

Exegesis of Acts 17:22-31

I have received two questions that I will try to answer as we begin this lecture. Sometimes I wish that I would only get questions I can easily answer. This first question is really hard. Look at Acts 15:20. How could the council include a command against sexual immorality with a command against eating food polluted by idols, blood, and strangled animals—especially if the motivation of the commands is to maintain fellowship with Jews, not to prescribe obedience to God. If sexual immorality had not been mentioned, it would be fairly understandable that this letter was sent out as advice to the Gentile churches saying, “Please, for the sake of not offending your Jewish brethren, abstain from food polluted from idols, the meat of strangled animals, and blood.” Why is sexual immorality included? This is a difficult question, and I will not be able to go into the issue of food polluted by idols because it is a very detailed and technical issue. But I think the reason the council included sexual immorality is that in these commands they are trying to address the issue of purity. There is a fruit of purity that is to grow in all those who believe in Christ. It is impossible to receive the grace of God and do as you please—not because you are again to come under the law, but because the gift of love drives you to fellowship with God. That includes knowing His will and being purified from the inside out, according to His purposes. Thus there is a purification that begins by receiving God's grace. This is my interpretation, but I really want to be careful on this point—that sexual immorality here is representing the purification (or sanctification) that should be happening in every believer. The council is sending out these commands against impurity as a signal for the Gentiles:

Our decision is that salvation by grace alone does not mean, “Do as you please and carry on with your Corinthian and Ephesian lives.” Rather, there needs to be the fruit of purity. To illustrate that, we are referring to sexual immorality. This seems to be a very strong factor in the various Christian Gentile churches as an area that raises its ugly head and establishes self determination versus God's purity and grace. We are not prescribing sexual purity as a means of salvation, but as a necessary fruit of salvation. This is not to say that there are not many other areas where we need to grow in purity, but sexual immorality is representative of these other areas.

The real problem with what I have just suggested is that the command against sexual immorality is in the context of other references to fellowship. There is a rather difficult phrase in 15:21, explaining the motive for the commands the council sends to the Gentiles: “For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.” But perhaps that simply means that the law of Moses, the instruction of God, is known in these various cities. “So you need to be aware, Gentiles, as you have fellowship with the Jews, that there are some very elementary aspects that you need, for the sake of fellowship, to be concerned about.” I would take the mention of sexual immorality out of that list and identify it as part of the whole of purification that Paul obviously speaks about in many of his letters as a very important outgrowth of the grace we receive by Christ. That would be my answer to this very difficult question. But I am, especially on this point, very willing to be instructed otherwise.

The second question is this: is Peter's speech in Acts 15 another example of him finally understanding something he had been taught earlier—similar to his understanding of Psalm 110 expressed in Acts two—or is he simply explaining these lessons he learned earlier? I would say he is repeating the lesson he learned earlier in Acts 10 and 11. But in some ways there is more clarity in Acts 15, which is a wonderful summary of the lessons he learned in chapters 10 and 11. In some ways I could simply say, “Yes” to this question. This is another example of how Peter has been brought into a fuller understanding of salvation by grace alone, but on the other hand, he has already learned that in Acts 10 and 11.

We will now move on to lesson 12, looking at Acts 17:22-31. This is a short and highly suggestive speech in Acts. One of the reasons that I am absolutely convinced that the speeches in Acts are historical is because they fit their particular context so amazingly. Unless these are eyewitness reports or reports that Luke passes on to us from eyewitnesses, I do not know how they could be so convincing. Let us go with Paul to Athens. In chapter 17 there is a reference to Paul going to the synagogue. It is amazing that he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks in Athens (Acts 17:17). Which place in your country would intimidate you most? Where would you expect to have such sharp philosophers and such educated people sitting there waxing eloquent, that you just kind of want to walk out backwards as you have just entered? In the United States, those places might include Harvard, Yale, Wall Street, the Supreme Court, or San Francisco. In the Greece of Paul's time, that place was definitely Athens. If you wanted to avoid a place where people knew a little too much for comfort, it was Athens. People in Athens thought; they had refined their skills of rhetoric. A good speech was one that convinced—that had a well-structured flow of argument that was measured, weighed, and aesthetically appealing. All kinds of aspects must come together in order for a speech to be convincing. You would not be intimidated in Rome—not by philosophy, knowledge, and cultural refinement, but maybe by metal, by power and influence.

So here Paul is in Athens. He goes to the synagogue, reasons with the Jews and the God fearers, and then he goes to the marketplace day by day with those who happen to be there. A marketplace in that time was the social center where everything turned and happened. There was buying and selling and the hiring of day laborers. There was an intertwining of commerce and enjoyment. It was a little like Paris with street-side life where people sat down and had a long talk about things, forgetting about those negligible little incidental things like work and other obligations. There was one cafe after the next. You need to imagine a very lively situation where you would just be one little flea in the whole works of the marketplace. And here is Paul, nearly like Socrates, seeking to engage some people by asking questions like, "What are you doing? What are you pursuing?" He is doing a little street debate. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers begin to dispute with him. Note that this is not on the Areopagus. This is not in the counsel of the lawyers or the attorneys; this is in the marketplace.

Paul meets these philosophers and some of them ask, "What is this babbling trying to say? "What is that seed picker talking about?" The Greek word in 17:18 literally means, "seed picker." It is someone who is absolutely haphazard in putting his thoughts together, who has no idea how to really engage a philosopher from his perspective. I think Paul could have been more eloquent, but he did not choose to do so. There were some other remarks as well: "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. Paul did not beat around the bush, he did not speak indirectly. He spoke about the truth of Jesus. Probably, as the speech indicates, he was speaking very wisely. "Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, 'May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?'" From the marketplace he is taken to the Areopagus, a hill which was a meeting place where about 200 to 300 people could congregate (although some researchers disagree). It was basically a congress of lawyers and attorneys who not only debated issues of the day, but they also decided legal problems of the city that lay a little bit below them: Athens. This a court, but it is kind of a mixture of Epicurean and Stoic thinkers who are also lawyers.

I have exaggerated a little when I said that Athens was the place to go. Actually, the Athens of several hundred years before Paul's time was the place to go. Unfortunately, by the time of Paul the high culture of philosophy had already deteriorated to the point where formality was more important than content. If you could make a good speech, it did not matter what idea you were selling. It sold. Rhetoric took primacy over content and good communication of a philosophical system such as Plato's or Aristotle's,

or at least a system of questioning like Socrates'. There was a certain deterioration in the communication, as well as a heightened curiosity about what people said and how they said it. It was not necessarily a desire to seek to explain the universal truths, like Plato or Aristotle desired to do. They no longer wanted to investigate by going for the ideas and systems as high as the phenomenon (Plato) or by looking at the phenomenon and maybe arriving at some system (Aristotle). That has lost its flavor a little, and now the philosophers are more curious just to hear new ideas. This is a little glimpse of the atmosphere in which Paul is preaching. There is a haughtiness—a feeling of supremacy. Paul obviously is not an Athenian philosopher. He does speak Greek, but that is about all. There is a haughty, prideful attitude, and a little bit of superficiality at this point in time. The high culture had deteriorated a little to this kind of a form.

Let us look a little bit at the two groups that are mentioned here, the Epicureans and the Stoics, in order to understand some of what Paul encounters as he preaches the Gospel. It would be quite a task to go into the nest of a bunch of lawyers, who are also Epicurean and Stoic philosophers who have a good bit of rhetorical skill and finesse, and to go in there and preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Here again we are coming up against the barrier of high tradition and institution. The weight of courts and privilege is standing against Paul. Sometimes you get to certain institutions and you just kind of take a deep breath. You just do not want to come up against this huge establishment with this single, little Gospel of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. That is how I felt at some of the German universities where the Gospel was absolutely marginalized in favor of the great history of philosophical thought throughout the ages. You feel this powerlessness. Yet little David—Paul—takes the slingshot and aims at Goliath: the Goliath of tradition, establishment, weight, and immovability. He aims and he hits the target. That is amazing, really. This barrier of privilege and social status is one that we may overlook as we look at racial, ethnic, language, and geographical questions, but the barrier of social status is a big one.

Who are the Stoics and Epicureans? Let us look at the Stoics a little bit. Stoics go back to Zeno, the philosopher who instructed his followers that the world is only material. This is a world view in which there is no god as creator of the universe in space and time, outside of and distinct from his creation. If you would find anything divine, like the logos intellect or the logos sphere that the Stoics spoke about, it would be a force within this materialistic world view. It is a monistic world view; there is no division between God and nature and between God and Satan as adversaries. There is one world and it is materialistic. There is a little problem: the misery of man, as Pascal later called it, which the Bible calls sin. The Stoic identified this as basic drives of man that are destructive to happy co-existence. They said that there are some destructive elements within this closed universe. The problem is that our basic drives, the basic needs of man, are destructive and seem to war against good purposes. The Stoics believed people had to master their destructive drives.

How do we master those destructive drives? There are two ways to deal with these basic drives of man, according to the Stoics. The first way would be to develop a solid apathy towards those drives, to reflect on the futility of sexuality, power, and money: to think them through and strive to see these things with the apathetic distance of a philosopher who has finally come to the height over these low things, so that they seem unnecessary. The other thing the Stoics prescribed was discipline—to employ the method of apathy and discipline—to let them work together and master these horrible things that get in the way of an understanding of life that corresponds with the good forces in nature. You want to bring yourself in line with the good forces in nature so that you are in harmony with them. You achieve this by this system of apathy and discipline. This is where the adjective “stoic” comes from. The focus on structure, discipline, and order explains the great attraction of Stoic philosophy to the aristocracy of the Roman Empire. I am convinced that the Prussians and Germans studied much Stoic philosophy, though I cannot

prove it. So this is the way the Stoics prescribed to master our destructive drives: by apathy and discipline.

The Epicureans shared the materialistic world view of the Stoics, and like the Stoics they understood that there was a problem. But they differed on how to deal with that problem. That is why they were a distinct group. But, contrary to general understanding, the Epicureans were not those who said, “Live however you want; we can’t do anything to solve the problem anyway.” Rather, they said that things in themselves are not bad, but use them in moderation. They were saying, “Do not suppress your desires by apathy and discipline. You just need to manage your drives—your desire for power, for material things. Just kind of manage them, keep them in harmony. But real happiness is not achieved by completely succumbing to these drives; ride them like horses, but do not let them manage you.” They advised people to practice moderation, to seek a good balance and harmony in the way they manage their drives. The word “harmony” is the key to understanding Epicurean philosophy.

There are wonderful points of contact between the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the Stoic philosophy or Epicurean understanding. A few things have to be established first, especially addressing this materialistic understanding of morality, because if you do not know God you are lost. You are lost in the moor of dealing with your own fallen nature and trying to pull yourself out, be it with Stoic philosophy or Epicurean moderation. That is what the speech of Paul does in Athens. Unfortunately, there are some people in the church—I won’t name names, but one of them is Hans Bayer—who fall into the Stoic or Epicurean way of handling man’s sin rather than the way of the Gospel. The Gospel says that managing or mastering sin is impossible. This idealistic philosophy is rubbish. When you really understand the desperate state of man since the fall, you will be brought to your knees and call out to the Lord, “Lord, save me or I am lost.” These philosophies sound nice, but they fall miserably short. That is why Stoics and Epicureans need to hear the Gospel. There are still many Stoics and Epicureans. Those of German descent are often Stoics, and those of French descent are often Epicureans. They co-exist happily, but they need the Gospel because the Gospel says, “This problem is much more serious than you thought. Our drives and desires are no longer under the authority of God and so they have become sinful and completely out of control. They have broken loose and are running their own course and doing their own thing. Our desires have become our idols with their own momentum and laws. And you will not be able to tame your desires unless you place yourself back under the authority of the God who is outside of this materialistic world. You will not be able to find within this universe some kind of an order to make sense of things—neither through the Stoics’ way of conforming to the laws of nature, nor through the Epicureans’ way of developing a certain harmony in order to co-exist with nature.”

The problem Paul was addressing in Athens is still a problem today. There is nothing new under the sun. If you asked someone from the United States or Germany, “Are you a Stoic or an Epicurean?” They would probably stare at you, but if you asked them how they go about life, they might say, “You know, I cannot commit adultery because that would ruin my law firm.” Do you understand? There is a morality. There is a sense of conforming to laws; there is a certain understanding, some philosophical thinking that says, “If I do this, I will be ruined.” Our society in the West in particular seems to have moved beyond that to saying, “Let us ignore all laws or consequences and just do whatever feels good.” We might say, “We are all in a mess and who knows what is true.” That is really dangerous. The Stoic society is much more stable than a society that simply says, “Sorry, that is how I am and I am honest about it. We have problems, but there is nothing we can do about them.” A Stoic society at least has some reflection. It is not stupid. It will not fall into every little trap simply because it feels good. Rather, a Stoic society will say, “Wait. If I walk there, I will be flat on my face, so I won’t do it.” But a Stoic society is no more Gospel-driven than any other secular society; rather, it is fear-driven. It weighs the disadvantages by saying, “I will lose out here if I do.” They have thought about it, but in the end there is

no solution. You must come to the Gospel. How does Paul bring the Gospel to these Stoics and Epicureans? We don't have a whole lot of time, but I will try to present to you how Paul structures his approach to the Stoics and Epicureans in Athens.

I also want to say that I am not convinced that there are only Stoics and Epicureans sitting in the audience as Paul begins to speak. An indication of that is that he addresses people who believe in all kinds of gods. The Stoics thought it was better to believe in one logical, unifying truth within this materialistic understanding rather than in all these fancy gods. I think someone once counted and came up with 33,000 gods in Athens. I have not verified that number, but I think it is close to the truth. So there was a third group, I believe, sitting in Paul's audience, and they were of the popular conviction among Athenians. Maybe they were lawyers, but they were not of the Stoic or Epicurean conviction. They believed in many gods—a popular pagan belief. You know that there were some stones dedicated to unknown gods. There is still a debate over whether the stones were dedicated to one unknown god or to a plurality of unknown gods, but I will not be addressing that right now. Why these altars to unknown gods? When you are serving 33,000 gods, you never know when you may have missed one who will be angry with you, or jealous, because you did not establish a stone for him. Just to be sure this didn't happen, they dedicated a stone to unknown gods so that all those whom they may have overlooked would not be jealous or feel overlooked. It was an attempt to appease them. This desire to appease the gods is found from the time of the Olympian gods to this very late stage in Greek mythology and religion—this desire to appease the arbitrary, capricious sense of the gods. So as Paul addresses the Athenian court, I believe there are some of those idol worshippers in the audience.

Paul begins his speech with a *captatio benevolentiae*: an attempt to establish rapport with his audience. From the rhetoric it is clear that you must not flatter your audience more or less than is right. Paul's *captatio benevolentiae* seems to be about right from what we know elsewhere. He connects with his audience by saying, "I see that in all things you are very religious." This can be understood to mean that the Athenians were superstitious or seeking after religious truth. Paul probably means that they are superstitious, but his wording makes it inoffensive and even complimentary. "I even found an altar with this inscription: 'TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.'" Here he is addressing their ignorance. "Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you." Using the connection of this altar to an unknown god, Paul is presenting the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the Father of Jesus Christ. His address is in three sections. To address the Stoic, Epicurean, and perhaps the popular understanding of these Athenians, the first part of the speech addresses the relationship of God to His creation (17:24-25). The second section, verses 26 to 27, pertains to the relationship between God and man. The third section relates the relationship between man and God (17:28-29). Thus the sections are the relationship of God to creation, the relationship of God to man, and the relationship of man to God. There is a movement of, "How does God relate to His creation? How does God relate to man? How does man relate to God?" Already from the structure you see that different sections of this speech deal directly with the basic flaws of Stoic philosophy.

Paul does not pick a fight with the Stoics by saying, "You know, your methods of apathy and discipline won't work. They will fail utterly." Rather, Paul establishes some basic truths: there is a creator God, distinct from the world. God has made man and the only appropriate response of man is to worship God and not idols. This is a very simple summary of the argument, but you see how Paul deals with the problem of, "How do we live? What do we do with our fallen nature? How do we handle our lives? How do we fit in to this?" He says, "But see, if you do not have this basic truth, you are lost because you will always move in your own circles, trying to improve yourself." This is fantastic how Paul preaches to the Athenians, making connections at every point of difference, as some interpreters of Scripture have said. This is an amazing speech, appealing to the Stoics, Epicureans, and the general populous in such a way

that they almost could not disagree with it. But at the same time, it is too close for comfort; it is not something that they can handle. It is an amazing speech that does not hit you over the head, but still it challenges the Stoics and the Epicureans in a fundamental way, especially as Paul preaches that God has made His world. He has made His world in such a way that man can live in this world and God relates to him. “From one man he has made every nation of men.” This reference to Adam and the origin of all mankind from one man reflects a little of the Stoic understanding—they had perhaps been influenced by Old Testament thinking.

One of the major points in Paul’s speech comes in verse 29: “Since man is such an important creature, why would you make a little something out of wood and pray to it, hoping that it will help you, that it will be strong enough to lift you out of your problems?” You see that Paul has something for everybody in that group. Probably when he spoke of idols the Stoics said, “Amen! I do not understand these superstitious lawyers sitting around here. It is so old-fashioned to believe in idols.” There was probably some nodding of heads at this point. But the final point is this: “Man is created for the worship of the living God. And guess what, this God has appointed the man Jesus to be your judge, you lawyers. You will be accountable to someone.” The great hope of the Stoics was to die and then to be freed from the limitation of physicality and to somehow evaporate into the sphere of the ideas. Thus for them, the resurrection is about as bad as anything because it would mean coming back into the body. They might have been saying, “Why would we want the body to be resurrected? Don't preach that!” But that is exactly what Paul is saying. The only problem is, if they reject everything that he has said, he has pronounced that every Epicurean and Stoic philosopher in that audience will have to stand trial under the one whom he is preaching. So they have an option. They can say, “Well, he is a babbler for sure. He uses bad rhetoric and really bad content. Let us see who is next.” Or they can get so penetrated with understanding that they say, “Maybe we are creatures and the world is created by God, and maybe there is somebody who will hold me accountable. I better listen to this. This cuts to my heart. Forget about the rhetoric, the presentation. I need to hear this.” Some were affected exactly in that way and they could hear about Christ, and then I am sure Paul explained to them the Gospel of victory over sin by being a bond servant of the living God and worshipping Him. In this wonderful way the Gospel is being brought to the intellectual, philosophical groups in our world, like Yale, Harvard, and MIT in the United States. Paul is able to cut to the hearts of these needy Epicureans and Stoics.