 'What is this babbler 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. 19 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? 20 You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean.' 21 (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.) 22 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. 23 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. 24 “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 human hands. 25 And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. 26 From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. 27 God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. 28 ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’ 29 “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 human design and skill. 30 In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. 31 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 everyone by raising him from the dead.” 32 When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, “We want to hear you again on this subject.” 33 At that, Paul left the Council. 34 Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.”

In that first verse, it says that Paul was “greatly distressed.” The original word used there means to be broken-hearted and angry together. It is something that Paul just can’t let go. He can’t walk on by and let it slide but he also knows that there is a difference between arguing and debating. These people didn’t argue. They debated. They loved to debate but there was no room here for anger. Paul knew his audience wouldn’t hear a word he said if he went after them like Peter had, if you remember last week’s message. So, Paul took the intellectual approach and he was the perfect man for the job.

Paul was extremely intelligent. He could speak multiple languages. He was well-educated and well-traveled and well-read, but mostly he was good at reading people. In **1 Corinthians 9:22**, Paul said, “I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.” Paul’s passion was for people to come to know God like he knew God. He wanted them to have the joy and the peace in this life that he had as well as

the promise of eternal life in Heaven like he had. So, I want you to see how Paul starts off his evangelistic message.

In **verse 22**, Paul starts off by giving them a compliment. He said, *“I see you are very religious.”* Now, the King James Version translates it “very superstitious” and that is not a good translation. They did not consider themselves superstitious at all. But they were proud of being religious. They didn’t know that Paul was not really impressed with how religious they were but would soon explain to them that knowing God is not about religion but relationship.

But he starts off with what they considered a compliment and then he made his case for Jesus being God and Lord telling these intellectuals something that would make them listen. Do you know what most smart people want? They want to get smarter. They crave knowledge so Paul tells them in **verse 23** that he is going to tell them something they don’t know.

For us today, we have to be careful with this because you don’t want someone to think you are talking down to them or patronizing them. That’s the wrong method here. What you want them to hear is that you have some knowledge to share that they will be interested in. You don’t even have to be a scholar to do this either. What is a disciple? A disciple is simply one who learns from Jesus and then tells others what you know. That’s all you have to do and an intellectual person will respect you when you say you don’t have all the answers but you know what you know.

That is how Paul starts his message and then he gets into the body of what he wants to say. Look at **verse 24** again. *“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 human hands.”* Here Paul teaches them about the greatness of God. They were used to worshiping little manmade idols made of wood or stone that had no power or feeling but Paul speaks of the Creator God who made men on purpose and for a reason.

How important is it to feel that you are here on this earth for a reason? Do you think that would be good news for somebody that was an atheist? God created you. You are not an accident. I don’t care what your parents say. God created you on purpose. You are not a mysterious speck of dust in the vastness of the cosmos. You have meaning. You are loved. You have great worth. Intellectual or not, that is a great message and we can preach it because we have a great God.

Muhammed Ali always claimed to be the greatest, and maybe he was the greatest at boxing but he never created something out of nothing. He never spoke something into existence or held the universe in the span of his hand (Isaiah 40:12). Ali may have ruled in a 20 x 20 boxing ring but God is **Lord** of Heaven and earth! He is the Creator and Sustainer and he created you and sustains you and at the very second He stops sustaining you is when you take your last breath. That is the greatness of God.

Paul continues his message to the intellectuals at the Areopagus in **verse 25** by teaching them of the goodness of God. There is a difference in being great and being good and God couldn't be great if He weren't also good. Paul said, "*And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else.*" Paul said that not only did God create us but He gives us everything we have and everything we need.

I say all the time how important it is to know that God is in control and He loves us. If He was only in control but didn't love us, He would have thumped me off the planet a long time ago. And if He only loved us but wasn't in control, then that would be nice but what is He really going to do for me? How is He really going to protect me and provide for me? But scripture is full of passages that speak of God's sovereignty which means He is in control and we know that He loves us, if from nothing else but for the fact that He sent His Son, Jesus, to die for us.

Corrie Ten Boom once said, "*Often I have heard people say, 'How good God is! We prayed that it would not rain for our church picnic, and look at the lovely weather!'*" Yes, God is good when He sends good weather. But God was also good when He allowed my sister, Betsie, to starve to death before my eyes in a German concentration camp. I remember one occasion when I was very discouraged there. Everything around us was dark, and there was darkness in my heart. I remember telling Betsie that I thought God had forgotten us. "No, Corrie," said Betsie, "He has not forgotten us. Remember His Word: 'For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His steadfast love toward those who fear Him.'" Corrie concludes, "*There is an ocean of God's love available--there is plenty for everyone. May God grant you never to doubt that victorious love--whatever the circumstances.*"

Let me repeat that verse she quoted from **Psalms 103:11**, "*For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him.*" How do I know

that God is good? I know because He is great and His love is great. That's how I know He is good.

How do I, Todd, know God is good? Because He blesses me with the presence of the Holy Spirit to live inside me and guide me and give me peace and joy in difficult times. That's how I know God is good. I will probably never have to face something so awful as Corrie Ten Boom did but I can still feel God's presence in my life and when I feel like a speck of dust in the universe, that makes me feel wanted; like I must have great worth. That is God's goodness.

Paul has one last point to teach the intellectuals at the Areopagus. In **verses 30-31**, we see him teach them about the grace of God. Just knowing about God and His greatness and how He created everything is not enough. Most intellectuals, in fact, anybody that thinks deeply at all, want to know how they got here. They also want to know that they are here for a reason. They want to know why they are here. That's important. And the first two points of Paul's message address those two important life issues. But deep thinkers also want to believe that there is more to this life than just this life.

Oftentimes, because they can't explain it, they choose to believe that there is no God. Intellectuals have a hard time with faith. If it can't be proven in court or in a petri dish then it can't be believed. Paul chose, in **verse 31**, to use as his proof the resurrection of Jesus and that was smart because even though they were 2000 miles away from where it happened, when a dead guy comes back to life, people hear about it.

These days, since we are 2000 years away, you might use as your proof your own testimony. We have talked about this before. With intellectuals especially, they might want to debate with you about facts and figures but they can't debate your personal testimony. They can't say that you don't have peace and joy in difficult times. Use your testimony to teach them of the grace of God. That's what Paul was trying to do in **verse 31**.

That Paul was so good at this. Look again at **verse 31** and see that Paul mentions that God will one day judge with justice. That was a great word to use for these folks because intellectuals usually think in black and white. They like for things to be either right or wrong, true or false. They want justice, or at least think they do because when they see that we are all sinners as it says in **Romans 3:23** and that the justice that we deserve is eternal hell as it says in **Romans 6:23** then they see their need for grace.

That's when **John 3:16** kicks in. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. That's the Gospel. You can do that. You can do that even if you are not a so-called intellectual. Teach them that God is great. Teach them that God is good and then teach them of God's grace. Don't be intimidated. You, as a believer, have the Holy Spirit of God living inside of you to give you the words and to soften their hearts and minds to what He tells you to say.

Paul told his young friend, Timothy, to do the work of an evangelist (2 Tim. 4:5) and I have no doubt that he would tell you the same thing today. And you can do the work of an evangelist, no matter what gifts God has given you and no matter how God has wired you. We should be like Paul and it should break our hearts so bad to think of lost people going through this difficult life and then spending eternity away from God in Hell.

Music

It should hurt us bad enough that we would become all things to all people even if those people are smarter than us. We don't have to know all the answers. Just know your audience like Paul did and then listen to the Holy Spirit speaking and be obedient.

Do you have that voice inside of you that is the Holy Spirit? **Isaiah 30:21** says, "*Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, 'This is the way; walk in it.'*" You can trust that voice if you are close enough to Him to hear it.

But you have to do what Paul told the smarties at the Areopagus. You have to believe and you have to repent. Seek Him, reach out to Him and you will find Him because He is right there. Do it right now as the music plays.