

Apologetics & Understanding

Lord, we worship You together today for the glory of today, for the beauty of creation. We worship You as the Lord of life and of new life, the One who has raised Your Son from the dead who will raise us up with Him and make everything new. Father, we look forward to that regeneration of all things. We pray now that You will renew our hearts and minds as we understand Your Word together. Teach us, we pray, so that we may go out into the world as Your people who demonstrate what it means to be renewed by You, to have our minds renewed, to think Your thoughts after You, and to have our hearts renewed so that we may be imitators of Christ in this world, in its very great need. Father, teach us today, we pray. Open our hearts to Yourself, to Your work of Your Spirit in us. Teach us, we pray, and fill our hearts with gladness. For Jesus' sake we ask. Amen.

In our previous session we were talking about building bridges. I used the illustration that everyone is living between two worlds. On the one hand there is a Christian worldview: what God has made known about the world in His Word. On the other hand there is the world of unbelief that people are also living in. The point I was making is that as we seek to talk to people and to build bridges, the bridges are going to be those points where the person is still in contact with God's world. They are still living constrained by the reality of the way God has created the universe and the way God has created them in His image. We are always going to find those points of contact, those bridges to build, as we get to know people. This is our task. We begin by asking what is right about this person's thinking. Where are elements of God's truth still present? We looked first at church people and second at people who are attracted by New Age Spirituality. We finished by talking about concern for the environment, which you will find among many New Age people.

A third group of people I want to look at briefly is secular people. What if my friend, family member, or workmate is someone who thinks of themselves as a thoroughly secular person? This is a person who sees no need for any kind of spirituality, who declares that they have no religious interests. I often have people say to me that they are not a religious person, as if they belong to some kind of different category. My response is always to say, "In the sense that you mean, I am not religious either. I am interested in what is true." By "religious person" they mean something rather different. They mean somebody who cannot cope with life or who is not concerned with what is rationally true. I am perfectly prepared to acknowledge that I cannot cope with life and that I need God desperately in every area of my life. But I am not prepared to acknowledge that I am not interested in truth.

Even most secular people have some acknowledgment that there is a God. About 90% to 92% of Americans believe there is a God in some sense. Half of them, though, would say they do not see much need for God in any kind of personal sense. He is just there to get things going, and then He is off in the distance. The truth is, whether somebody thinks they are religious or spiritual or not, every human being we are ever going to meet is religious in the sense that they are committed to something. They put their trust in something. Their trust may be in the future of the human race, the improvement of their society, science and technology, their own ability to think reasonably, the goodness of themselves and their fellow human beings, sexual fulfillment, or money. For many women, the thing in which they put their hope and on which they build their lives is family. To put it in another way, their idol is family. For many men and an increasing number of women, they put their trust in their work. Their identity is absolutely bound up in their job. That is what gives them a sense of meaning and purpose and shapes their lives. The satisfaction of oneself, the pursuit of one's own happiness, is the idol of many of our contemporaries. All people put their trust in something. The challenge for us is to find out where that trust lies.

Almost all of the things in which people put their trust are actually part of God's good creation. Work is good. God has created us to labor and to enjoy the sense of satisfaction and fulfillment that work brings. God has created us to have families and to find fulfillment in marriage and family. Most idols that people have are actually part of God's good creation. They are points of contact, even if the people's trust in them is idolatrous and inappropriate. The thing itself is something good and creates a bridge that we can build. The French writer, Pascal, who was a Calvinistic Catholic in aspects of his theology said, "Everyone is already committed." There is already a commitment of the heart and the mind to something. This creates bridges for us, things which we can commend and respect. For many of the people who are secular, it is going to be their sense of the need for some kind of moral values. We were talking about that in the last session as I used the example of my friend from England, the industrial psychologist. The recovery of values in business practice has been increasing, causing books on servant leadership, forgiveness, delegation, and treating people with dignity to become very popular in the community. It is because those values work. That gives you a bridging point to talk to people.

We have many times used the example of people coming to church because they feel the need to have their children get some kind of moral training. That sense of responsibility as parents has been placed in their hearts by God. That is part of God's reality. That moral sense has been placed in them by God. No human being you ever meet is amoral. Many are deeply immoral, but they are in touch with the moral order of the universe, though their judgments may be warped and wicked. You will always find a point of contact.

If you think about the openness of the former Soviet Union to the Gospel in the last 10 years, one of the primary open doors has been the longing for some kind of moral foundation. Lennon taught that morality is a bourgeois obsession. After two generations of atheistic Marxism teaching that there is no God or moral order, Russia and its satellite countries have been so deprived of moral training that there is a desperate sense of moral bankruptcy in the culture. It is one of the reasons why probably millions of people there have become Christians over the past 10 years. God has used this deep sense of moral need as a bridge for the Gospel. I have many friends who have been going over to the former Soviet Union several times every year to teach with The Commission. It is an organization put together with the leadership of Campus Crusade, but many other Christian ministries are involved with it. A couple of my friends have been to Russia and its satellite countries four or five times a year for the last 10 years, invited by the Ministry of Education. They teach morality from an explicitly Christian perspective for the public school teachers. They will go to a city, for example, in the middle of Siberia, and 400 public school teachers will be there. They will be trained in the Ten Commandments and how to teach them to children. That is something we would have difficulty doing in America right now! Because there is such a desperate sense of the moral bankruptcy of the culture after two generations of atheistic Marxism, the government itself has invited evangelical Christians into the former Soviet Union. God has used that to bring enormous numbers of teachers into the kingdom of God. Many of them have never heard the Gospel before; they have never been exposed to any kind of explicit Christian teaching. It has created a wonderful evangelistic opportunity for people who have some understanding of atheistic Marxism and a materialistic worldview to go and communicate biblical Christianity. They declare it not simply as a pragmatic answer to their moral problems but as the truth. It is God's truth. It is the way God has created the universe and the way He has created us. He has called us to live in obedience to His commandments and to reflect His image. It has been an extraordinary open door, and the bridge is fundamentally the desperate sense of moral need that atheistic Marxism was lacking. The people needed something to rebuild their personal lives and their society. God is using it to bring enormous numbers of people into His kingdom. There are all sorts of bridges for the secular person.

What if the person is a complete cynic, or at least says he or she is? They say that they believe that life is utterly observed, and there is no meaning in the end. There is just what is here between birth and death, and that is it. They say Christians are people who believe in “pie in the sky, by and by,” who do not have the courage to face up to the emptiness of existence and get on with it. There are people like that out there who are totally skeptical. That is where many young people are; you can hear it in their music. Whether it is alternative music, punk rock, or rap, much of it is totally cynical. My boys used to listen to a group called The Beautiful South, and everything they ever write is totally cynical about every aspect of the human condition. Let me give an illustration of building a bridge with such a person.

There is a guy I play tennis with sometimes who describes himself as a complete cynic. He loves the writings of H. L. Mencken, who was writing a generation and a half ago and used to love to attack and ridicule Christianity. This guy is involved in an H. L. Mencken society. He collects first editions of Mencken’s books and boasts about his personal cynicism and skepticism. He loves to attack some of the Christians with whom he plays tennis for being unrealistic, stupid, and not having the courage to face up to the absurdity of life. He likes to poke fun. Some of the guys he played tennis with for years occasionally invite him to church or some Christian meeting. They are very friendly to him, and he rubbishes them when they do. “Of course I am not coming to that stuff,” he says. In meeting him and praying about how to communicate to him I have been observing his life. He is a man who has been happily married for 55 years; he adores his children and dotes on his grandchildren. When it comes to his family he is not a cynic at all. These are the things that really matter to him. At that point he is in touch with the world that God made, with the way that he is made in God’s image. He is not a cynic where it really matters to him. The way we might express it is he is raising his hands, giving his praise, and bowing his knee to this world of cynicism, the absurdity of human existence. He thinks there are no rational answers to human questions that make sense of life. But all the time he has got his hand back here in God’s world. Where things really matter to him he clings to those and is not a cynic.

Everyone has always got that point of inconsistency. Schaeffer talked about this in one of his books. Where are they living in a way that is totally inconsistent with their own understanding and own professed beliefs? That is your bridging point. So I said to my tennis friend, “Your cynicism sounds really brave and courageous the way you express it. But what I have observed as I have gotten to know you over these past few months is that, for the things that really matter to you, you are not a cynic at all. Look at your marriage and the way you talk about your children and grandchildren. You are not cynical in the slightest where things are important to you.” He is not cynical about business either. He is a very successful and prosperous businessman. Where there are things that he treasures he does not allow his cynicism to intrude for a moment. It absolutely blew him away. I was doing two things at the same time; one was to establish a bridge, and the other was to challenge him. He said, “I really want to talk about these things some more.” From that point on he completely stopped rubbishing his friends’ Christianity. For the first time he started thinking seriously about the possibility of God’s existence. I went on to tell him that the things he really treasures are indeed beautiful; they are wonderful things. They exist because we live in a world that God has made. He is the Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named. This guy really listened, and we began to talk. Now he is very respectful to Christians about Christianity. He has begun to open his life up and started to share. I pray that God is calling him step by step into His kingdom. The beginning of real conversation was identifying this bridge: where is the person still in touch with God’s world? That is always going to be there; human beings are not demons. There is going to be something that you can touch where the person’s heart and mind is engaged by the truth of the way God has made them and the way He has made the world.

That brings us to principle three from Paul’s example in Acts: understanding what others believe. In the synagogue it is very evident that Paul understands his hearers. We do not need to look at that in any kind

of detail. As you read through the message in Acts 13 it is a masterpiece of Old Testament exposition and its fulfillment in Christ. You find Paul deeply committed to getting alongside his fellow Jews. As he says in 1 Corinthians 9, when he is with the Jews he is as a Jew. He is prepared to have Timothy circumcised, and he is prepared to take vows. He thoroughly understands and is prepared to engage with the culture of his fellow Jews and of the God-fearers who have joined themselves to the synagogue. Paul has made the effort to have a deep understanding of his hearers. In Paul's Areopagus address, you will see some of the details of Paul's effort. Let us go quickly through these as we think about how Paul has made the effort to understand them. As you look at Acts 17, one of the things you observe right away is that there are no quotations from the Old Testament. It is one of the ways in which the message is so radically different from the message in Acts 13. There are, however, a couple of quotes. If you look at Acts 17:28, you will see two brief passages in quotes. The first words are "For in him we live and move and have our being." These words are not a quotation from the Old Testament, though you could find biblical passages that make a very similar point. They are taken from a poem that is addressed to Zeus by one of his sons, Midas. Zeus is considered to be the father and greatest of all the Greek gods. The poem is by a writer named Epimenides. It reads,

They fashioned a tomb for thee, O holy and high—
the Cretans, always liars, evil beasts, slow bellies!
But thou art not dead; thou art risen and alive for ever,
for in thee we live and move and have our being.

That is what Paul is quoting from. You may recognize another part of that verse: people of Crete are liars, evil beasts, and slow bellies. Paul quotes that line in his letter to Titus. In Titus 1:12 he speaks about the person who wrote it, calling him a prophet. He says one of their own, a prophet, said this about the people of Crete, and Paul quotes this same passage from Epimenides. That is the first quotation, taken from the poem addressed to Zeus.

The second quotation is later in Acts 17:28. It says, "As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'" That quotation is from a writer named Aratus, who is from Cilicia. His words, indicating they have been begotten by God, are very common kinds of words. Here is an example of another poem addressed to Zeus, which has a similar kind of language. In the *Hymn to Zeus*, the words are,

Most glorious of immortals, Zeus
The many named, almighty evermore,
Nature's great Sovereign, ruling all by law
Hail to thee! On thee 'tis meet and right

That mortals everywhere should call.
From thee was our begetting; ours alone
Of all that live and move upon the earth
The lot to bear God's likeness.
Thee will I ever chant, thy power praise!

Those words are quite remarkable. They are very typical of the kind of poetry of Epimenides and Aratus, which Paul is quoting. Already among the Greeks, by this time, there is a move toward monotheism, to worshipping only one god. Zeus is becoming bigger and bigger in the thinking of people. The other gods are less and less important. Zeus is thought of as the great father, the almighty one, the many named one, and the sovereign of nature. He is the immortal one and the one who gave life to humanity. We are his children, his offspring; we are begotten by him, and we bear his likeness. This

is language that Christians can readily look at and realize that there are things that have elements of truth about God in them. That is why Paul is quoting such writers. It is not because they were Christians or because he agrees with everything they say. Later on in his message he is challenging other aspects of their thinking. But he quotes them with approval in Acts 17. Verses 27-29 say, "God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his own offspring.' Therefore, since we are God's offspring..." Paul is quoting these writers in approval. He understands this movement in Greek thought toward a higher view of Zeus, saying things about him that have elements of truth in them. They view humans as being somewhat like God. We have a kind of divinity about us. This is the way they would have expressed it; we are God's children. Paul is showing his understanding.

The second example about how Paul has made the effort to understand them is the altar to the unknown god. Paul refers to this at the beginning of the message. Acts 17:23 says, "For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNONWN GOD." There is a fascinating legend about the altars to the unknown god that were on Mars Hill. As you read this passage and think about the legend, it is appropriate to assume that Paul is probably familiar with the legend. If he was, it helps us see the power of his message. Several writers of the legend tell us that at a point in the past the people of Athens had experienced a terrible pestilence. They offered sacrifices to their gods, to Athena, but the pestilence continued. So they sent for Epimenides and asked for his advice about what to do. He was considered a wise person. He knew they had offered sacrifices to the gods they know and worship, but they should build an altar to the unknown god. They should pray that the unknown god will stop the pestilence. That is how the legend goes. They built the altars, prayed, made sacrifices, and the pestilence stopped. The altars are left on Mars Hill as a memorial commemorating their deliverance.

Some Christians find it disturbing that Paul refers to the altar to the unknown god and perhaps to this legend. He says in Acts 17:23, "What you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you." They find it disturbing because they think this means that Paul is somehow approving of pagan worship, sacrifice, and practice. Of course, he is not approving of these things. He knows and believes that there is only one true God. But he also knows, and we need to recognize this too, that every blessing that any human being enjoys comes from God. Whether they worship Him and know Him or not, every blessing comes from God. There is no other giver of good gifts. We call this God's common grace. The Psalms speak about this in many places. God cares for everything He has made. He is the One who makes the water flow down the hills and gives life to the earth, the One who brings the seasons. This is what Paul says in Acts 14:15-17 to the pagans in Lystra who want to make a sacrifice to him. He says, "We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them. In the past he let all nations go their own way. Yet he has not left himself without testimony [witness, evidence]: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons." He is saying to the Athenians that God has shown them kindness by stopping this pestilence. All good gifts come from God. "He provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy." In other words, you may worship your idols and gods: Athena, Zeus, Hermes, or whoever else it is. You may regard them as the givers of good gifts, but every good gift you actually have comes from the one true God, the creator of heaven and earth. That is what Paul is saying. The god they worship as unknown, he is going to make known to them. Every gift that anyone ever enjoys in this life actually comes from God. Whatever false belief or idolatry fills a person's heart, the gifts they have come from God. God's gifts are intended by Him to be a testimony of witness to His existence, goodness, and gracious care for the human race. That is what Paul is saying in Acts 14 and 17.

The third example about how Paul has made the effort to understand them is in the other possible allusions in his message. In Acts 17:24 Paul says, “The God who made the world and everything in it...” This is an expression in Greek that is almost exactly the same as the words in Plato’s dialogue, *The Timaeus*. In Acts 17:27 Paul says, “God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him,” which is also similar to some of Plato’s words. Those ideas are present in Plato’s works in many places.

The fourth example about how Paul has made the effort to understand them is in Acts 17:25. Paul says, “God is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.” In Acts 17:18 Luke tells us that there are Epicurean and Stoic philosophers disputing with Paul who are listening to him as he speaks. What Paul says in the first half of Acts 17:25 is precisely the view of the Epicureans. They believe that God needs nothing from humanity. He is not dependent on us; He does not need the sacrifices and offerings that we give Him. The Epicureans would have happily expressed their views in agreement. The second half of the verse, “He himself gives all men life and breath and everything else,” is exactly what the Stoics would have said. This is true all the way through Paul’s message. He is constantly showing his understanding of the thinking of the people to whom he is speaking. He does the same in the synagogue. The message is an exposition of Old Testament text with which his hearers are thoroughly familiar. Paul is constantly ringing bells in the heads of his listeners. He is demonstrating that he has become all things to all people by his familiarity with their ideas.

Let us think about this for ourselves. Sometimes evangelism is taught as if it is not necessary to make the effort to understand the people to whom you are speaking. I have heard people teaching evangelism who have said this: “All we need to do is simply proclaim the ABC’s of the Gospel: Christ died for you, you are a sinner, repent and believe in Him. That is all we need to do, whoever the audience is.” I have heard someone express that you do not need to bother with what people believe. Just preach the Gospel. Do not be concerned with that they think. Conversion is only a matter of the will. I heard an evangelist in Britain say something similar when he was leading an evangelistic crusade at one of the universities. He was meeting with the people who were going to talk to the unbelievers afterward. He said to ignore the mind and strike for the heart. In other words, you do not need to spend any time answering their questions or making an effort to understand what they think. All you have to do is preach the Gospel and the Holy Spirit will do the rest. That sounds very spiritual: it is simply the message of the Gospel and the power of the Spirit. He communicated that you do not need to engage yourself with the person, to spend time thinking or trying to discover what they believe and think. But that is not what we are taught in the New Testament. The New Testament does not encourage us to be lazy about the people we meet and their thoughts. We may think we have spiritual reasons for it, for it shows more trust in the Holy Spirit not to make an effort to understand what people think. But that is not what God tells us to do. It is clearly not what Paul is doing in Acts 17.

Let me give you an illustration using my friends who have worked in the former Soviet Union for the past 10 or 11 years, going over there many times with The Commission. That ministry discovered something. At first they thought they could simply go and proclaim the Gospel. However, they very rapidly discovered that they were not connecting with Russians, Ukrainians, and others. The people were so completely unfamiliar with the biblical message that it simply did not make sense to them. The Commission started getting people to go over there and speak who understood something about Marxism and materialistic philosophy. They sent people who were able to speak in a way that showed they understood the thinking of their hearers. God started blessing that ministry extraordinarily.

Let me use another example. Before Francis Schaeffer moved to Switzerland in 1948, he was a pastor in St. Louis. God called him to go to Europe, and he lived there from 1948 until his death. When he got to Europe he discovered that much evangelism was missing the mark and failing to communicate with people. Already by that time the vast majority of people in Western Europe had absolutely no knowledge of the Bible. The culture everywhere in Western Europe was totally post-Christian. It was not possible to begin with the message “You are a sinner, Jesus is the Messiah promised in the Old Testament, repent and believe in Him.” That was a sermon Paul could preach in any synagogue. There is nothing wrong with the message. It is a true message. It can be demonstrated that Jesus is the Messiah in the Old Testament. Look at how His life, death, and resurrection fulfill these promises. That is what Paul says: you have not kept the Law of Moses; repent and put your trust in Him; He will save you. His substitutionary death is sufficient. He rose from the dead for your justification. That is the good news of the Gospel. But in a context where people have no familiarity with the Bible, it is not the only good news of the Gospel. You have to begin somewhere else. That is what the people who went with The Commission to Russia discovered. You could not begin at that point. You had to begin with the existence of God, who God is, and the moral nature of the universe as it is created by God. You had to challenge the most foundational ideas of atheistic Marxism. In the same way, in Western Europe the Good News begins as it did for the Athenians in Athens. They started with the proclamation of the existence of God and of who we truly are as human persons. That is where the Good News begins. It does not begin with the person of Christ. It climaxes with the person of Christ, but begins with who God is.

The universe is meaningful. For me as an unbeliever, as with many unbelievers Francis Schaeffer encountered in Western Europe from 1948 onward, the Good News began with the fact that the universe is meaningful instead of observed. That is why the book of Ecclesiastes is still my favorite book of the Bible. It addresses that question of the absurdity of the human condition. It has shaped two generations of people in Western Europe and is shaping almost the whole of the younger generation in the United States at the moment. The good news of the Gospel begins with the fact that there are answers, that life makes sense because God exists and has made Himself known. That is why Schaeffer calls his book *He is There and He is Not Silent*. God is there, and He has spoken. Of course the message of Christ’s death and resurrection and the challenge to repentance and faith needs to be proclaimed. The fact that God exists and has made us in His image, this is a moral universe, and there is an answer to the problem of evil and a resolution to the problem of suffering, needs to be proclaimed. Those are also fundamental elements of the good news of the Gospel. History is going somewhere. Life is not simply an absurdity that is happening. It is not a play going on that is going to die out with the death of the solar system. Christ is coming back, and He is going to reign and make everything new. History is actually going somewhere. All these things are the good news of the Gospel.

I am not saying that there is anything inadequate about the message, “Christ is the Son of God, He died for you, repent and believe in Him.” But it is not the whole Gospel. The Gospel begins where Genesis 1 begins: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” That is why Paul speaks that way to the people in Lystra. “Turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and the sea and everything in them.” He is the living God who provides and cares for the whole human race, who gives joy to your hearts and crops in their seasons. Similarly, when Paul is in Athens he talks about who God is. He talks about who we are as persons made in His likeness and the moral nature of the universe. The other way to put this simply is that it is absolutely essential that we do our homework when we are talking to people. It is lazy to meet somebody and not make the effort to get to know them and find out what they think. We should not think that we can just tell them ABC and then we fulfill our obligation as a Christian. We cannot assume that if they do not respond they are not ripe fruit, so we can simply pass by. That is not how God has treated you. That is not what the incarnation is about. Christ

did not yell from heaven, ABC; He became incarnate among us. That is what all these things I am saying are about: we should make the effort to get alongside people. We should try and be with them and understand them so that when we speak the truth, what we say is like an apple of gold in a setting of silver. It is really appropriate to who this person is and to where they are.

The example of William Carey, described as the apostle to India, is astonishing. He is the founder of the modern missionary movement. He did not simply preach the Gospel and translate the Bible into the language of the people. He made a thorough study of Hindu scriptures and even translated them into the everyday language of the people. He wanted to understand the people to whom he was going. I remember being in India myself and meeting some people there who had been missionaries for many years. We had a day off from the meetings where I was speaking. I asked if I could go to the nearby city of Hrishikesh, which was one of Hinduism's most holy cities. It was filled with temples. The missionaries responded that in their 30 years they had never been there. They had no intention of going there. They did not know anything about it.

How can you communicate God's Word faithfully to people unless you are prepared to understand them? Paul went around and looked carefully at people's objects of worship. He made the effort to understand them. To put it simply, Paul did his homework. It is not more honoring to the Holy Spirit to think that it is not important to get to know what people think. That would be like saying it is more honoring to the Holy Spirit for you to preach a sermon that you have not prepared. If you admitted that you never bother to prepare your sermons but just pray that the Holy Spirit will give you His words, you would not last long as a pastor. The church would throw you out pretty fast. They would say that is not spiritual at all; it is actually lazy. It is an excuse for not presenting yourself to God as a workman approved, as Paul challenges Timothy to do, rightly understanding and communicating the Word of truth.

One of the other beauties of this is that you and I are in the same position as unbelievers. Think of the way the apostle John puts it in 1 John 5:21: "Dear children, keep yourselves from idols." He is writing to Christians. There are many other challenges in the New Testament to us not to worship idols. Jesus said in Matthew 6:24, "You cannot serve both God and Money." The apostle Paul says to turn away from covetousness. Covetousness is idolatry. You and I find ourselves between two worlds as well. We have bowed our knee to the Lord; we are offering Him praise. We have our eyes turned to Him. But all of us constantly have our hands taking things from the world of unbelief around us. All of you struggle with idolatry of all sorts, every one of us does. You all struggle with the idolatry of money. If you told me making an idol of money is no problem at all, I would not believe you. You do not know your own heart. You cannot live in this culture without making an idol of materialism. Another idol we all struggle with is that we believe we have a right to the pursuit of our own personal happiness. That is part of the foundation of America and the way we think about ourselves. But it is an idol to live for my own happiness. God promises me happiness, but it is as I submit to Him. He gives us everything for our enjoyment, the Scripture says. I am called to worship, love, serve, and adore Him even if all of my happiness gets taken away in this life. We are not promised that everything is going to be smooth in this fallen world. Some of you struggle with these things. You or members of your own family struggle with health, cancer, and other difficulties. I cannot live for the pursuit of my own happiness. We all bow to idols of one kind or another. When we seek to understand people and when we seek to build bridges, we need to recognize that we do not speak from a position of superiority. We also wrestle with the same challenges that dwell in the hearts of those to whom we speak. Commit yourself to understanding the mind and the heart.

We spoke earlier about Jesus' encounters with people. For example, look at the rich young ruler in Luke 18 who comes to Jesus with the question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus often asks questions of those who come to Him. He asks questions for two fundamental reasons. One reason is because He desires to know and to understand what is in a person's heart and mind. He wants to know what is shaping their lives. The knowledge of people did not come automatically to Christ. He is truly human. He had to grow in wisdom. He was not born with an instant knowledge of everything in the universe. He is truly human as well as truly God. We cannot get our minds around that. We simply have to affirm both of these things. His humanity is genuine. He says He does not know when the second coming is going to be. How do you get your mind around that? I do not try to get my mind around it. God is more wonderful than any of us can begin to imagine. Jesus asks questions so that He may know people and help them understand themselves.

You may have discovered that the process of discussions that you have with people helps people become much clearer about themselves. They realize what matters to them, what they believe, and what is shaping their lives. That is what Jesus is doing. He is helping people understand the idols of their own hearts. Schaeffer says that if he only has an hour with somebody he spends the first 55 minutes asking them questions. That way in the last five minutes he can say something that speaks directly to them. He can speak with understanding. In getting to know someone, an appropriate question to ask is if there is a book or somebody's teaching that is important to them and has shaped their life and understanding. Then you should go and read that book. That is what Paul did in Athens. He made the effort to do his homework. I am sure he stayed up at night making an effort to understand what the people thought. That way he could speak words that made sense to them, that spoke to where they were.

We find Jesus constantly speaking to where people are in the Gospels. He speaks to the teachers of the law. Already by the age of 12 He has done His homework so well that He is able to discuss with the teachers in the temple. They are amazed at His understanding. He worked hard to do that. He is truly human. You find this all the way through the Gospels. Jesus has a wonderful grasp of exactly where His hearers are. He speaks with understanding to them. Whether He is with country people, fishermen, or farmers, Jesus understands them. He has made the effort. You recognize this; Christ is your high priest. He is the One who knows you intimately. He understands you. What an encouragement that is to you! He knows your heart and the issues you struggle with. He knows your sorrows. This is what Hebrews 4:15 says when it talks about the priesthood of Christ. He "has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin." He knows the weaknesses that you wrestle with. It is a very great encouragement to you to know there is Somebody who understands you completely. You can take anything to Him.

The same is true at our level with one another. When you go to somebody to confide in them, you go to them because you know that they are already beginning to understand you. You know that you can trust them to understand you. When you come to them they will not just say, "This is the answer to your problem." They are not asking for a simple answer. They are asking for understanding. They want you to make the effort to listen, sympathize, and genuinely understand. We recognize as we relate to one another as believers that God calls us to understand each other and spend the effort to get to know somebody. That way when we do say something to somebody it is not like rubbing salt in a wound, saying "peace" when there is no peace, or healing somebody's wounds lightly. These are words of real comfort, addressed to this individual in the struggles that they are having.

In exactly the same way, we are called to understand unbelievers. We should understand what is going on in their minds, the devotions of their hearts, the things that they treasure, and the things that matter to them. When we speak we should speak words of genuine wisdom to them. This is pleasing to God. The

Holy Spirit is the One who converts people. I cannot convert anybody. But God calls me to build wisely. He calls me to commit myself to understanding, to be a Jew to the Jew and a Greek to the Greek. If you are spending time with someone who is a Muslim, read the Koran and understand them. You should be able to say back to the person what they believe and what is shaping their life. It should be in a way that they can recognize themselves and be pleased with what you have said. You should not represent a caricature, causing them to say, "I certainly do not believe that. That is a misrepresentation of what I think." Do not do that to people. This is the calling of Christ, to incarnate the Gospel. It means to get alongside people, to understand their minds and understand their hearts.