

“Between Assignments”

(Acts 17:16 – 18:1)

13 April 2025

1. Thanks for opportunity to share. I’m sorry for the circumstances with Pastor Rob’s health that have made this necessary. Let’s continue to keep him in prayer.

Arlene and I are currently at the Keystone Project. We’ve completed 2-weeks of coaching students and have 2 more weeks. We appreciate your prayers for us and Colleen-Marie, William Boling, and Joshua Kaufman.

2. Our text this morning is Acts 17:16 – 18:1:

¹⁶ While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷ So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸ A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, “What is this babbling trying to say?” Others remarked, “He seems to be advocating foreign gods.” They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. ¹⁹ 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?” ²⁰ You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean.” ²¹ (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

²² Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. ²³ For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

²⁴ “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. ²⁵ And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. ²⁶ From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. ²⁷ God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. ²⁸ ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’^[a] As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’

²⁹ “Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill. ³⁰ In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. ³¹ For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.”

³² When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, “We want to hear you again on this subject.” ³³ At that, Paul left the Council. ³⁴ Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

18 After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth.

May God add His blessing to the reading of His Holy Word!

Prayer

3. God has called all His followers to a single multi-faceted task. It is described this way in Matthew 28:19, “Go, therefore, and disciple the nations (*ta ethne*), baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and teaching them to observe everything I have commanded.” It is to the task of discipling the nations (*ta ethne* “people groups”). Jesus will not return until this task completed; according to Matthew 24:12 this Gospel of the Kingdom is preached as a testimony to all people groups in His name, and the church is mature (“obeys Jesus’ commands”) is united, and looks like Jesus, according to Ephesians 4:13. We are called to this task and we can speed up Jesus’ coming according to 2 Peter 3:12 as we are engaged in the work to which God has called us. As Richard Greene, teacher and director of the Keystone Project, has quipped: “We’re waiting for God when perhaps God is waiting for us.”
4. Paul was determined that this task was paramount in all he did (see, 1 Corinthians 9:19 and Colossians 1:28b-29), as we will see demonstrated by his time in Athens. It is my desire that his example will inspire you to get on with the task if you are not engaged and encourage you to continue in it if you are.
5. Permit me to provide you with some background. Acts chapters 16 through 18 are a record of Paul’s Second Missionary Journey. Acts chapter 17 is an account of Paul working his way down the Aegean or Grecian Peninsula, being kicked out of Thessalonica and Berea and finding his way to the city of Athens. What I find of interest is that the bulk of the chapter focuses on Paul’s activities in the city of Athens while he was waiting for Silas and Timothy. Luke spends 19 verses on Paul’s activities during this time and only 15 verses on Paul’s earlier activities in two other places. This shows that this interlude between where Paul had been and where he was going were extremely important. Be aware that God’s detours and interludes in your plans may be more important than what you had planned.

Paul waited for Silas and Timothy in the city of Athens. When Paul arrived there around A.D. 51 Athens was a small town with about 20,000 people. Although it was small, it was the university center of the world, a center for the philosophical pursuit of truth.

While Paul was waiting he went sightseeing (“as I walked) as many of us do when we are in a new location. He saw the magnificent temples there, the Parthenon, and was struck by the 30,000 statues of idols in the city. It was commonly said “there were more statues in Athens than people.” However, Paul did not allow his sightseeing to keep him from looking at his surroundings through God’s eyes. And we’re told that “Paul was greatly distressed” by the proliferation of idols (Acts 17:16).

In viewing his surroundings and circumstances through ministry eyes, Paul was following in the footsteps of Jesus. We learn from Mark 6:30-34:

The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported all that they had done and taught (when He sent them out to minister alone). Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, He said to them, “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.”

So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place. But many who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. **When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.** So He began to teach them many things (emphasis added).

I believe Paul and Jesus’ examples ought to inform our behavior. **We ought to view life through God’s eyes and be open for Him to intrude with a ministry opportunity even when we are on a break or on vacation (i.e., holiday).**

In a related vein, God’s concerns can be selectively overlooked when we view the culture around us. This could easily have happened if I were standing in Paul’s sandals. As a result of having been heavily influenced by Renaissance and Enlightenment thinking filtered through my relationship with Jesus Christ, my vision would probably have been attracted to the craftsmanship of the idols. However, the craftsmanship of idols was not God’s primary concern. God’s concern was about the demons that stood behind them and their taking away glory that rightly belonged to Him. Doing so is a serious thing! So, like Paul I ought to be greatly distressed by idolatry.

On one occasion, Jesus’ disciples were admiring the temple in Jerusalem. Architecturally, the temple was impressive. It was an architectural wonder of the ancient world. It was the architectural perspective Jesus’ disciples spoke about to Him. Jesus however emphasized God’s perspective: the temple building and its complex would come down in 40 years. The truth for us to take away is this: We ought to embrace God’s perspective.

6. Our text tells us in verses 16-17 that Paul did three things while in Athens:
 - a. First, he looked “carefully” at the culture of the city around him. God has placed you in a particular place. He loves that place and the people in it. He knows their concerns and calls you to love them, and invite the Holy Spirit to help you not view it through natural eyes, but supernatural eyes.
 - b. Second, he connected with people in the Synagogue or we would say today “church”. We need to connect with the people of God. However, we must not stop there, which we are tempted to do and our churches often make it quite attractive to do with their programs and amenities.

- c. Paul did a third thing. He connected with people in the marketplace. Paul went to the marketplace, (*agora*) because the marketplace was the venue in which commerce was transacted and it was the place where ideas were discussed. Some years ago, in the USA it was estimated that only 5% of the church attenders are paid by the church. The other 95% earn their living through other employment. Sometime ago, it was estimated that 35% of Americans attend church services on a weekend. The other 65% do not. God has an ingenious plan. You are the church. You carry the Spirit with you. He calls you to bring the church to those around you, and one of the most significant ways is through being a great worker, doing your work with excellence and integrity, having a good attitude, and looking for and seizing opportunities He opens up.

Business by and large is controlled by Satan's Babylonian system (Revelation chapters 17-18). God's intent is that all aspects of life be brought under His Lordship. You are God's agent to bring about this change in your place of employment by working there as He would. For more information on how to be God's minister in the workplace I recommend Ed Silvoso's books, *Anointed for Business* and *Transformation*.

7. As Paul made himself available and seized the opportunities God had given, God provided additional opportunities. For Paul his discussions in the marketplace opened up the opportunity to discuss at the Areopagus where Paul addressed the leading philosophers of the day. This was an expression of the biblical truth that as we're faithful in small things God provides larger platforms.
- God opens doors for those who do the things he's put in front of them. As they do, He provides greater guidance:
 - o God has done so with regards to some Muslim men who run a printed shirt kiosk in the mall. It began in October when I met Moo, an individual from Mauritania, while witnessing at the Uptown Rapid City Mall. Over the past 6-months it has led to developing a relation with Saif, a Muslim from Egypt, who is being exposed to the gospel and befriended.
8. As you seize opportunities, God will provide you with insights needed. God did this for Paul.
- In that pagan, idolatry-filled environment, God provided him with the insights he needed to connect with those people. This passage describes three insights:
 - First, was that their idolatry evidenced that they had a need for God they were trying to fill, albeit in the wrong way. He mentions it in the opening line of his talk, "I see that you are religious in every way." The craving for someone beyond ourselves is common to everyone. The early 20th century British Catholic journalist G.K. Chesterton noted this when he quipped, "Every young man who knocks on a harlot's door is looking for God." Your friends and neighbors have an ache that only Jesus can fill. Many of them are seeking to meet it in unsatisfying ways. You carry the good news they need.
 - Second, Paul's kingdom eyes enabled him to see "an altar" to the unknown God. He used that altar - which had no content attached to it - to preach the gospel to them. I would suggest that God has buried the gospel in every culture. He did so with Don Richardson, missionary to Papua New Guinea 60 years ago, through him discovering the concept of a "Peace Child", as described in his book by the

same name. We are called to invite God to give us His eyes and ears and be guided by the Holy Spirit to discover hidden “Redemptive Analogies” and use them to share the Gospel with the people around us. I would also suggest if God has hidden so-called “Redemptive Analogies” in cultures, or groups of people, He also has keys hidden within individuals that open them up to the gospel. For this reason, we need to invite the Holy Spirit to reveal them to us.

- Additionally, because of the general revelation of himself that God has given to everyone he was able to cite two pagan Greek philosophers, one from Crete the other from Turkey to support a point he was making.

God knows just what is needed and promises to give it to you as you walk by His Spirit and seize the opportunities He puts before you. Mark 13:10-11 reads: “¹⁰ And the gospel must first be preached to all nations.¹¹ Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit.” Luke 21:12 adds that the words Jesus gives will not be able to be contradicted or refuted.

- But God’s preparation was not merely in that moment. He had prepared Paul in the past for that moment. Paul was a gifted intellectual, a super-genius, who had been trained at the feet of the prominent Jewish teacher Gamaliel, and had the equivalent of a Ph.D. from an elite University. Additionally, he had spent some of his life in the Greco-Roman culture. God used all of that in that moment he shared on the Areopagus.
 - This applies not only to Paul but to us. He knows the battles He wants us to fight and the opportunities He will provide and the people and places He wants us to impact. We need to go into those situations in the power of the Holy Spirit using the tools God has given. We see this in the Old Testament account of David’s battle with Goliath. Both Saul and David were concerned about defeating Goliath. If God had used both of them their approaches would have been different. If King Saul had confronted Goliath, it would have been in armor as a seasoned soldier, rather than a slingshot, because that was how Saul had been trained and it was what he was comfortable with. On the other hand, it would have been foolish for David to confront Goliath in Saul’s armor because he had not been trained in how to use it. God had trained David to skillfully use a sling and that was the instrument David used to bring down Goliath. If God’s not trained you in using Saul’s equipment don’t go into battle with it. If he’s only trained you to use a slingshot, use the slingshot. God will deal with the situations you face based on how He’s equipped you.
9. Back to the narrative. Paul marvelously shared the word. He probably shared it for two to three hours and the summary we have is merely bullet points of his remarks. Paul’s address began with creation, dealt with the common human problem of idolatry and confining God to structures does not do justice to His greatness. (Incidentally, this is not only a problem for pagans in the first century. It is a problem for Christians in the twenty-first century.) Paul stressed the centrality of Jesus’ resurrection, mentioned the reality of judgment and called the people to repentance. Why did Paul share the Bible from creation to consummation when presenting the gospel. It was because he wanted them to do more than add Jesus to their Pantheon of Gods. He wanted Jesus to be Lord over their pantheon. In a similar way, as American culture has become more secularized and increasing embrace neo-paganism more thorough gospel presentations are required to keep those making decisions to not simply add Jesus to their “god shelf.”

10. What were the results? They were mixed. According to verses 32-34 there were some who mocked his teaching. There were others who wanted to learn more and there were a few who followed. Luke provides us with the names of two of them: Dionysius and Demaras.

Your results when witnessing will often be mixed. Don't be discouraged or become bitter over those who do not respond positively. It is not your mission to change hearts. That is the job of the Holy Spirit. The late Bill Bright, the founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, used to say, "Success in witnessing is sharing Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit and leaving the results to God." If you have done that, you are a success in God's eyes. You and I are then called to follow the Holy Spirit's lead and continue to work with those who are interested and disciple those who are ready to follow Jesus the Messiah. Discipleship is simply training them to follow everything Jesus has commanded, including having them go with you as you are in your routine of touching others for Jesus. Making disciples involves working with people in a relational way so that they obey Jesus' commands and taking them with you as together you share the good news of Jesus with others and begin to disciple those whom God opens their hearts to you.

11. The central truth I believe God wants you to take away this morning is found in Ephesians 5:15-16: "Be careful then how you live not as unwise, but as wise, making the most of every opportunity because the days are evil."

- I am the eldest of 5 other living siblings. My younger brother Tim was diagnosed as having stage-four colorectal cancer in the fall of 2016. Due to a 7-year age difference I did not know him well. In December 2020 he shared that that would be the last time I would see him because he would be dead before our return from DRC a year later. It was the best conversation I had ever had with him. Tim was put in hospice care in April 2021. Arlene and I were told he had from days to weeks to live. My family urged Arlene and I to return to the USA. We purchased the plane tickets and thought our mission was to minister to Tim. However, just hours after purchasing the tickets he died. We knew then that the mission was not to minister to him, but didn't know what it was. We asked God to show us. A day and a half prior to our return to Congo. We knew His assignment was a middle-aged woman who was tormented by demons. Through deliverance she experienced significant freedom. However, the most significant thing to that woman not the freedom from a demon that had been with her from birth, but it was that she saw God's love for her. She was amazed that, "God had sent people 8,000 miles from DR Congo to minister to her so she found greater freedom." Since then, we've continued to be in contact with she and her family and Arlene spoke with her yesterday as she does on a regular basis.

This week God's word to you is this: "Be careful then how you live not as unwise, but as wise, making the most of every opportunity because the days are evil."