

Philosophies of Life Acts 17:18-21

Well, last time we were together we began to look at Paul in Athens. He is by himself, and in many ways this would have been a spectacular city, very old and the architecture would have been beautiful and fascinating, especially for a cultured man like Paul. But Paul was grieved and righteously angered by what he saw. There was literally more idols than there were people in the city. Athens was a hotbed of various different ideas and philosophies, and basically you had your favourite gods or goddesses but you really didn't condemn other gods. They prided themselves in their acceptance of so many ideas. And for the Greeks they loved ideas and philosophies. Some of the most famous philosophers were Greek — Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle just to name the most recognized ones.

And we saw that Paul's anger was righteous by what he did or what came out of him. Anger moves us to act. So often we are moved by anger and think it is righteous because we want something good. But the primary reason we want that good thing is not because of Christ but because of self. We are willing to punish others through words or actions in some of the most hostile and unchristian ways yet call it righteous. Paul is moved for the glory of Christ, and we see that because he begins not by punishing or shouting inflammatory words or giving up on them, but by preaching Jesus Christ — by making known the gospel to Christ to about anyone who would listen in the city. As we look at our anger is it really righteous? Does it respond in ways that makes the character and person on Christ known? Much of what we call righteous really is not righteous at all.

The other thing we see in this paragraph is that these individuals have never heard the gospel. They knew nothing about Jesus and the hope we have through him. But here is the thing, they believed something. They were driven by some philosophy of life and some belief about God or the afterlife. Every person has some sort of philosophy of life, some sort of belief system. So often when we engage with others we never ask the question — what are they believing? It really comes out in the way they live. Here is the glory of the gospel and the truth of God — our God explains life, who we are and who he is, and affects how we live. So if you understand what an individual truly believes, you understand the way they live, and the gospel corrects that faulty thinking and life. It gives light in the midst of their darkness.

All of us here believe something about life. We are driven by those beliefs in how we function not just at church but in all of life. The professing believer who hates his spouse and constantly condemns her, and thinks about how life would be so different if she was not in his life is believing something about God and some philosophy of life. The child who just wants to escape from her parents' rule, and believes that all her problems will disappear. The person who works long hours at work and forfeits time with the family. The person who thinks that his or her problems will never change and just wants to escape her life is believing something about life and God. Think through all your problems and struggles and trials and temptations this week. Think how you responded to them, and you responded to them out of your heart, and you responded to them through believing something about life and God. We call that many times a philosophy of life or belief system, and every person is driven by it.

When you got up this morning you were driven by some sort of philosophy of life. Often for those who are believers it can be a hodge-podge of both Christian and non-Christian ideas. The question I want you to try and answer as we look at the text this morning, what message are you telling yourself? What are you saying to yourself about this life and maybe all the difficulties and trials in your life? I want us to look at the responses to the gospel of Christ in this paragraph, and really challenge ourselves not only with recognizing that I need to understand others so that I can make known Christ, but I also need to understand what person or message or philosophy is ruling my life and the responses of my life. It is either Christ or some other kind of philosophy.

1. We need to understand the messages we listen to. V. 18.

There are a couple of things I want to point out before we look at this verse, which truly is fascinating. I would have loved to hear the conversation that went on with Paul and these men. One of the things that we see is that there really is nothing new under the sun. Although these various philosophies had founders, they were alive and well before these men, and they are alive and well today. People just regurgitate the same things that people believed in the past. Often again, old ways and old philosophies in our life come up again and again. They might believe in Karma, that person will get his own for what he did. Whatever goes around comes around. It dates back to 100 years before Christ. And someone does something against us, and God never even enters the picture but repeat that phrase, whatever goes around comes around. We might have thought that nothing good happens to us. The worst always takes place in our life. Classic Stocism. That certainly is a denial of the new life that Christ gave us, but we can fall into that fatalistic pattern of thinking rather than seeing an all good God guiding the steps of my life. And that will affect the way we live and respond to life.

The other thing to remember is why we have these various philosophies of life. Why do people believe the things they do? Some of these things are just bewildering. I mean even to say that there is no God, denies the overwhelming evidence of God's existence, which is everywhere. People proclaim to be wise but are only fools. But why these philosophies? Well, listen to what Paul says right after he says that the evidence of God is seen so clearly in creation that every person is without excuse, Romans 1:21-23, **"For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things."** Think of these philosophers claiming to be wise because of their so-called deep thoughts about life, its meaning and the after-life. Think of all the images with all the animal parts and various likenesses of all parts of creation. They suppress the true knowledge of God because this allows them to function the way that they want to function. You could find some sort of god or goddess to legitimize about any kind of behaviour. Our minds and hearts are really idol factories worshiping without any light from God just about anything and everything.

And Paul says it is futile because in the end there is only one truth and one God and one way to come into his presence. What was true about Athens is so true about

our world and culture and society today. There is still a suppression of God's glory and being, so that they can live and function the way they want. So think of that as we read our verse. Look at the beginning here of verse 18, **"Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him."** No doubt this was a lively debate. We look at these philosophies and we go on and never realize what they taught. And let me say that Epicurean and Stoic philosophies are alive and well today. They dominate many people's thinking and lives. The founders of them started postulating their philosophies about three to four hundred years before Paul. And both quickly became popular.

Epicureanism was founded by Epicurus who taught that the chief goal in life is pleasure. You only have this one life to live and after this there is nothing. Therefore you need to get all the good things that this life has to offer. As far as the teaching about gods, they taught if there are any gods, which you cannot know for sure, are in the atoms. They are in the atomic level and they created the world by accident, but are uninvolved in the affairs of man, nor do they care at all about what is happening. They are completely separate and unknowable. Therefore don't worry about God, just seek to please self, look after self and live for this moment. Seek to find as much personal joy and happiness as you can. Now, do you hear any of that philosophy today? It is behind the slew of divorces, and parents leaving families. I just want to be happy. It is behind what we call bucket lists. I want to do this before I die. It is behind the love of money and the selfish living for what money can buy. It is behind the Nike, "Just do it," or the McDonald's "You deserve a break today." Life is all about the here and now. Live as if this is all there is. Where has Epicureanism invaded your thoughts and the trials of your life? We make the great goal of life not the glory of Christ but my own personal happiness. How can it not go wrong when all we care about is self? You get a whole bunch of people living for the kingdom of self and it is going to end in destruction.

The other is Stoicism. This philosophy saw God was basically in everything. There was no spiritual, but only the material world. God was in everything, and there was a predetermined plan. But here is the thing, it was an impersonal plan. Bad things happen, and you just have to grin and bear it. There is nothing you can do about it, only respond in a way that is moral and upright, but there is no personal God who is there to help. For them they looked at the intellect as the prize of life. Emotions should be checked and eliminated as much as possible. Just do your best was the basic motto. Think of it because people today see no order or rhyme or reason for any of the good things in our life nor any of the bad things. They are just there. There is a fatalistic and impersonal way of looking at life. Both of these philosophies are alive and well. Both of them attempt to make sense out of life without God in their lives. But both cannot help but leave a person not only in his sin but in utter despair. And here is the amazing thing, those who believe these lies want to hang onto them rather than seeing the liberation and light and freedom of the gospel of Christ.

I mean look as the verse continues, **"Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, 'What does this babbling wish to say?' Others said, 'He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities' — because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection."** Amazing how people hear but do not hear the message of the gospel. Some of it is because of intellectual pride. They want to hang onto their philosophies. They many times ridicule believers as

backward, lacking any sense or any reasoning powers. They are in the know and they are enlightened. Some of the philosophers said this about Paul, **“What does this babbler wish to say?”** This is not a complement. But the term was a metaphor. It literally described birds picking up scraps of seed — maybe from the hardened path. But the meaning was that someone picked up scraps of ideas from various different places and is now passing it off as something deep and glorious and meaningful, but in the end it is just scraps of ideas. And Paul was not a new thinker coming up with new ideas but gave what was given to him, and that was the unadulterated gospel. Paul indicates how he came to Corinth which was another Greek hotbed of various philosophies, 1 Corinthians 2:1-5, **“And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.”** Paul met these philosophers not with their wisdom but with the wisdom of God. And often the simple and may I say profound gospel will bring the scorn and ridicule of the world, but it will also demonstrate in the lives that God touches — his wisdom.

Others said, **“He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities’ — because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.”** Foreign divinities is basically those not found in the pantheon of images and idols that were found in Athens. And notice the word “divinities” is plural. He is preaching Jesus and the resurrection. Resurrection is feminine, and it seems that they think he is preaching about some goddess and the afterlife along with Jesus. And again, this is not right, he has no right. You see this response in our world today. Believers in an age of tolerance have no right to preach the message of Christ. People are intolerant in the name of toleration of Christianity today. They have no time for these truths but suppress what can be known of God.

But where have the philosophies of the age entered your life? It is not hard to see because it is where we are nor responding well, or are so self centred in our thinking. God is such a God of hope and meaning. With the philosophies of the world constantly blaring in our ears, we need to here about the hope and the presence and the personal goodness of our God through Christ. It truly changes who we are.

2. We need to see our responses to life. Vv. 19-21

Now these verses prepare us for the preaching of Paul to the Athenians. And introduce us to this masterful sermon that we will take quite some time investigating and looking at. The philosophers want new ideas and maybe even might look to add a new deity or statue to their collection, but what they get through the preaching of Paul is something so unexpected. It really shatters and shakes their world. And the whole scene is orchestrated by the providence of God. I think people look at these verses as the citizens of Athens being open or truly wanting to understand the gospel of Jesus. But this is more educational or academic. Everyone in their natural state rejects the God of Christ and no one seeks for him, only God can open their hearts to do so. There are a lot of hard hearts here that move them to do what they do next. And here is the

thing, whatever we believe about life and God will find its way out in our lives. You are living in some way or some how in what you believe about God. We have our official theology — what we publicly profess about Christ and proclaim when we come out to church, but we have an unofficial theology — what we believe about God in the Monday to Saturday about our lives. It comes out how we talk to people, confront the unexpected and respond to life. And as you look back at this past week, what are you believing about God? Does it really match with your official theology?

So look at their response to Paul's preaching of the resurrection of Christ in verses 19-20, **"And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, 'May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.'"** Notice "they" took him. The "they" were probably the philosophers who called Paul a babbler and a preacher of foreign deities. And this was probably not by force but Paul would still have to answer to the powers that be about what he was teaching. No one was allowed to teach what was not sanctioned by the official of Athens.

Now notice they brought him to the Areopagus. This was where the leading men of the city held court. It was centuries before that court concluded that Socrates was corrupting the minds of the youth, and therefore sentence to death by drinking poison. Now, by this time Paul would not have been sentence to death but he could be told to stop preaching or even be banished from the city. Now notice these are strange teachings, in other words, they are things we never heard before. And this all seems so well and good. Can you imagine someone saying to Paul, Can you explain the gospel to me? It is like saying, "sickem" to a dog. There had to be an eagerness.

But look at the last verse in this paragraph because it really explains the why they want to hear, **"Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new."** Now what does this mean? Well, it means that they are really not interested in whether Paul speaks the truth or whether his message is necessary in their lives. They loved novelty. They loved something new to stimulate their minds. They loved something new. In other words, they in the end were the babblers looking for something they had not thought about, something they can add to what they already knew. Something of an expansion to their philosophies that were constantly in flux.

And is not that the way many people look at Christianity — just another option among many. Christianity works for some, but for others it doesn't. I am happy it works for you but its not for me. Or some people take a little Christianity, and a little of Epicureanism, and a little of Stoicism, and try to blend them together. The Athenians if they like what Paul presents about Jesus will add a statue of him to the thirty thousand plus statures that already exist. And what Paul will present really obliterates their so-called syncretism and so-called wisdom in presenting the only God and the only way to come into his presence.

But here is the thing about syncretism, syncretism is the blending of ideas together. And syncretism is alive and well today. You see it everywhere. It is incredible to see how many people call themselves Christians but do not believe in hell, or who espouse abortion as an option, or are not sure whether Jesus was raised from the grave, or think that God condones same sex marriage. How could they call themselves

Christians? Because they have chosen the elements that they like about Christianity, and the things they like about the philosophies of the age. They have actually created a religion in their own image — their own likeness. God is not the final arbitrator of truth and error but they are with their intellect. And it is shocking how much syncretism is alive today — in the name of Christianity, which is not Christianity.

Now here is the thing, it is so easy to condemn such blatant and obvious examples of that in our world and in the lives of others. But we are often — more often than not — blind to our own sins — blind to our own syncretic patterns in our lives. It could be holding grudges or unforgiving attitudes, explain away sin. Well, God knows how much they hurt me. We have offended a holy God. Or what we might watch in the name of entertainment. God really doesn't care. It is only entertainment. It is only a little pleasure. Sounds a lot like Epicureanism. Ephesians 5:3, **“But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints.”** As you look how you interact with your spouse or your children or the colleagues at work where has you become a syncretist? The problem is not God or the Bible but our own sinful hearts that still want to create a god in our own image.

Here is the amazing thing about a passage like this, not only does it show us what other people believe, but because light has come into our hearts it shows us what we believe. And our God truly loves us so much that he takes this searchlight of Scripture to reveal the false philosophies in our lives, because God knows what is best and highest for us, and that is conformity to Christ. And no change can come unless we see where that change needs to take place. Let us seek to banish the lies we tell ourselves through the truth that God tells us in his Word.