

# The Unknown God

Acts 17:16-34

<sup>16</sup> 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 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. <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.

<sup>24</sup> "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. <sup>25</sup> And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. <sup>26</sup> 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. <sup>27</sup> 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. <sup>28</sup> 'For in him we live and move and have our being.'<sup>[a]</sup> As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'<sup>[b]</sup>

<sup>29</sup> "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. <sup>30</sup> In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all

*people everywhere to repent. <sup>31</sup> 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.”*

*<sup>32</sup> 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.” <sup>33</sup> At that, Paul left the Council. <sup>34</sup> 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.*

Every year U.S. News and World Report people publish an issue ranking America’s best colleges and universities. The categories include: Best National Universities, Best Liberal Arts Colleges, Best Regional Colleges and Universities, Best Value colleges and universities and Up and Coming Schools.

It is not surprising that the top national universities include: Princeton, Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Stanford, Duke, MIT and so on...

Beyond academic rankings, depending on what ranking you read there are a number of towns that make the list of best College towns. Those lists include towns like Ann Arbor, MI, Madison, WI, Berkley, CA and Boulder, CO. Sometimes college towns are ranked as best party school. Places like Iowa Sate in Ames, IA and C.U. in Boulder, CO make those lists.

Interestingly one of the best college towns listed is Athens, GA... home of the Bulldogs and known for its art and music department which produced The B 52’s, a new wave band in 1972 and R.E.M., a popular alternative band in 1980. In my estimation I think R.E.M.’s “Everybody Hurts” is one of the most hauntingly beautiful songs I’ve ever heard. And they are right out the University of Georgia in Athens, Georgia

Our text today focuses on another famous university town, Athens, Greece. Athens, Greece was at that time the greatest university town in the world... it was not known for being a party school or for producing rock bands but as a center for learning that attracted students from all over the world. Athens was the place to go if you wished to discuss “the latest ideas.”

Our scriptures today began with Paul making an observation.

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply troubled by all the idols he saw everywhere in the city.

This got me thinking about just how many idols are out there today. Think about it. We have people like Clay Aiken, a former American Idol runner up that made it big in country music, is running for congress in North Carolina and will most likely win based on his name alone. What about all of the people out there that idolize these big time pastors in the mega churches? How many people base what they do on their zodiac sign, their horoscope, or what some fortune teller told them.

We need to begin with the context from which the scriptures come from.

Exodus 20:3-4 says; <sup>3</sup> *“You shall have no other gods before<sup>[a]</sup> me. “You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.*

The Ten Commandments begin with God stating: “I am the Lord your God and you must not have any God but me (or other than me). You must not make for yourselves an idol of any kind or an image of anything in the heavens or on the earth or in the sea. You must not bow down to them or worship them, for I the Lord your God, am a jealous God who will not tolerate your affections for any other gods.”

Then in Matthew 22:37-40 Jesus said this: <sup>37</sup> *Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>38</sup> This is the first and greatest commandment. <sup>39</sup> And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’<sup>[b]</sup> <sup>40</sup> All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”*

So we have to ask ourselves two questions. 1. Is there any idea, value, perspective, thing or person in my life that is more important to me than God? 2. Does my life reflect priorities that deflect my devotion to God?

Now let me tell you that when you grow accustomed to the way things are, you no longer see them for what they truly are. There are idols all around us trying to affect the way we think and live and ultimately deter us from our devotion to God.

These are the truths and convictions that Paul took with him through life and these are the truths that informed his observations when he walked through the city of Athens. There is one God and God does not tolerate our having affections for any other gods.

The scriptures tell us that Paul was deeply troubled and distressed or experienced extreme emotional concern by what he saw. Some would say that Paul was really, really ticked and enraged. Interestingly, Paul did not act on the basis of his emotional state. No, Paul reasoned with them. He asked and answered questions. And then as one thing led to another he was invited to have a debate with smart, philosophical types...

Paul debated the Epicurean and Stoic Philosophers. We don't know how the debate went other than he told them what he believed about God, Jesus and his resurrection.

But think about setting down and debating these folks...

1. Epicureans believed: Everything happens by chance. Death is the end of it all. They believed there were gods but gods were remote and did not care about human affairs. They believed that because humans have consciousness, we have the free-will and the ability to craft happy lives and to avoid painful choices. And they believed that pleasure was the chief end of man. For the Epicureans the pursuit of pleasure was a virtue. Thomas Jefferson was an avowed Epicurean and was responsible for getting "the pursuit of happiness" included in the Declaration of Independence.
2. Stoics believed: They believed everything was God (essentially pantheists). Everything is fated because everything is the will of God. Everything is out of your control. The way Stoicism worked out in life was that you did not get passionate about anything. You were apathetic about everything and were logical and reasonable in all things. The Stoic naturally preferred pleasure but did not require pleasure to be happy.

So the Epicurean has the power to pursue pleasure and create happiness in life and the Stoic has the power of peace of mind whatever the circumstances in life. Both of these philosophies are alive and well today in our culture and in our churches they just aren't labeled as such.

Anyway, after debating with the philosophers they thought that Paul's talk about this perceived foreign god warranted a larger audience, so they took him to the sort of "thought police" on Mars Hill.

After debating the philosophers he was taken to the high council of the city where he was asked to tell them about these strange things... they wanted to know all about this latest new teaching.

Paul said, "Men of Athens, I notice that you are very religious... I saw many shrines. And one of your altars had this inscription: 'To the Unknown God.' This God, whom you worship without knowing, is the one I'm telling you about."

Now, The Athenians were people who wished to be informed of every idea floating around out there and they enjoyed debating the issues. Not so many years ago in academic circles the university was a place where you could be exposed to ideas and learn to think and make informed decisions. Not so much these days.

The University of Colorado Boulder raised a million dollars to create a chair for a "Scholar in Conservative Thought." However, when Steve Hayward expressed conservative thoughts he was accused of having and expressing conservative thoughts. In other words we like hearing liberal thoughts but we do not want to hear conservative thoughts (or vice versa). Smith University nixed having Christine Lagarde, head of the International Money Fund, speak at their Commencement because students objected to IMF policies. Condeleza Rice was nixed as the Rutgers University Commencement speaker by the Rutgers University faculty who accused her of war crimes. The First Lady, Michelle Obama, was nixed as the speaker at the Commencement for high school students in Topeka, Kansas because she was too popular and people would come to hear her rather than honor the students... I suspect there were other unspoken reasons for that nixing.

Currently in our culture, if you don't like someone or what someone thinks... just unfriend them or bar aid them with false accusations and get arguing going and the truth gets lost.

However the highest court of thinkers in Athens issued Paul an invitation: "Come and tell us about this new teaching. You are saying some strange things and we want to know what it is all about." And so he did.

In verses 22-31 he complimented them on their religiosity and then pointed to the idol with the inscription, "The Unknown God" and proceeded to tell them that that was the God of whom he was speaking.

Paul began to tell them about

- The Creator (not the made but the Maker)
- The One who guides history
- The One who makes us desire Him (His purpose was that all would search for him and find him.)
- The One who commands everyone to repent (Days of ignorance are over. Now is the time to repent and turn to him.)
- The One who will judge through Jesus Christ (whom He has set a day for judgment with justice)
- The One who raised Jesus from the dead

What Paul explained to the Athenian scholars is not new news to us. We have had the benefit of knowing for a long time what those people heard for the first time that day. We readily affirm everything Paul said to the Athenians.

But in this story some laughed in contempt, others said, "We want to hear more about this later." But some joined him and became believers.

Today not much has changed. Some still laugh and have contempt for such an outrageous belief. Some are not so quick to dismiss the possibility that it might just be true. And others still and will believe and receive the truth of God's Word.

Let me ask you ... Do you think a biblical understanding of idolatry limits the definition of an idol to things created by human hands and displayed to be worshiped?

Do you think you may have any "unknown" or "unidentified" gods in your life?

I would have to say that if Paul were to wander into our lives and wander around the streets of our hearts and minds, he might see some things we have grown so accustomed to that we no longer see them for what they are... idols.

Guys, anything more important than God and our relationship with Him; anything more important to us than others; anything for which we are overly passionate; anything that dominates our thoughts and controls our time and attention; our

money, anything to which we are addicted... is an idol. Anything that takes our eyes off the prize, so to speak, is an idol.

We better get real concerned about his because God said *"I am the Lord your God and you must not have any God but me ."*

*And Jesus said, "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind. This is the first and greatest Commandment. A second is equally important: Love your neighbor as yourself. The entire law and all the commandments are based on these two commandments."*

We don't need to model ourselves after Paul, like we have his back or something, we need to get out there and do it better than he did. We need to be much more zealous and passionate about reaching others and breaking down those idols in their lives.

To truly love people the way we are commanded to is to tell them the truth.

You cannot love God if you don't love your neighbor. Let's get out there and spread the love.....