



Sent – Part 12

Apologetics in Athens

Last week in Part 11 of Sent, we read Acts 16 where Paul continued his missionary journey across the Mediterranean. Paul and his companions consider traveling to Asia as well as Bithynia, but the Holy Spirit prevents them from doing so. Instead, Paul receives a vision from God directing him towards Macedonia. Entering Philippi, Paul and Silas are arrested but later freed from prison and the jailer receives salvation. The story demonstrates the priority of the Gospel: it both requires our commitment and demands a response.

This week in Part 12 of Sent, we will read Acts 17:16-34. Having been supernaturally delivered from prison in Philippi, Paul once again finds himself in hot water as he is run out of the town of Thessalonica. Coming to the city of Athens in what is modern-day Greece, Paul now enters the center of culture in the ancient Roman world to await his compatriots. Paul's discourse with the Stoics and Epicureans at the Areopagus demonstrates how to deliver the Gospel effectively according to the specific cultural context and how to take our personal Christian walk into the public.



BELONG

Start the group with an opportunity for community. We want this to be a place where the body of Christ can **belong** by sharing their lives with one another in genuine fellowship.

- How is everyone's week going? Any life updates?
 - What is something the group can be praying about?
 - What is something the group can praise this week?

 - Our walk with Jesus is often very personal, especially for American believers. Is the Christian faith meant to be kept private? If not, what does bringing Christianity into the public space look like?
 - Is there only one way to present the Gospel to a person or to a people? If there are multiple ways, how should the cultural context affect how you present it?
 - Do you think everyone is "looking for God?" In your experience, are people searching for a higher meaning or are they not concerned with it?
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BELIEVE

Move into the relevant Bible passages and read along together. This is where the body of Christ can learn together to **believe** in Jesus more and love Him better.

Acts 17:16-34 (NIV)

¹⁶ 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.

The Cultural Context

In the opening verse of the passage, Paul is described as “greatly distressed” because the city of Athens is “full of idols.” Athens is a thoroughly non-Christian city in what is



modern-day Greece, and home to unfettered idolatry. The text makes note of two groups of interest within the city, namely the Epicureans and the Stoics. In their time, they were the best-known schools of philosophical thought, and as such they attracted many to the city of Athens to discuss and debate the leading issues of the day.

Such debates took place within a place called the Areopagus. This was an Athenian court that once held a greater kind of jurisdiction over the city. Now, it was a common gathering place for philosophical and religious ideas to be discussed. Paul is taken there in response to his preaching in Athens about Jesus and the resurrection, ideas the Epicureans and Stoics find laughable at best. In verse 18 Paul is called a “babbler” (a slang term that meant “seed-picker”), but others in attendance found his ideas intriguing.

Ancient Athens in Paul’s day is no different from America today. We are a culture, sadly once primarily defined by Judeo-Christian values, defined by idolatry and secular worldview. Also like Athens, America continues to debate the merit of religious and philosophical ideas in the public sphere. Before Paul, Christianity did not have a stay in the public marketplace of ideas, allowing Athens to be dominated by false religion. America, despite the widespread presence of the Christian church, can ironically sometimes feel exactly like Athens in this regard.

This is because many Christians believe their religion is a private matter and not meant to be actively taken into the public space. As we can see here with Paul, who is about to provide what can only be called a master class in delivering the truth of God within a perverse culture, this is biblically incorrect. As Christians, part of our mission is to speak the Word of God to the world out loud. If we do not, other worldviews will dominate the discussion and Christianity will be drowned out in the noise.

However, being successful within that public space requires us to understand the culture around us. Paul understood what the people of Athens believed and as a result was able to tailor his message specifically to his audience for it to be maximally effective. In the same way, Christians in America must be aware of the culture war being fought around them. The Gospel should be paramount in every age, but different issues are emphasized in each age. We must be prepared to address those issues specifically if we are to make ground with those who do not believe in Jesus or His truth.

The Christian Response to Culture

In response to seeing the idol worship of Athens, verse 17 says that Paul reasoned with Jews and Gentiles in the synagogues and the marketplaces daily. The NIV describes Paul’s reaction as being “greatly distressed,” while other translations say, “his spirit was provoked within him.” Perhaps a better way to describe Paul’s emotions toward the situation were anger and brokenness.



You can probably imagine a similar response by Christians you know to the immorality of our day here in America. Idolatry and debauchery have never been more common among the American people, and the acceptance of homosexuality and transgenderism as normative behavior is perhaps the largest contributor to the cultural shift we are experiencing. It is very easy to see sin proliferate as it has and become angry as Paul did.

This can at times be a righteous anger akin to how God sees sin and abhors it because it is so fundamentally contrary to His good character. We are rightfully angry because we see sin destroying peoples' lives and negatively affecting our own. However, we must be careful not to allow our anger to become hatred towards those who practice such immorality. As the old saying goes, hate the sin and not the sinner. More importantly, what should grieve us most is how God does not receive His rightful glory from man.

The people of our country largely do what is right in their own eyes because the very idea of truth has been jettisoned. There is no God, and so there is no right and wrong. Everyone has the license to determine good and evil for themselves because they answer to no higher power. However, their satisfaction and peace can only truly be found in Christ, not the pleasures of this world. Paul's response is not self-righteous judgment and condemnation; rather, he takes action by jumping into the fray of the public arena to "battle" against his philosophical and religious opponents.

His brokenness on the inside does not leave him paralyzed, cursing the sin he sees from afar or refusing to get involved because it "isn't his place." Paul moves towards those who are sinful and carries the Gospel directly to them. This should be our response as well to our culture. We are not to be passive, allowing the world to carry on in whatever fashion it wants without exposing it to the Word of God. We must be active participants in fighting evil culture with the truth of God's revelation.

Everyone is Looking for God

You can have confidence to go public with your faith because everyone around you is looking for God, whether they admit it or not. In verse 27, Paul says that the earth has been arranged by God in such a way "that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us." In a sense, life is like a cosmic game of hide and seek. We feel that God is hidden from us, but in reality, He is evidenced by His creation indisputably, and He is readily accessible to us through His son Jesus.

The problem is that we are so sinful and broken as human beings that we cannot find God on our own, and so we settle for less than ideal alternatives. As we take faith into the public, we must understand that everyone is searching for meaning and purpose but



have chosen lesser idols. As Christians, we are not immune to this failing either. We often place a higher degree of importance on things that do not compare to God.

People Need the Truth About God

Our obligation as Christians is to give people a clear picture of who God is.

Creator

In verse 24, Paul says God “made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth.” God is a Creator God and is directly responsible for the creation of all that is. The very first verse of the Bible affirms this truth, saying “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.”

As the Creator of the universe, God is definitionally above and outside of the universe. In other words, God is not of the world, but is entirely distinct from it. Paul continues, saying that God “does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything.”

The Greeks and Romans worshiped gods and built temples in their honor. The Jewish people too built a Temple for God where His presence would reside, but they understood that God ultimately had no such need for it. In the same way, God does not need us to do anything for Him. Rather, as Paul says, “he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.”

God created mankind as well as the universe. Although He did not have to, He gave us life so that we might know and worship Him. As Creator, God is also the sustainer of all things, including our very lives. We are completely dependent on Him whereas He is completely self-sufficient.

Ruler

In verse 26, Paul says “he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place.” Notice that Paul says “from one man” he made all nations, a clear reference to our common descendance from Adam, the first man from whom all people share ancestry.

He was Adam’s king in the garden, and He has been the true king of every nation that has arisen since, whether they acknowledged Him or not. Jesus is Himself described as the King of Kings because He is of greater authority than all rulers who have ever ruled, and further He is the one that even kings must answer to.



As Ruler of all, God has determined the times of entire nations. No nation has come that God was not anticipating nor has any nation come that God has not Himself granted His authority to rule. Notice how Paul says God “made... every nation.” It is God who is credited with the creation of the nations, and so any power they have is given to them by the one true Ruler of the universe.

Judge

In verse 30, Paul says, “The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness.” God has always held mankind to account for sin since the Fall, but with the coming of Jesus the knowledge of God was now being spread across the nations.

The God of Israel was no longer confined to the Jews, but the covenant and the awareness of that covenant was not made available to the Gentiles across the world. In this way, no one is without excuse before God. Paul continues, saying that the judgment will come “by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

Jesus is the Judge of all mankind, and He is coming back to reward the faithful and punish the unbeliever. The book of Revelation describes Jesus on white horse, as one “who is righteousness judges and makes war.” The second time Jesus comes, He will bear the sword and He is not looking to take prisoners. Jesus’ resurrection is the assurance we have that not only is He God incarnate, but that He also has been given authority by the Father to judge.

Redeemer

Though Jesus will return to judge, Jesus has done something extraordinary to save mankind from that judgment. God, manifest in the person of Jesus Christ, willingly took the punishment of the guilty party onto Himself. Though we deserved death, Christ died in our place for our sins. The resurrection itself is evidence that the payment has been accepted.

Because of so great a sacrifice, Jesus has been given the authority to judge the living and the dead at the end of times. This is who God is! If we want to be a Christian in the public sphere, this is the God we must present.

Every Man Responds to God Differently

Your obligation is to present the truth about God and then move on. The response of the people to the message is up to them and God, not you. In verse 32, some respond by mocking the very idea of the resurrection. Paul departs from these people and moves onto the next, and that is all in his power that he can do.



Others join Paul and believe in the Gospel. We cannot control which way people will choose, but the reason we preach the Word of God in the public sphere is so that we can take as many people to Heaven with us as we can. If our personal faith does not go out of our homes and into the street, it is a guarantee that there are those who will not find Heaven.

BECOME

Wrap up the discussion by asking some closing questions. We can **become** more like the people God is calling us to be by reflecting on what we've learned and applying it.

- What specific problems do we face as a culture today in the United States?
 - What would you say is the most pressing issue as Christians we face?
 - How do those problems alter or shape our presentation of the Gospel?
- Is our faith meant to be isolated to our homes, or brought openly into the streets of our communities?
 - What does it look like for a Christian to publicly debate and defend the Christian faith?
 - How far can/should a Christian go with not only proclaiming the Gospel publicly, but also pushing back against immorality in our country?
- Why is it important that God be presented as Creator, Ruler, Judge, and Redeemer?
- What are we to do when someone does not respond to the Gospel?