

## So Many Alternatives Acts 17:16-17

Well, we see that Paul arrives in Athens after being forced out of Thessalonica. We see the brethren helped him get to this city. And it is incredible how the reputation of Paul seems to catch up with him. People in the last few places know all about him. After what happened in Philippi, we see opposition from people in Thessalonica and then Berea. So Paul is shipped off to Athens, and Athens is about 250 miles away. It is a greater distance away, and as you look at his activity in the city you see that no one knows him in that city, and no one knows of Jesus Christ. Timothy and Silas would join him later. In a way, this might seem like a break, a mini vacation. And we certainly all need rest, but once he was in this city his main driving compulsion took over and that was to make much of Christ — to proclaim him to those who do not know him. It is so challenging of a passage, because we never take time off when it comes to our faith and love of Christ. So often people on vacation from work do so spiritually. They actually would never consider going to church on Sunday, or even reading their Bibles or having an extended time in prayer. For Paul his whole life was about Christ. He couldn't forget about him. He was the very fabric of his life.

And as we start to look at his ministry in Athens, Athens was an old city, already beyond its prime. It was at its zenith of power about five hundred years prior to Paul entering the city. But there are a few of things to note as we begin this section. One is that the main emphasis is not on his ministry in the Jewish synagogues, even though as he always did, he entered and began to preach Jesus Christ. But the main emphasis in this passage is on his ministry to the pagan and idolatrous people of Athens. And what we see here is people who know nothing about Jesus or the true God in heaven. They know nothing of the Scriptures, and have never heard the name Jesus Christ. That is evident in this opening paragraph.

So the question becomes where do you begin when it comes to people who know nothing of God? Do you begin with Jesus, or their sinfulness, or the impotence of their gods? I mean they really are ignorant of anything pertaining to God. And this is why the passage is so valuable because Paul begins right at creation. He begins with God as the Creator and who all of us are answerable to. He presents God. And it is incredible because everything after that falls into place. Once you start to understand who God is you start to understand yourself and your sinfulness. You start to see your guilt. You start to see the need of a Saviour, and then you see the only way is through faith in him. So this passage of Scripture is so valuable because it teaches us how to share our faith with those who know nothing of Christ.

Another way this passage is valuable is that it really challenges us with a zeal for Christ and a compassion for the lost. Often we just interact with people on a daily basis and never think of the philosophies and idols that they are shackled to in their lives. It is incredible how many people say they believe in God. A national survey out of the University of Lethbridge concluded that 60 percent of Canadians definitely believe in God. There is another 23 percent that say they think there is a God. So that makes up about 83 percent of Canadians. The only question is what God are they believing in? What God is your neighbours or family members or work colleagues believing in? The philosophies that were alive and well in Athens are regurgitated today. People are

shackled in superstition, in astrology, in a number of really foolish religious systems, and here is the thing — we have the answer. We have the message. And there is a sense where we should be righteously angry at what is being taught and believed, but that righteous anger should lead, if it truly is godly to a compassionate and zealous giving of the gospel. We care about God and care about them.

But the other thing that we see in this passage is a godly anger in Paul. We often associate anger in others as sinful but see it as righteous in ourselves. This passage really illustrates good godly anger and its expression and show the false anger that so often is in our lives. There is a lot of anger in our world. And there is a lot of anger in Christianity. Are you angry this morning? Is anger dominating your life and relationships? Here is a better question — are you good and angry? Let's look and see true godly anger and the outcome of that anger in this passage.

1. We need to see the heart that God wants us to have in anger. V.16.

Now this is such an interesting verse because it explains not what Paul did primarily but his heart, what was going on inside of him. And it is the inner life that leads to external action. And here we see the zeal he had for Christ. And there is a mixture of emotions going on inside of us. There is joy, sorry, celebration, anger — all of these are given by God and have the potential to reflect God. All of these can be sinful or righteous. We can take great joy and have an internal eagerness to sin. We can have an unforgiving attitude and hatred and anger to others, But all of these emotions can be expressed in such a way that honours our God. They can be expressed in a godly way. We can rejoice and have a heart of gratitude for our salvation. We can hate what God hates. If we love God and Jesus, than any disparaging or teaching that degrades him will cause a zeal inside of us. And it is that zeal and anger that really exposes what is important to us. What gets us upset? What gets us good and angry? As we examine that question — that exposes what is near and dear to our heart.

So what is nearest and dearest to Paul's heart? Well, lets examine this verse, **“Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.”** Now Paul is in Athens waiting for the arrival of both Timothy and Silas who were left behind to help train those in the new churches of Philippi and Thessalonica, but would shortly join Paul. You can imagine Paul going through the streets of Athens. And it is incredible to think as one observer said, you are more likely to bump into an idol than you were a person in Athens. And he was right. The population was ten thousand individuals, but there were about thirty thousand statutes paying homage to various deities, and the various different control they had over the known world. This was idolatry on steroids. John Calvin famous statement, **“That man's nature, so to speak, is a perpetual factory of idols”**, finds its visual expression in Athens. So when the text says that Paul “saw that the city was full of idols” this is not an exaggeration but very literal. And it is incredible because idols are meant not to be admired because of their architecture but are to be worshipped.

I can remember being just outside of Quebec City at a Roman Catholic Church that was said to have contained a famous and valuable relic and that was the hand of Mary's mother Anne. And here behind glass, was this hand encased with gold, and a kneeling bench all around it. And here were worships actually praying to that hand. There were other statues to other Biblical personalities such as Paul and the other

apostles, and people knelt down and with their hand touched the idol and were praying fervently. This was such rank idolatry. And you can imagine Paul seeing not only the idols but the worship to these idols. Whatever you wanted or desired if you came to the right deity in the right way you could get. And all these people were placing their trust and reliance in these lifeless and impotent idols. I mean what can an encased and dead hand do? What can a stature carved out of wood do? And the answer is nothing.

Listen to what God says about idols in Jeremiah 10:3-5, **“for the customs of the peoples are vanity. A tree from the forest is cut down and worked with an axe by the hands of a craftsman. They decorate it with silver and gold; they fasten it with hammer and nails so that it cannot move. Their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field, and they cannot speak; they have to be carried, for they cannot walk. Do not be afraid of them, for they cannot do evil, neither is it in them to do good.”** Do you see the folly here? And listen to what God says in Isaiah 42:8, **“I am the LORD; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols.”** Here the glory and trust that should be given to the One true God is given to these lifeless idols, lifeless as the scarecrow in the field.

Now think of what is going on in the soul of Paul. The text says, **“his spirit was provoked within him.”** Which basically means he was good and angry. God hates idols. He will condemn and judge all idolatry. God is good and angry. God is not only good, but in his goodness he is angry at anything that is against his character, but his anger is never out of control but the necessary response to evil and injustice. So think of anger in us. Anger is mostly associated with sinful attitudes, and let me say that when it arises in us it is usually sinful. But if we never were angry then we would be uncaring and unfeeling. A tyrant who punishes his citizens and puts them to death as merely entertainment causes emotional response — and that emotional response is anger. This is not right. A mass murderer who puts so many people to death is executed and we might have an emotional reaction that this is just and right. In our love for God, and zeal for God, anger is a necessary response that God has given us because we love God and others. Paul here is angry. Paul here realizes the false hope and the sinful hearts that erect these idols, the worship of these dead images, and the distortion of who God truly is, and he is stirred in the deepest recesses of his being. The word “provoked” means to become angry or infuriated.

And there are a couple of questions that we need to raise at this moment. One is what makes you angry? If anger is not always sinful, and there are some things in our lives that we should be good and angry about — what makes you angry? Here is a definition of anger: **anger is a moral and emotional judgment of a perceived or real wrong that deserves punishment?** Righteous anger has to do with God and his fame. Does my anger ever have to do with anything close to what we would call the glory of God and his honour? Those are good questions to ask. I think some people are perpetually angry. Angry at life and at other people because they do not get what they want, and there is a constant judge that is ready to punish those who have not lived up to your expectations. So what are you angry about and who are you angry with this morning and why are you angry? Those are good and searching questions to ask?

But there is another set of questions that we should ask that I think is just as vital, and that is — is your anger really righteous? Is it really about God and his glory?

We might identify things that are really unjust, that are even against God's law, and we might think based upon that criteria — that my anger is justified. But the Bible warns over and over about anger and unjust anger. And probably about 80-90 percent of our anger could be categorized as sinful anger. But here is the question: how do I know if my anger is just or sinful? And here is the answer to that question — you can see most clearly by what is coming out of you. Anger is an internal emotion that finds its expression outside of us. And that leads to our second point.

2. We need to see our zeal will find external expression. V. 17.

We justify our sinful hearts because we want something good. But we want that something good more than we want God. It's more about what we want than loving God. Think about it, a husband or wife might want a great relationship with their spouse. But they are constantly fighting and looking at the other, and really wanting good things. But in her anger she never seeks to honour her husband, but condemns him. In his anger he never seeks to love her and sacrifice as Jesus sacrificed for us. Think about what James says in James 4:1, **“What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?”** What causes quarrels? We want to point outside of us to the other person instead of seeing what is going on in our hearts because that is where the true battle is taking place. I want what I want and I am willing to fight and argue rather than obey and follow God.

So think of what godly anger looks like. In a marriage where there is fighting and comments that should not be made, when your spouse's sin splashes on you, righteous anger is so upset that sin can destroy that which should be holy. So how do we fight in anger sin and unholiness? We fight it with holiness. We fight that sin with obedience to God, with forgiveness, with patience realizing you are just as sinful. Look how sin is destroying our relationship. You fight sin with God's revealed truth wanting him to be magnified and work through this situation. Righteous anger always has God's glory and his will for me in that situation as paramount. Righteous anger sees and identifies sin and responds in godly ways. It is ruled by God and his glory.

So think of what Paul does here, because the focus is not anger against people or opposing others, but his focus and zeal is for God's glory which leads to godly qualities coming out of Paul through godly ways. Look at the verse, **“So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.”** Look at the first word in the text. “So” is drawing a conclusion from what he observed and now felt. Paul is angered in himself with all that he sees in this city. He doesn't leave the city or pray some imprecatory prayer of damnation upon them, or shake his fist at the people or give up on them. Think of all those responses because they are all are responses we have for things happening around us. We could all justify our hearts before God because we see the unrighteous actions of others, but we are not ruled by God and his revelation. We are ruled by how it affects us. We are angry because it really is about us.

So the “so” is here to indicate Paul's external response. He sees something evil and sinful, something against God's glory. He is moved within himself that this is not just or right, and he is moved to godly actions. He interacts with three different groups of individuals. He interacts with the Jews in the synagogue, and with the God-fearers

who would have been Gentiles connected to the synagogue as we have seen throughout this book. And he interacted with people in the marketplace, or what was known as the agora. And he seemed to interact, teach, and preach and enter into dialogue with anyone who would listen. And it is this last group that Paul really interacts with and is the focus of what Luke writes about in Paul's ministry in Athens.

But let me say that there is always three criteria for righteous anger. One is that righteous anger is always against actual sin. It is actually a violation of God's word. It is evil as defined by God. It is not just a mere inconvenience. Some individuals will argue about everything and anything. Where to go to dinner on a night out, where to put furniture in the living room, or why someone was late or whatever. Righteous anger is against actual sin. Second righteous anger always has God's glory and purposes as central. Listen to what Robert Jones writes in his excellent book *Uprooting Anger*, "**In Scripture, God-centered motives, not self-centered motives, drive righteous anger. Righteous anger focuses on how people offend God and his name, not me and my name. It terminates on God more than me. In other words, accurately viewing something as offensive is not enough. We must view it primarily as offending God.**" It is here that we go wrong so often.

And the last criteria of righteous anger is always accompanied by godly qualities and therefore expresses itself in godly ways. It doesn't fly off the handle and vent, nor does it withdraw and have nothing to do with others. It expresses itself in godly ways, and in godly virtues. It is never out of control but seeks to honour God and even minister to others. So think of Paul's anger here. Was it godly? Did it meet all three criteria? Well, was he angry at actual sin as defined by God? Idolatry is the most condemned sin in the Scriptures. Was his zeal for God and his kingdom? And the answer is yes. These were distortions of the one true God. And thirdly, did it lead to godly virtues and expressions and responses? And here we see Paul does not fly off the handle or leave the city but engages with people in a controlled way to explaining the true God and the hope of Christ. The text says he "reasoned" with others.

So the value of a text like this is it exposes our own anger. It defines what anger is and also defines what righteous anger really looks like. The question we need to grapple with is — is what I call righteous anger in my life really righteous? It might be that your spouse said something that was really unkind or vicious. It is in the category of sin. But your response is to rail and throw all their failures in their face, and feel absolutely justified in doing it. It might be your son and daughter has done something and broken your rules. You realize this is sin, but what comes out of you is a loud and angry voice absent of any control or grace. It is more about you than God. We might feel that anger rise when we are snubbed for a promotion or when someone doesn't return a phone call or a text in the appropriate time manner that we deem appropriate. Jones again writes some key questions we have to ask ourselves, "**Are you angry because of what the person did to you, or what he or she did to your Savior? Whom do you regard as the one most offended—you or Jesus? In the midst of your heated emotion, are you consumed with yourself or with your God? Does your indignation arise because God's name is dishonored, or because your pride has been hurt? Righteous anger arises because of the other person's sin against God, not because of your personal hurts or vengeful desires.**"

But I want us to realize the call here is not — not to be angry. If we are not angry at sin and do not have the appropriate responses than we are not lovers of Christ. Growth in godliness entails not only exposing sinful anger but replacing it with godly anger. Godly anger is so zealous for God. Imagine being so angry at what you saw in Athens, that it causes you to patiently interact with the people of the city and proclaim Christ. Impatience is making ourselves a god, but patience recognizes God is God and seeking to serve him. I hate idolatry and how it blinds, therefore in my good and godly anger I will honour God and be patient. Sinful anger stifles the work of God because in sinful anger it is not about God's kingdom but my kingdom even when you want good things. People want the right things but for selfish motives, and you can see that by what is coming out of them. James 4:2-4 says, **“You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.”** And he is talking to believers here. Sinful anger stifles the very things that God wants in your life. But godly anger, which is always accompanied by godly virtue and godly control leads to fruitfulness. It led to further opportunities to preach the gospel, and the fruit was others who were idolaters actually coming to Christ.

And in the end it is really all about Christ and his glory. Maybe our lack of zeal in wanting others to know him is just symptomatic that we truly are not good and angry but responding to life in an angry and sinful way. Maybe we need to recapture who and what life is about. God can and does change our hearts. And God truly wants us to be good and angry.