

“Modern Day Idols: I See That You Are Very Religious”

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Acts 17:16-34

“While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.”

After doing some preaching in Berea, Paul had just arrived in Athens. Silas and Timothy had stayed behind but they were coming to join him soon. So, like any sensible person would do if they had a few days to spare in Athens, he thought he’s go around and take in the sights. Even in Paul’s day, the city would have been a historical wonder, so Paul takes a tour. He checks out the Parthenon and the Acropolis and all the other great sights of the city. As he tours the town he sees idols. He sees temples and statues to all the gods and goddesses in the Greek pantheon.

He comes round one corner and there’s Poseidon, the god of the sea and the storms holding his trident in his hand. Around another corner there’s Ares, the God of war and conquest, muscular, temperamental, and well-armed. Nearby Paul sees a statue of the beautiful Aphrodite, goddess of love, beauty, and desire. Just down the street, there was Athena, goddess of wisdom and knowledge, looking strong and sensible. Paul found himself shaking his head. Like any Jew, he was allergic to idols. And as a Jewish Christian, as someone who believed Jesus was Lord, he saw all this false worship as destructive and sad.

He was getting close to wrapping up his tour, when he came upon another altar. This altar had no statue or image. It was open on top and on the side, written in Greek, was an inscription: Agnosto Theo– “To An Unknown God.” Paul laughed. He couldn’t help himself. This town had a god on every corner and yet it still wasn’t enough somehow. This town had tried every God under the sun, this town had tried every philosophical system and debated every intellectual idea, and still they knew something was missing. With this altar, Athens admitted that there was an empty hole at the center of their soul, and none of the gods in these temples, and none of the philosophies of the Areopagus were able to fill that hole. Paul cut short his tour and headed to the marketplace. The Spirit was moving and he felt a sermon coming on.

Today we start a new sermon series on idolatry, and what better way to start our series than by walking through Athens with Paul and looking at the idols. I hope that as we take this walk and as we hear Paul’s reaction to these idols, we will learn something about how idols function in our lives today

I think for many of us our sense of idols is still very much tied to physical statues. For many of us, when someone says idolatry we picture someone bowing down to a statue of a god. Ahab and Jezebel were idolaters. They bowed down to statues of Baal. The Babylonians were idolaters they bowed down to statues of Bel and Nebo. The Greeks were idolaters. They bowed down to statues of Apollo and Zeus. That's right of course, but we end up with the sense that it's all about the statues. As a kid, I remember thinking I that there must not be as much idolatry around anymore because I didn't know anyone who bowed down to a statue or offered sacrifices to a statue. But idolatry is more than statues, and as we shall see in this series, idolatry is not gone from our world. Idolatry is still very much practiced in today's world and its still wreaking havoc.

You see, idols don't die. You might think that no one worships Aphrodite or Dionysius or Athena anymore, but you would be wrong. These gods and their glittering promises are still very much alive today. They change names and forms, but all the gods of Athens are actively worshipped in the streets of our cities and towns. If you don't think anyone worships Aphrodite anymore, go to the mall and take in the ethos of Victoria's Secret. Then head down to the huge cosmetics section at Macy's where Aphrodite's black robed priestesses will be happy to help you with product. If you don't think anyone worship Dionysius anymore, go to a frat party or a rave. Or watch a Pitbull video – the Latin rap artist, not the dog. If you don't think anyone worships Athena any more...well, let me hold off on that one, I'll get to that one later. The point is: Idols don't need a statue and idols don't die. Idols get re-incarnated.

That's because behind the idols there are powers. Earthly powers. Powers that God has created for good (so if I call out Aphrodite I'm not saying romance is bad, and if I call out Ares I'm not saying we shouldn't have a military), but then get twisted into evil. That's what idolatry is at its heart. Idolatry happens when we take a good earthly thing, a good created thing, and we lift it too high. We put it in the place of God. Our souls are meant for God, idolatry happens when we try to fill them with sex or money or power or family or whatever. Here's the truth: If Paul spent a day walking the streets of our city and an evening flipping through cable TV he would have exactly the same reaction as he had in Athens.

In this sermon series, we will spend the next 5 weeks looking at modern-day idols, examining the ways in which we are still tempted to give ourselves to these earthly powers. In a moment I will talk about Paul's response to the idolatry he finds in Athens, but before I do that, let me run through a couple of the general features of idolatry.

First, idols promise to give you power. Idols say to us some version of what the devil said to Jesus in his temptation: just bow down to me and I will give you the world. Beauty says worship me and I will open up doors of attention and pleasure. Money says, worship me and all doors will open because everyone has their price. Fame says worship me and maybe you can be immortal!

Second, idols are demanding gods. They are taskmasters. They promise you rewards, but you don't get that reward up front. You have to make sacrifices and blood offerings. There is no grace in the world of idols; it's all works, and works and works. Beauty says, "In order to have my blessings you must spend an hour in the gym every day. You must prostrate yourself before me in all sorts of painful exercise positions. Then go home and anoint yourself with many oils and then maybe you will be worthy." Success says, "I promise to make your name great, but first you must spend 80 hours a week in your office in service to me, and then I need you to sacrifice your family on my altar." Idols promise you power, but they wear you out and take you captive. You end up chasing something that keeps receding into the distance.

So that's the shape of idolatry. Now let's get back to Paul. When last we left our hero, he was on the way to address the tenured faculty of the Athens University, also known as the Areopagus.

He's on his way to talk to Epicurean and Stoics and all the learned men of Athens. This is the Harvard, the Stanford, the Oxford of the day. The way Luke tells the story, it's clear that when Paul goes to the Areopagus, Paul will not just be confronting idols in general, he actually confronts a specific idol. When I set out to write this sermon, I thought I'd only be talking about idolatry in general, but as I studied the text I realized that Paul confronts a very specific idol:

the idol of knowledge, the idol of intellect. Remember I said I'd get back to Athena. Do you know what Athena is goddess of? Wisdom and Knowledge. In one of his writings, Plato suggests that Athena is associated with wisdom and intelligence and that her name is a compound of the Greek words *theo noesis* – divine intelligence. Do you know Athena's origin story? She was born out of the forehead, out of the brain of Zeus. That's a pretty good indication of what sort of power she represents. The power of the mind. The power of the intellect. Do you think Athena had any influence on the culture of Athens? They only named the city after her, that's all. And the greatest landmark in the city, the Parthenon, was her temple. Luke tells us that intellect and learning had shaped the whole culture of the city: "*All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.*"

Knowledge and learning are great things. Knowledge and intellect are God's gifts. We should not be anti-intellectual. I am thankful for universities and colleges. I am thankful for the deep thinking that goes on there. But because they are such good things, they can be raised too high and made into a god. Intelligence, knowledge can be made into a god. They fit the profile. They offer you power. There is great power in knowing things and intelligence will always get you admiration. It's a thrill to be in the know. You come into a room of perplexed people, stumped by a problem, and you step forward and say, I can explain! You untangle the mystery and everyone nods their head in admiration. That's intoxicating. When intelligence and knowledge become an idol, people start to worship that power. They see it as the greatest power, the hope of the world. They feel as though

their knowledge lifts them up over the riff raff. Remember who Plato thought should rule the world? The Philosopher Kings! The high priests of knowledge.

Paul engages the Athenian idol in a really clever way. He starts by finding common ground with his audience. He speaks their language. From verses 22 to 28 he talks about religion in general. He quotes their poets. He references the architecture of their city. From verse 22 to 28, everything is philosophical and abstract. *'In him we live and move and have our being' – that's abstract language.* It looks at the truth from a comfortable analytical distance. You can imagine the men and women of the Areopagus nodding their heads and stroking their beards as they discuss Paul's metaphysics.

But then in verses 29-31 Paul makes it uncomfortable. He takes away the analytical distance. Paul gets specific and personal. He tells the Philosophers that it all depends on a man named Jesus. Life, truth, justice, hope – it all centers in this carpenter from Nazareth whom God sent to the world, who died on a cross and who was raised from the dead. In him all things hold together. In him are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. If you want to find the beginning of knowledge and wisdom, if you want to find life and meaning, it starts by falling on your knees before him like a child and letting his Spirit fill you.

It's at this point he loses his audience, because Paul is asking them to surrender their idol. They've spent all this time building their knowledge. They've spent so much time climbing the mountain of intellectual greatness, all their pride and dignity is tied up in their intellectual power, and now Paul is asking them to fall on their knees and surrender like some hayseed at a revival meeting?!?! No way! Resurrection!?! Physical resurrection?! Hasn't this babbler read Plato?! They can't fall to their knees and surrender their academic dignity. So they walk away.

This is a pretty typical pattern. You've spent your whole life worshipping an idol, building up the power of your beauty, the power of your money, the power of your success, the power of your intellect – it's what gives you meaning and purpose. You think you will be nothing without this idol, and so you can't let it go, you won't surrender. How hard it is for the rich, the smart, the successful, the beautiful, the popular, the religiously accomplished to enter the kingdom of heaven. It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. Someone said that once.

What's your thing? What's your idol? What's the thing that you've worked so hard on that you think gives you power and significance? I hope Jesus confronts it during this series. I hope he tears it from your hands (and mine!). I hope you surrender. I hope that you will come to this table empty handed, offering nothing but your need of salvation, and that you will let him fill you up.

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