

Apologetics and Challenge

Heavenly Father, we thank You that You are the One who delights to come to our aid when we are called by You to serve You, serve Your people, and to proclaim Your truth. You have sent Your Spirit as the great witness and call us to work alongside Him and by His power and with His wisdom and understanding and with His commitment to work in the hearts and minds of those to whom You send us. Father, we know the task to which you called us is completely beyond us without Your help and without Your strength. So, Father, we pray that You will teach us today, that You will take Your Word and write it on our hearts and use it to shape our ministries. Thank You for Your commitment to help us. We thank You in Jesus' name. Amen.

At the end of the last session we were asking questions about 1 Corinthians 1 and 2 and considering the objection that Paul renounced reason. We looked, first of all, at the challenge that Paul's message in Athens was a failure and a mistake and saw that there is absolutely no evidence for that whatsoever. In fact, it is simply a cavalier way of approaching Scripture that is deeply dishonoring to the Word of God. Second, we looked at the question of how Luke presents Paul's proclamation of the Gospel. It is a fascinating study that Paul uses and that Luke uses to present Paul's message. The variety of language is very, very interesting. An immediate conclusion one can draw from that is that Luke does not create any sort of a tension between direct proclamation—or speaking boldly the Gospel and declaring its truth—and reasoning about it, seeking to persuade and convince people of its truth. There is no evidence whatsoever that Luke sees these two in tension with each other. Third, we looked at the question of what Paul is saying in 1 Corinthians 1 and 2. I made the point that Paul is challenging the Greeks' dependence on wisdom. We will come back to that issue later in this session.

We also said that Paul is challenging the way some of the Greeks regarded the use of rhetoric simply as a clever kind of tool to convince anyone of anything whether it was true or not. I made the point they are like some of our lawyers today. If you can hire a good enough lawyer (if you have the money), then you can often get a resolution to your case that is denied to those who are poorer. That is simply a practical reality in the culture in which we live. If you have somebody clever enough with words in a courtroom, they can often turn aside issues of evidence and truth. That is exactly the issue that Paul is addressing. He says this in contrast to that: "I have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. And by the open statement of the truth, I commend myself to everyone's conscience in the sight of God."

That is a challenge to all of us in our ministry no matter what kind of context we are thinking about. As we proclaim the Gospel to unbelievers, we should not hide aspects of the truth from them that are unpopular in our culture. For example, the judgment of God, in our own moment of history, is certainly not a popular doctrine right now, but we are called to proclaim it clearly and boldly regardless of what people think about that. It also means that in our relationships with one another as Christians we are called to openly state what we are doing rather than seek to get our way by underhanded ways—not saying the purpose of what we want to communicate. You are all aware of these kinds of problems in church politics. It is so easy to dispense with open statements of the truth and adopt back-room and secret ways to try to get one's own view to predominate. Scripture challenges us to completely set aside such approaches to our calling.

As we think about parallels to the point Paul is making in 1 Corinthians 1 and 2 about eloquence and the wise use of rhetoric to seek to deceive people into responding to something, there are all sorts of equivalents today. If you turn on your television or your radio or go to many churches, you will find preachers shamelessly manipulating people by rhetorical skills and seeking to push people into

emotional responses without sufficient declaration of the truth. Of course, there should be an emotional response to God's truth when it is properly taught because it touches our hearts—it touches every aspect of our humanity. But there is a huge difference between that and shameless emotional manipulation. Several of you in this room are quite experienced preachers already. Any of us who have preached for any length of time know perfectly well that you can make people laugh, you can make them cry, and you can make them get out of their seats and kneel on the ground if you want to do those things. However, it is not our calling to manipulate people to do things we want them to do. We are called to declare God's truth, which of course touches the heart, the emotions, the mind, and the will. We need to be very careful that whatever response we seek to get from people is a response to the truth itself and not to our cleverness. As a preacher, one has to renounce that adoption of shameless tricks that come with the trade. Paul is passionately speaking against that.

Another kind of equivalent to what Paul is talking about in 1 Corinthians 1 and 2 today is the way it is possible to use the techniques of advertising to trick people into responding to things that they have not fully understood. Again, as Christians we have to absolutely reject such an approach. Think of Paul's words, "By the open statement of the truth, having renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways, I commend myself to every man's conscience in the sight of God." The manner in which we present the truth must conform to the truth itself. There must be integrity between the manner in which I communicate the truth and the nature of truth itself. There must be integrity, and that is really an issue for the preacher. The test of the power of my preaching is not whether people are crying at the end of a message. I have to look into my own heart to ask whether there is integrity in the way that I have presented God's message. Of course people may cry because the truth is deeply moving, but it must not be because of some trick I have used. Musicians know this very well, too—that you can make people cry and jump and dance and shout and laugh and sing simply by all sorts of cheap musical tricks. If you are a musician, you know that that is not what God calls you to. If people are moved appropriately by the power of music, that is a different thing. It is just the same as it is with preaching. The issue is not emotion or anything else because God has created us with emotions to laugh and to dance and to cry at the truth. However, it must be a response to the truth and not to the tricks of the preacher or the musician.

That brings us to our sixth principle, clarity. Clarity is a careful definition of the message. God calls us to clarify the Good News as we seek to communicate it. We might express this by saying that we are called by God's Word to tune the message of the Gospel itself to the hearers' ears and hearts. We are to clear away the particular confusions that an individual or a group of people have and to carefully define the truth that they need to hear. We build bridges; that is, we find points of contact, areas of agreement, and points to affirm and commend. Then we must go a step further. The bridges we build have the purpose of communicating truth that is not yet known, not yet understood, and not yet believed by the hearers. We are to clarify the truth that they need to hear. We build a bridge so that we may cross it with God's truth that needs to be heard.

In Acts 13, how does Paul go about clarifying the message of the Gospel in the synagogue? We may express it this way: he has built the bridge of his hearers' confidence in the Old Testament Scriptures, the bridge of the expectation of the Messiah, and the bridge of their honor for King David as their great king. Paul then tells them that all of these Old Testament passages speak of Jesus. The prophecies point to Him as the Christ. Every detail of His birth, life, death, and resurrection demonstrate that Jesus is indeed the Messiah. So, they expect the Messiah, they trust the Scriptures, and they honor David, but Paul tells them that their Scriptures speak of Christ and their prophecies have been fulfilled in Him. With regard to David, they believe David's words and they honor him as their greatest king. The passage from the Psalms that David quotes is fascinating. David wrote of not decaying in the grave in

Psalm 16:10. He quotes that in Acts 13:35, “You will not let your Holy One see decay.” Paul says David lies in the grave to this very day. You can see his tomb in Jerusalem. He did not come out of it, but Jesus—the One David was writing about—has come out of the grave and has risen from the dead.

Another example of what Paul does to clarify the truth is he builds the bridge of their respect for John the Baptist. Then he says, “John the Baptist who you respect so highly was focusing all of his message on the person of Jesus Christ. He did not proclaim himself to the people. Rather, he turned their attention to Jesus and declared that Jesus was the One that they should honor rather than himself. He was not worthy to untie Jesus’ sandals.” The way we might summarize what Paul is doing in the synagogue is like this: he says to the Jews and God-fearers, “You long for the Messiah, good. I have even better news for you. Jesus is the Messiah. You believe the Scriptures; that is great, but the Scriptures speak of Jesus. You honored John the Baptist; that is great, but John the Baptist tells you to honor Christ.” What Paul is doing is pushing them a step further. You need to go a step further to the place where you will find Christ and, in Him, life itself. That is Paul clarifying the message of the Gospel—building bridges but pushing people a step further.

What about Athens? If we turn to Acts 17, Paul is among the pagans. Here, of course, the challenges are very different in terms of what Paul has to think about when he wants to clarify the truth. Again, Paul is pushing them a step further. First, the Athenians have a sense of divinity and are prepared to build an altar to an unknown god, so Paul declares with confidence that God exists, that He rules heaven and earth. Second, even their greatest philosophers struggle to come to a knowledge of God and struggle even more to make God known to others. Plato said something like, “To find the Creator, the Maker, and Father of the universe is difficult, but to make Him known to the ordinary people, this is almost impossible.” That was a very loose summary of Plato’s words. The greatest philosophers of the Greeks struggle to come to some knowledge of God, but Paul insists that God has revealed Himself clearly in creation, through his rule over history, and in particular, through the person of His Son. “So you have this confused knowledge of God,” Paul says, “but God has, in fact, made Himself clearly known in creation, in His rule over history and in His Son.”

Third, they recognize that human beings are God’s offspring. Paul agrees, but then he urges them to see how majestic and glorious God must be because we, in our human and finite glory, are simply God’s creatures and He is far, far greater than those He has made. Again, one way to express this would be to say that Paul tells the Athenians that their deepest longings are met in the truth of who God is. Their wisest thinking is fulfilled and surpassed in the revelation that God has given about Himself. Their most cherished ideas are transcended and completed in the message of Jesus. In essence, Paul was saying to them, “It is good that you have a longing to know God. It is far better to come to know Him as the Creator, as the Lord, as the Savior.” Or he says, “It is good that you are seeking God to try to find Him, but what is even better is that God seeks us, and despite our ignorance and willful twisting of His truth, He has made Himself clearly known.” He might put it this way, “It is good that you honor God as the One who gives life. It is better to see Him in His true greatness as the Lord and Creator of everything under heaven and earth who cannot be contained in temples or appropriately honored by a statue.”

People need to have the Gospel made clear to them. It is your challenge whenever you talk to anybody to see where they are confused, where their understanding is inadequate, and to clear away that confusion and push them a step further. You are to declare to them whatever aspect of the good news of the Gospel that they particularly need to have clarified. The good news is that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ promised by God in the Old Testament. The good news is also that Jesus is the Son of God who died for our sins and rose again for our justification. And the good news is that there is a personal God who made heaven and earth and everything in them. I am thinking about the good news now. The good

news is the message of Christ, but the good news is also the existence of God and who He truly is. The good news is that there is a God whose character is holy and just and righteous and that there is a foundation for the distinction between good and evil. That is very good news for our generation that is relativistic. Hinduism (Pantheism) has no foundation for the distinction between good and evil. Christianity does in the character of a holy and righteous God. The good news today is that human beings are made in the image of God. They are unique. They have this wonderful dignity and glory that their personality is founded in the personal nature of God. That is good news for a culture that sees no basis for human dignity. The good news is that there is a resolution to the problem of suffering. In a culture like ours that sees no answer to that problem ultimately, it is good news that every tear will be wiped away, that death will be no more. The whole message of Christianity is good news. Or to put it another way, you might say every article of the Creed is good news, whether I am talking about who God the Father is as the Creator of heaven and earth, who God the Son is as the One who became incarnate and lived a righteous life and died for our sins and rose from the dead and is coming again, or whether we are talking about the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life. Every aspect of the Gospel is good news.

The Gospel fulfills every right longing of the human heart. It really is good news. The Gospel answers every honest question of the searching mind. The Gospel delights and surpasses every good impulse of the creative imagination. The Gospel meets and transcends the ache of need in every soul to come to know the living God. “God set eternity in our heart,” Ecclesiastes says, and the Gospel meets that longing of the heart, soul, mind, will, and imagination. C. S. Lewis wrote about his own conversion in two books, *Surprised by Joy* and *The Pilgrim’s Regress*. This point that I am making here is exactly the point that Lewis makes in the account of his own conversion. He was surprised by joy when the hopes and longings of his inner being were completely satisfied in the Gospel of Christ. What is fascinating is if you look at what Lewis says as an example of this. Lewis’ longings were created in him by pagan mythology (by pagan legends of the people of Scandinavia, of the Norse legends, and of the Anglo-Saxons and others). They created a longing in his heart for a better world, a better universe, the paradise, you might say, where the deepest needs of the human heart and soul and imagination are met. He eventually finds the answer to that in the Gospel. He is surprised by joy, the joy that the Christian message offers.

I was recently talking about Harry Potter and I was addressing this issue. In what Lewis and Tolkien called “mythopoeic,” fairy stories, myths, and legends from all over the world, they actually express faithfully, to some degree, that longing for eternity that is set in the human heart by God. There are echoes of the truth there and the Gospel fulfills all of those. You may be interested in a wonderful essay Tolkien wrote about fairy stories. It is published in a little volume called *Tree and Leaf* in which he talks about the way all fairy stories long for the idea of resurrection. They are filled with the hope of resurrection, the hope of eternal life. He writes in that essay that the Gospel is the greatest fairy story ever told. He is very careful to say he does not mean that the Gospel is simply a fairy story or a legend. Of course it is the truth. Christ rose from the dead in history. That is why it is the most wonderful fairy story. Here, the longings of all legends, myths, and fairy stories across the face of the earth find their fulfillment in the Gospel of Christ. The Gospel satisfies every true need that is in people’s hearts and minds.

Now, let us turn to one example from Jesus’ teaching of clarifying the truth. If you turn to Matthew chapter 22 in your Bible, this is a typical example from the Gospels. You could find many examples of Jesus doing what I have called “clarifying the truth” or pushing people a step further—building on what they already know and then urging them to move a step closer to the truth. We could express it this way:

if somebody is on a path, what we are trying to do is press them toward that gate in the Kingdom of God and move them a step further along that road.

That is when I think about my father dying of cancer back in 1972. I was going to visit him every single day and praying about this all the time because this, of course, is something that we cannot do by ourselves. We need the work of the Spirit in people's hearts. I was trying to push him a step further, a step closer, toward the Gospel by clearing away another area of confusion. I did this by showing another area of inadequacy in Marxist thinking because he was a Marxist. I wanted to move him a step closer along that road toward the knowledge of Christ. And that is what you find Jesus constantly doing as he interacts with people. This is a very interesting example. Jesus often does this with very penetrating questions. Penetrating questions are one of the best ways to move people a step further to make them realize their present understanding is inadequate.

Matthew 22:41 says, "While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them, 'What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he [whose descendent]?—that is what the word "son" means here—'Whose son is he?' 'The son of David,' they replied." You see, they know the Old Testament well. And there are, of course, many messianic prophecies that declare that the Messiah is going to be a descendent of David or Jesse, David's father. Isaiah 11 says, "...the branch from the root of Jesse." Isaiah 9 says, "The descendent of David who is going to reign over his throne and over the whole world forever." So, there are many, many prophecies that say quite explicitly that the Messiah is the son of David, or the descendent of David. They are right, but Jesus says to them, "How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him [the Messiah] Lord? For he said, 'The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.' If David calls him Lord, how can he be his son?" That is a great question. Jesus, of course, was quoting Psalm 110, another messianic psalm. He is saying to them, "You have not read well enough. The Messiah is not only David's son; he is also David's Lord. Just look at what David himself said, 'The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand.'" The Messiah is David's Lord. He is my Lord and so he is urging them to think more deeply about who the Messiah is, and he really blows them away. That is what he is doing. He sends them off to think. Jesus is constantly doing that with people. He is pushing them a step further. He is seeking to advance their understanding. You could think of Paul simply saying, "Let your conversation always be full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone." The "salt" there is the salt of God's truth that needs to season, to change, and to clarify in order to push people a step further along the road to an understanding of the Gospel. That is the sixth principle.

Finally, the seventh principle is the principle of challenge—the need to challenge the heart, the mind, and the will. This is our final principle. Whenever the Gospel is proclaimed, it must come as a challenge to its hearers. For people to come to a saving knowledge of Christ, they have to repent and believe the Gospel. They have to turn away from their sin and from what they have believed, whatever they have put their trust in, or whatever they have lived for apart from Christ. Without that repentance, without that turning, there will be no salvation. It is as simple as that. We are quite aware of this if we recognize somebody as what we might call an obvious sinner living in flagrant disobedience to God's commandments about truth telling, respect for other people's property, or about sexual fidelity. Like Paul says in Ephesians, "Let the thief no longer steal, but let him do his work with honest hands so that he may have to give to those in need."

I remember having a conversation with a guy who was responding to the Gospel. He was staying with us at the English L'Abri. This was many years ago, and he had lived for years as a thief. He had not done an honest day's work probably for five or six years at this point when I was having this conversation with him. I turned to that passage in Ephesians and read it to him because he was saying he wanted to be

a Christian, to believe in Christ. And I said, “Well, this is the Gospel’s challenge to you.” His response was, “No way. No way. I am not prepared to do an honest day’s work. I am quite happy to be a Christian. I want to believe in Christ, but I am certainly not going to stop being a thief. It is too good a way of life.” We had a discussion about it and I said to him, “Well, if you were serious about coming to faith in Christ, this is going to have to happen, because Christ calls us to submit to His authority. That is what coming to Him means—acknowledging Him as Lord as well as Savior.” He did not like that at all. I said to him, “Well, if you are really serious about this, I am going to continue to pray for you certainly, but God is going to deal with you about this.” And he went away obstinate and carried on thieving. A few months later, he was in prison for a couple of years. He was caught by the police and spent the next couple of years in prison. There, God spoke to him very powerfully. He had to be challenged in that area.

Whatever obstacle is in the way of an individual coming to faith and repentance has to be dealt with, and the Gospel has to challenge it. This is true for everyone, whether they are a thief like the man I spoke of, whether they are living in the service of some other god, believing some other philosophy or into some other religion, or whether they are living for some kind of personal idol that controls their life; they have to be challenged. The Gospel must always come as a challenge. If there is no challenge, then the Gospel has not been faithfully proclaimed. Luther put it this way, “You can preach the Gospel with the loudest voice and in the clearest manner at every point except where it is under attack and you have not preached it at all.” If you are not prepared to challenge the idols of an individual’s heart and the idols of the culture in which we live, you have not preached the Gospel faithfully.

Let us look at our examples again. In Acts 13 Paul is in the synagogue. There are several areas of challenge in this passage. They are fascinating and they would have cut Paul’s hearers to the heart. In fact, that is exactly how it describes the response of some of them at various places in the book of Acts. There are several areas of challenge. First, Paul challenges these people in the synagogue about the unjust trial and death of Jesus in Jerusalem. He declares that it is God’s people, Israel, and their rulers—the very ones who have been appointed by the Lord to lead the people in the service of God—who have put the Messiah to death. That is one of Paul’s challenges—that the priests (the leaders of the worship of God), the kings and the teachers of His Word (the Scribes and Pharisees, those whom God has appointed to proclaim His truth to lead the people) are the very ones responsible for the death of the Messiah. For people listening to Paul in the synagogue, this must have come as a shocking and outrageous charge. And, of course, it is one of the reasons why some of the Jews present get so angry when Paul preaches the Gospel. He does not accuse; he simply states this as sober history. He insists that the trial of Jesus was conducted without adequate evidence of crime deserving the death penalty. That is his charge. For those listening to Paul, accepting what he said meant a very radical change in their thinking and in the direction of their lives. The present rulers of the people have led them into the rejection of God’s most important messenger. The Messiah was crucified as a common criminal. That certainly calls for repentance. That is Paul’s first area of challenge.

His second comes in what Paul has to say about the Law of Moses. Paul, of course, recognizes that the law was given to the people by God. But Paul insists in his message that the Law of Moses can never justify the people. It can never make them acceptable to God. That is one of the points that he comes to in the climax of his message—that Jesus died to justify them from everything from which the Law of Moses could not justify them. He essentially says to them, “You are right to devote your lives to obeying God’s commandments, but no matter how hard you try, you will never be able to keep the Lord’s requirements in such a way that you will satisfy the demands of God, God’s standards. Only Jesus can justify you; for through his death your sins will be forgiven.” Again, this message comes as a shocking challenge to the people in the synagogue. The Jews there would have thought of themselves as devoting

their whole lives to obeying the law. The Gentiles who had come to the synagogue were attracted by the moral standards of Judaism by the law. Many of these people would have seen their obedience to the law as the guarantee of their salvation, the guarantee of their justification. Paul said, “Absolutely not. You will never be justified.” Paul’s words are demanding a complete turning around in their understanding of the law, that it could not justify them, and their understanding of themselves, that their obedience to the law was completely inadequate to save them. That is a second area of challenge.

A third area of challenge comes at the very end of Paul’s message where he quotes the prophets. Verse 40 says, “Take care that what the prophets have said does not happen to you. Look, you scoffers, wonder and perish for I am going to do something in your day that you would never believe even if someone told you.” Paul warns them that if they do not listen to his words with open hearts, they will be like the scoffers against God against whom the prophets warned. Here, Paul’s challenge is very direct. “Are you going to fulfill God’s warnings against those with proud, scornful, and rebellious hearts?” Paul’s purpose was to challenge these people to recognize that they cannot just claim to be the people of God. This is one of the great problems of Judaism at this time. They thought, “We are the children of Abraham. We are God’s people. We are the ones who have the temple, who have the law, who have the prophets, and who have the Scriptures—the promises. We have the lot and nobody else has it. We are blessed and nobody else is.” Of course, there is a sense in which this is true. They indeed have these blessings, but they took pride in themselves and not in gratitude to God. What Paul is saying is “Listen, you people. The fact that you belong to the chosen people, the chosen nation, and that you have all these blessings, does not necessarily mean that you will inherit salvation. So watch it, you proud, rebellious, and scornful people. Membership of the nation of Israel is not enough to save you.” Paul directed those three challenges at the very heart of what these people thought it meant to be a faithful worshipper of God. The strengths and glories of Judaism at that time were the hope of the Messiah as the deliverer of the nation, devotion to the law, ownership of God’s Word, and the conviction of being God’s people. Let me repeat those points: the hope of the Messiah as the deliverer of the nation (that is their longing, for the Messiah to destroy the Romans, giving them back their land), devotion to the law (a righteousness the world had never seen), ownership of God’s Word (“God gave His Word to us”), and the conviction of being God’s people (“We are the chosen nation”). Those things were the glories of Judaism, their pride and security, the basis for confidence in a hostile world, and their sense of identity. Paul is really challenging them and saying, “That is not enough. It will never save you. In fact, all of these things are an obstacle between you and God unless you repent and put your faith in Christ alone.” He challenges them not to be proud of these things but to humble themselves and become dependent on the mercy of God in Christ. That is Paul’s challenge to the Jews.

There is a fourth one in their later discussion on the next Sabbath from verse 44 onward, and this is a fascinating one. It says, “On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the Word of the Lord. When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and talked abusively against what Paul was saying. Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: ‘We had to speak the Word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. For this is what the Lord has commanded us: ‘I have made you a light to the Gentiles that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.’” They are applying a messianic promise to themselves as proclaimers of the Gospel about Christ, who is the light for Gentiles. Of course, this makes the Jews really mad, and they incite a persecution against Paul and Barnabas until they get expelled. This is another area of challenge. “God’s Word is for the Gentiles, too, not just for you. In fact, you are not even worthy of it. You declare that you are not. God is going to delight to save the Gentiles.” That infuriates them because, again, it strikes at the heart of their pride. Do you remember Jesus doing exactly the same thing in the synagogue in Nazareth in his first public message? He talks about occasions from Israel’s history in the ministry of Elijah and Elisha where God saved and cared for Gentiles. All the

widows were starving to death, but it was a Gentile widow who God cared for. Israelites were dying of leprosy and struggling with leprosy, but it was a Gentile who God healed. They were so angry they wanted to kill him at his first message. So Jesus is really challenging them in this area. You see Jesus doing this all the way through the Gospels. “You think you are children of Abraham. God can raise up stones and turn them into children of Abraham. You are children of the devil.” These issues of their confidence in the law, their confidence in their identity as the chosen people, and their confidence in owning the temple and the promises of the Messiah, are the areas where Jesus is constantly challenging the Jews as He presents the Gospel because they are the barrier between them and God.

What about Paul among the pagans? In Acts 17 the areas of challenge are very different, but again, they focus on what is at the heart of the way of life and the worship of the Athenians. Paul’s first area of challenge is idolatry. That is everywhere apparent on Mars Hill. “You should know better,” he says, “than worshipping at these temples. God is the creator of everything. He does not inhabit structures made by people. Of course he does not. This is a foolish idea. How can you possibly think it is fitting to worship God under the form of these statues? These idols adorned with gold and silver and precious jewels are simply the product of human design. Your worship of these temples and statues is ignorance and folly.” It may seem obvious to you that this idolatry of the Athenians should be challenged, but just think that the buildings on Mars Hill were some of the most beautiful buildings the world has ever seen. They were absolute marvels of architecture and some of them still are. People still go from all over the world to see those buildings—like the Parthenon. The statues of the Greek gods were some of the most marvelous statues that have ever been made. They have hardly ever been surpassed in terms of the artistic skill, beauty, and glory of them. You know, they were wonders of the ancient world and Paul says, “You have to repent of this stuff.” That is pretty challenging. He told them, “This is foolishness and ignorance compared with the true worship of God. You have to turn away from this stuff to worship the true and living God.” That is the first area of challenge. The second is closely related to it.

Paul commends the Athenians on their desire to worship, he quotes their writers with approval, and he expresses appreciation for the thinking of the Stoics and Epicureans. But Paul goes on to tell them that their schools of philosophy, their wisest thinkers, do not have sufficient wisdom to lead them to the true and full knowledge of God. Paul tells them that in comparison to the clarity of God’s revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ, all their wisdom is darkness and ignorance. This challenge that the greatest thinking of the Greeks was ignorance and darkness in comparison with the truth made known by God in Jesus (a Jew they had never heard of) must have shocked them to the core. They treasure their wisdom. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 1 and 2, says, “Greeks seek wisdom, but I declare Jesus Christ. He is the wisdom from God.” So, Paul’s second challenge is, “You have done some great thinking, but it is darkness and ignorance in comparison with what God has revealed of His wisdom in Christ.”

Third, Paul challenges them in their sense of superiority. The Athenians believed that they were a superior race, that they were God’s gift to humanity. They looked down on other nations and people as ignorant children and slaves who needed to learn at the feet of the Athenians. Paul, in contrast, says, “The human race is one. You are just like everybody else.” That is what he tells them. “God has made from one man every nation of the earth. You have a common ancestry. You are no better. And true wisdom has not come from Greece. It is come from Israel. The real judge of the human race, the one with superiority, is this unknown Jew, Jesus. He is going to be appointed by God to be the judge of the whole of humanity, including Athenians. You are not superior. You are not in the position of judging others because you will be judged by an unknown Jew.” That is Paul’s third challenge—“You are not better.”

His fourth challenge has to do with the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. This is the issue that has caused some of these guys to say that Paul was a babbler, a bird just going around picking up strange ideas from here and there. That is what the word literally means. He is a seed pecker. He is a babbler, just sifting through the refuse of ideas. That is what they are saying. They are being as rude as they can. It is the resurrection that causes them to make that response. Almost all of the Greeks believed in an afterlife. Not all Greeks did because some of them were totally secular in the sense that they believed that life is just birth to death. They believed in an afterlife, but for them the afterlife was purely spiritual. For the Greeks, the afterlife was a state when the spirit would be set free from the bondage of the body and the material world. They thought of the body and the material world as inferior. The physical, for them, was temporary and lower. The spiritual was eternal and far higher.

Escales, one of the great Greek tragedians, wrote in his play “The Amenities” these words spoken by the god Apollo, “Once the dust drinks down a man’s blood, he is gone once for all. No rising back.”—the most literal translation of the Greek there is “There is no resurrection.”—“No spell sung over the grave can sing him back, not even father can”—that is, not even Zeus, the greatest of the gods, can bring him back to life—“There is no resurrection.” A fascinating thing about that is that these words in the play come on the occasion when the Areopagus is first founded, when it is first instituted. So this notion is at the heart of the life of these people. Here, they are meeting at the Areopagus on Mars Hill, and at its very founding there is this statement by one of the gods, “There is no resurrection.” But Paul declares at the end of his message, “There is resurrection. God has given proof of this truth to all people by raising a man from the dead. This man is Jesus who will be raised up to be the judge of everyone.” Paul is challenging the notion of the worthlessness of the body. This is one of the most difficult ideas for the Greeks, and Paul is just challenging it directly. “There will indeed be resurrection. There already has been resurrection. You are all going to be raised up, and God has given proof of this by raising up Christ. God made us as physical spiritual beings forever. The body is not inferior nor is the material world.” Just as with the Jews, Paul has challenged some ideas and beliefs that are at the very heart of what it meant to be Greek, to be Athenian. These ideas were their glory and their pride. Paul is trying to say, “These most precious convictions, these most precious practices that are at the heart of your life, are inadequate. They are not enough.” And he is calling them to question them so that they may be humbled before God, turn away from pride in these things, and put their trust in Christ so that Christ is the one who gives them their wisdom, their source of boasting, their sense of identity, and their secure anchor for eternity.

If you reflect on these challenges either in Athens or in the synagogue, you should notice this: Paul is challenging the most precious things at the heart of these people’s culture. He challenges the most precious beliefs and convictions of the Jews, and he challenges the most precious convictions and beliefs of the Greeks. The reason for this is simply this: at the heart of all sin is pride. This is true whoever people are. At the heart of all sin is pride, and our pride is almost always put in God’s most special gifts to us, whatever they may be. For the Israelites, it was God’s gift of His Word, of His Law, of calling His people, Israel, to be His treasured nation, and of promising them the Messiah. These are the most cherished things for the Jews. Yet it is precisely those things and their confidence in those things that Paul challenges. It is not that God had not given these gifts, but they had turned them into a source of pride. They had become a barrier between the people and God. This is true for the Greeks as well. For the Greeks, God’s most precious gifts to them were the gifts of general revelation, the gift of wisdom, philosophy, poetry, drama, architecture, and sculpture. Yet, it is these things that Paul challenges. Any gift of God, especially His most precious gifts, to every culture or every individual can become an idol—things we worship in the place of God. We worship them not because there is something inherently twisted about the gifts that God gives but because of the rebellion and pride in the human heart. We can turn into idols God’s most beautiful gifts whether it is His Word, wisdom, beautiful

buildings, artistic abilities, or whatever. Another way to put this would be that the bridging points in any culture or to any individual, the points you commend and affirm, are also going to be the points you are going to have to challenge because the bridging points are those areas where people are holding onto God's gifts. But the area they have to be challenged is exactly the same place because we turn God's gifts into idols.

Let us finish by looking just very quickly at a couple of areas where we have to challenge people in our culture today. If we do not challenge people at these, they are not going to hear the Gospel. One is the area of our wealth. We are the wealthiest nation the world has ever seen. Most of us experience a life that has a kind of comfort that would have been unimaginable for the majority of people just a few years ago. But it is obvious to any of us that our wealth, our material prosperity, and marvelous physical gifts have become very easily a source of pride, self-satisfaction, and idolatry. In Matthew 6:24 Jesus put it very simply, saying, "You cannot worship God and money." There are lots of people who have to be challenged in that area. Your heart needs to be challenged in that area, and my heart needs to be challenged in that area. That is one of the idols of our culture and of you and me. If you do not know that, you do not know yourself very well.

Second, we need to challenge our culture's understanding of freedom. Our freedom is one of the very great gifts of God to this nation. As I said earlier, inside of America we have the greatest freedom the world has ever seen, but freedom is an idol of our culture. The biggest idol for our culture is a desire for autonomous freedom to define for myself what I am free to do.

The third challenge is closely related. It is self-affirmation—the value placed on the individual. Again, it is a wonderful thing that there is a unique dignity of the individual and that every individual matters. However, you do not have to be a wise person to recognize that love for one's self, love for the individual, is destroying every social institution in this culture. Every family and every social institution suffers at the relentless pursuit of self-satisfaction. This is at the heart of New Age religion. It is the heart of most pop psychology. Almost every commercial you will ever see on the television is saying, "You have to live for yourself and nobody else," and you have to challenge that.

A fourth idol of our culture is tolerance. It is a wonderful thing to delight in diversity and to rejoice in the cultural and racial diversity in this society. But that delight in diversity can very easily become the refusal to value what is true and good and to value it above all other things. In such a context the Christian claim of truth is an offense against the idol of tolerance. There is only one way of salvation, only one name under heaven—the name of Christ—by which people can be saved. That is offensive. It is offensive to talk about money in this culture. Christians do not want you to preach sermons about money. Nobody wants you to preach sermons about personal freedom. Nobody wants you to preach sermons about self-affirmation and the pursuit of individual satisfaction. People do not like you preaching sermons about tolerance. If it is done in the right way and really challenges them as well (and not just people outside), then these are not popular areas of preaching. Why? It is because they are the idols of our culture, and they are the idols of our hearts. But that is where the Gospel has to be preached in this society; otherwise, we are not preaching it at all, not in any way that is faithful. You are going to have to give an account to God one day as to whether you have challenged the idols of people's hearts that stand as barriers between them and God and that alienate them from each other. You cannot claim, as the apostle Paul does, to be clear of the blood of all men—"I am innocent of the blood of all men," he says—if you do not challenge the idols of the time in which we live. It is no accident that the heresies of our time in the church revolve around these idols. Years ago I was sent one of Robert Schuler's books. He sent one to every pastor in the United States, and it was called *A Theology of Self-Affirmation*. What a surprise that would be to one of the heresies of the time in which we live.

If you wanted to design a message in a context that perfectly fits the culture in which we live, go to the Crystal Cathedral. The health, wealth, and prosperity gospel is a theology that is designed to appeal to this culture—not in the sense of building bridges and properly respecting people, but a theology that is entirely shaped by the culture and that does not challenge the culture. It encourages wealth and glorifies it, which encourages freedom and the individual pursuit of self-satisfaction. Proponents say these are all blessed by God and just wonderful things so we should just enjoy them. But this theology is baptizing the idols of the culture in which we live. It is the same with that whole shift in evangelical theology toward such a wideness in God's mercy that people can be saved no matter what they believe as long as they are sincere. That is going to become like a great river, like the Mississippi in full flood, flowing through the churches in the generation to come because it cuts at the heart of one of the idols of our time. But God always calls us—and this is true whether you are talking to an individual or whether you are talking to a group of people in a culture—to challenge those areas where the heart is captive to the idols of the time, the idols of the culture. It is true for you as an individual. Your greatest personal gifts that God has given you are areas where you have to be most aware of temptation and idolatry. If God made you super intellectual, it is a wonderful gift but that is going to be your idol. If God made you good-looking, or sexually attractive, that is going to be your idol. You better be careful. You may commit adultery and bring dreadful discredit to the Gospel. If God gives you wealth and material comfort, be careful because that is going to be your idol. It is true of anybody here, whatever your personal gifts are. If God made you meek and gentle, it is a wonderful thing, but be careful. You will end up becoming flexible and pliable and abandoning the truth in the face of pressure. Your strengths are your weaknesses. You need to know that. That is what Paul is doing. That is what Jesus is doing. He is attacking the strengths that become so readily the idols and the great weaknesses.