

The Gospel for Philosophers

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 04 June 2017

Preacher: Derek Lamont

[0 : 0 0] Okay, well you turn back with me this morning to that passage we read in Acts, if you have a Bible, it's on page 926 of the Pew Bible certainly, and the story that we have of Paul and Athens.

Now, one of the great things that we have as Christians is that we possess something really great. We've got something really tremendous as Christians, and we have experienced the power of God changing our lives and we believe that that power is available to change the lives of other people too.

And we recognize that, and the Bible speaks about that as really good news, that is good news. The trouble is, the difficulty is that this is great news, and it's paradoxical.

It's great news that people don't want to hear. People don't want to hear it. It's not like a baptism. It's not like a birth. It's not like an engagement. It's not like a new job.

It's not like winning the lottery or whatever it might be. This is good news that generally people don't want to hear. It's unlike any other good news because it exposes in us very often a deep antipathy towards the things of God. We would rather close the door on that particular discussion.

[1 : 1 8] Never talk about religion, never talk about politics, and what's the other thing? Religion and politics are pretty major anyway, and never talk about them. And even that antipathy, that immediate reaction to talking about this good news that we find as Christians, when we want to share our faith with others, speaks of already, speaks of the difficulty and the problem that there is in society and that there is in our spiritual relationship with God.

So as Christians, it's very important when we live out our lives as Christians and when we seek to share our faith with Christians, the first thing that we recognize is the need for prayer, okay?

We need to be praying for our friends. We need to be praying about the gospel. We need to be praying about our lives because primarily what we've come to understand in our own experience is that the rejection people have of God is not primarily an intellectual one, a mental one.

It's not a head issue, in other words, it's a heart issue. So the primary problem is in the heart, and we can't necessarily deal with that in the lives of anyone else.

We can't even deal with it in our own lives. We need God to come in and change our heart and change our attitude. So prayer is very important, and that's why we have seven days of prayer. It's why we pray for our friends. It's why we recognize that that is the forerunner and the ongoing background to living our lives as Christians.

[2 : 4 6] We also need wisdom, okay? We need great wisdom. We've been doing a study in Proverbs in our evening worship, and it says, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

In that place where we worship the Lord through Christ, where we recognize His rightful place, and we seek that wisdom to give Him the preeminence in our lives and share that with others, and also as disciples that we are willing to learn how better to love Him and love other people and share the gospel with other people in a loving and sensitive and respectful way, which the Bible tells us to do.

So we've come to this study in Acts for those of you who are visiting today, and it's the study of the early church, and it's got a lot to do with sharing faith and planting churches and all these kind of things, and the opposition and the difficulties as well, that sometimes arose in the early church.

We believe it to be God's word that has authority for us, and it is continuing to be relevant because of that. So this story is about the gospel coming to Athens, okay?

So Paul comes with the gospel to this great Greek city of Athens, and it's a city that had a tremendous history and a tremendous background and tremendous culture, it was an intellectual and a cultural kind of hub, particularly in the past, possibly by this time it was fading a little bit.

[4 : 21] It was only the memory of Plato and Aristotle and Socrates, and that's not the one that played for Brazil. We recognise, and not only people of a certain generation will get that joke, but it is this ancient Greek city was a free city in the Roman Empire and remained really a cultural and intellectual metropolis.

And we have in this account from Luke two particular philosophies of life that governed that city. There was Epicurean and there was Stoicism, both very difficult philosophical underpinnings that lay behind the thinking of the city.

The Epicureans believed that God, there was lots of gods that were all very remote, and that people were just physical. They were materialists or atomists, as you maybe say, we just were made up of all the atoms that we are physically.

There's no afterlife and there's no judgement, that was really what they believed. And their idea was Carpe diem, seize the day, live for pleasure, make the most of every day and just have as much fun as you could.

So the Epicureans were really kind of into culture and arts and just living for pleasure every day. But the Stoics, this other philosophical grouping within the city that's spoken about in the passage we read in verse 18, they also recognized that God was everywhere, but probably in everything, he wasn't a personal being, he was very impersonal and they were very rationalistic and they believed in fate and going with the flow, they were self-sufficient and they thought it was important to endure pain as part of life.

[6 : 10] So we talk about Stoics, being a Stoic, just keeping going in good times and in bad times. It's a pretty rubbish philosophy, I would have thought.

Naturally, I'm much more attracted to the Epicurean philosophy if there's no God. But the Stoics just seemed to think it was good for them character-wise to endure pain and also recognize it as part of life.

So that was the kind of thinking behind the people of the city of Athens and the people to whom Paul came with the Gospel. And interestingly, we are in Edinburgh, we're the Athens of the north.

That's what we're called. And we're called that for the reason we're called that because similarly we're a culture and intellectual kind of focused city for Scotland.

And the postmodern secular mind has many parallels to the kind of thinking and mindsets of both the Epicureans and the Stoics.

[7 : 10] So you might find, and I might find today in Edinburgh, for example, it's very difficult to share our faith because people's philosophy is either heathenistic, let's just live for pleasure, let's just live for today.

Carpe diem just make the most of the day because that's all it is. There's no judgment, there's no afterlife. We just are what we are, we're just made up, we come and we go and there's no reason.

There's nothing. Or they think we're fatalists. You know, what we'll be, we'll be and there's no personal life, there's no personal God, there's no afterlife.

And we do sometimes recognize that it reveals itself in different ways, but there's nothing really new under the sun, the Bible says that, and that we kind of go circular, cyclical ways of thinking.

And many of these ways just push God out of the picture altogether. So we believe the Bible speaks to us, and the Bible speaks into our situation, and we see how Paul brought the gospel to these people, and it's great.

[8 : 14] And I hope we can learn something from it. Because in this passage that we read, I've called it God's Evangelistic Smorgasbord, okay? Because what we have in this small section is Paul working with all kinds of different groups.

It's very varied and it's very detailed. In this one encounter, he meets all kinds of different people, and he models a huge variety of interaction with different groups of people and different philosophies and different thinking.

So the reminder is that when we share our faith, when we live our lives, we don't have a formula. We don't go out and say, this is the way we share the gospel. ABC, bang, bang, bang, people will come to faith, or they'll not if we do this, this and this.

Because Paul reveals here a variety of ways of sharing faith in such a way that will interest and trigger the thought process of the different kinds of people that he witnessed to us.

So I'm going to ask three questions briefly and then finish with a little bit more. I'll try and be short in brief, okay? The three questions are simple. Where, why and how?

[9 : 30] In this passage, does Paul share his faith? Well, where does he share his faith? Well, in a sense, it's almost a model of, I think, I believe, of sharing faith.

And the Johnny Cash song comes to mind. I've been everywhere, man, and where that song just speaks about, everywhere that Johnny Cash had been in America, and he lists all the different places, the towns, the cities, and the states that he'd been to.

And it's a bit like that here, because what we're seeing here is that God is telling us that we can go everywhere and to any people to share the faith that we have, to share our faith.

There's nowhere that's out of bounds. So you've got, in really three different groups that summarise, I guess, the whole of life. He starts by going to the synagogue, which was often his way.

So Paul goes to the synagogue, and that is, I think, the modern-day equivalent of the church. So he goes to the church to tell the church of his day about Jesus Christ and about the resurrection.

[10 : 31] And we need to still do that, don't we? We still need to speak about the gospel and the resurrection, the death and resurrection of Jesus in the church, because people come to church and they might not be Christians.

And they might believe intellectually, maybe, but their hearts might not be changed. So we have this ongoing duty to share the gospel, as we do, and challenge one another with the message of the gospel in the church context.

But then we also see that he goes out in verse 17 to the marketplace. And the marketplace was the place where people socialised, where people spoke to one another and discussed things.

We probably do it much more than we do, in a sense, in the 21st century. But we can go to the marketplace with the gospel. That means wherever people socialise, in cafes and in pubs and in social events and in our homes, we can go and we can share and we can befriend and we can talk to people outside of the church about our faith in Christ.

And we have legitimacy from the Bible and from God's example in Jesus for doing that. But he also speaks at a place called the Areopagus, which translates, Mars Hill, a famous place in the middle of the city of Athens.

[11 : 53] Previously it was probably a law court where judgments were meted out. But I think by this time it was probably more a council of philosophers. A place where philosophers gathered and discussed the latest ideas.

The idea we get from the passage we read and maybe even sometimes judged whether that particular philosophy was allowed to be shared with the public in the city of Athens.

And so they make an informal inquiry about Paul and this message. They want to hear him again. And so he comes to this semi-formal organ, this grouping to share his message.

One comment that I was reading called a slightly contemptuous indulgence of Paul's ideas. You know, he's a babbler, he's crazy man. But they wanted to hear a little bit more of what he had to say about Jesus and the resurrection.

Now I don't think we've got a direct parallel to that Canary, the Areopagus as such in our city or in our culture. I think the nearest thing would be universities, the media and the political arena.

[13 : 00] These kind of idea-formulating groups of people who are thinking and philosophies are shaped for the whole of society, whether it's universities or politically or increasingly, sadly, in the media.

But we can go there with the gospel. We can go there to befriend people. We can go there and stand up without shame and without intellectual inferiority at any point and share the gospel in a reasoned way.

So where? Anywhere. Why? Because Paul was told his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.

In other words, he had this great motivation. When he came out of Athens, he looked round and just in his heart, the kind of words, a really strong word, he was greatly, deeply distressed and frustrated and angry and just saddened that around him was a forest of idols.

And his spiritual insight was such that he could see that idolatry was a waste of time and the living God was being ignored and they were missing the point, they were confused and hopeless, and they had inverted everything.

[14 : 23] The First Commandment is worship the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind. And they weren't doing that. They were choosing to worship idols instead.

And that was the core that he could see of their rebellion and sin against God. He was jealous for God's rightful place in society and in life.

Remember who Paul was and remember that he once was like them and that he had met with Jesus and been changed. His own heart was transformed. It was real. It was absolutely real to him.

And so he was deeply distressed. That motive, it's a great motive that we could possibly look at in our own hearts and lives about having, do we sense that same frustration and sadness and recognition that it's only the living God that's transformed our lives and hearts and yet people are sticking their two fingers up at him and ignoring him and putting other things in a place of preeminence that shouldn't be the case.

And then how? How did he share his faith? And we can only really skim this very briefly because we recognize that in this short passage, and I'm sure it's there under the guidance of the Spirit of God to cover a huge reality, that he was, in this short time, he was willing to reason, verse 17, he was willing to debate, verse 18, and he was willing to proclaim verse 22. So there's different ways that he spoke, different ways that he was willing to go and tell people, he was willing to listen, he was willing to reason, he was willing to be an apologist to defend the truth intellectually from the heart in his life, from his experience. It was all of these things.

[16 : 21] And it speaks of a simple but a profound and well thought out and engaging, respectful, confident sharing of his faith with religious theologians, with what I would call the punters, and also with the intelligentsia.

So you've got the different levels that Paul is confidently bringing the gospel into, and it's great, isn't it? Isn't that great for us? They're the gospels for every type and grouping of people that he came to see in Athens, and he does so very powerfully.

I just want to mention just a little bit about where he gets back to the Areopagus, and what he says to them, which what we have is just a two minute thing, obviously a summary, and some people get in their high horse and say, well, he's not presenting the whole gospel, and it's not all this and that.

Of course it's not, it's a summary that we've got here, and people need to get a grip sometimes. So what we have is, what we recognize is that he finds commonality, doesn't he?

In verses 22 and 23 he says, you know, I perceive that in every way you're very religious. So he tries to come alongside them and find commonality in their experience and what they're doing, and he says, you're worshiping people, that's what you are, you worship.

[17 : 45] And he says, I've walked around here, I've been a tourist in your city, and I've seen you've got a plaque for the unknown God. And well, I'm going to tell you about that God that you don't know, that you worship in the ignorance, and I'm going to challenge you to reconfigure your priorities and who you're worshiping and why you're worshiping.

He finds commonality, and it's around that whole theme of them being idolatrous. And he wants to take what people, every one of us do by nature is to idolize.

We might not idolize idols of stone and wood, but idolatrous, as you know, we've often said that here, just putting someone in the place of God, usually ourselves, putting ourselves first, and ignoring God.

And he wants to take that whole concept of idolatry and the things that they are worshiping, the things that they are putting first, and he says, I want to replace it with who you ought to be worshiping, because we all worship, we all worship.

But he says, we worship things that are created rather than the Creator, and he wants to highlight that to them, and he wants to bring the light of God into their situation, and say, I want you to worship God and who He is, instead of worshiping and chasing everything in your life that is only a shadow and a pale, empty reflection of who God is.

[19 : 18] So we all put something there, we all have a preeminence and a priority, and that's the problem of the brokenness of sin in the world, is that we've dismissed God and His rightful lordship in our lives, and we've chosen to be kind of gods, I guess, ourselves, in control and in charge.

So it's vital for us in our lives to find commonality with people, to find association with people, and a handle into their lives and into their thinking, whether it's football or whether it's wider sport or whether it's culinary gifts, or whether it's whatever their talents or gifts or time or energies or relationships, looking at them and seeing them as people and seeing what they are placing before God and seeking to have a handle that will make them think, rather than splurging out something that seems to be formulaic and seems to be from a distance and doesn't seem to be filled with passion and love and concern for them.

Find commonality, offer identity. He also then offers them an identity, doesn't he? He says that we are all image bearers of God.

He speaks about who God is. God is our Creator. Verses 24 to 29, and he speaks briefly here about the character of God. God is not in the pillars, he's not in the mountains and the trees, there's some kind of pantheistic God.

Not as a kind of one of many gods that we've created. He is the supreme sovereign, self-sufficient Lord of all humanity, personal and sovereign.

[21 : 03] They give us the gift of life, they give us reason, they give us purpose. Who is over this world in which we live. It's a huge, it's a huge reality for us to consider.

But he goes more from God the Father and moves into God, sorry, God is Creator, and gives the identity of God as Father, very interesting and one that maybe we don't think of enough.

And he speaks about their own poets and saying, for indeed we are his offspring. And then he goes on to say, being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver.

So he, what does he do here? He uses the we language, he associates with them. We are, we are God's people. This is about us. We, basically what he's saying is we belong to God, because he's our Father, but we are estranged by nature. So that paradox isn't it?

We belong because we are made in this image, but it's broken. We're estranged, and all of us are in that condition naturally. So we associate with everyone because of that, but he made us to be close to him.

[22 : 15] And that's the good news. The good news is not only that we're made to be close, but the brokenness that has brought the separation, the sin and the death has been dealt with by Jesus on the cross for us. And so for people who believe in fate and who believe that we are just random atoms, is that not good news?

Is it not good news that we have, that this world is made by a personal loving and just mind, that we're not just bouncing around as random, pointless atoms in this world, simply pleasing ourselves until our time has gone, with little wider respect and dignity, but just random pieces of chemical reality?

Our identity is God as Father, but that relationship is broken. That's why we struggle with the good news. So he introduces the divine image in verse 31.

He speaks about Jesus Christ, who came and who rose from the dead, and he spoke about Jesus to them. Christ, not a complete sermon, but he speaks here not of an idol, but he speaks about God in the flesh.

People say, I would love to see God. Wouldn't we all love to see God? Well, we find that Christ is God in flesh, and Christ is the answer to the family estrangement that we find ourselves in this world in which we live, the death, the brokenness, the evil, which we all recognize and see not only outside, but we see it in our own failings and fallings and mortality and our questions and our longing for God.

[24 : 05] We see it in Him. And so God the Father sends the Son. I was saying one of these memes this week about if Dad can't fix it, no one can.

You know that whole idea that, oh, get Dad to fix it. Maybe you can't say these things now in the world of equality in which we live.

Sorry, old. But there's that whole thing is, you know, Dad will fix it. It doesn't work in my house. But there's that whole idea, isn't there?

This is Dad fixing it. This is God the Father sending the Son to fix what we can't put right, to pay the price in all the desperate costs that involve for the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit on the cross.

He took our sin and He took our death and He took our guilt and He paid the price because He loved us and because we couldn't do it ourselves so that we could have that estrangement dealt with.

[25 : 13] Jesus, therefore, for his matters, he's not just some kind of philosophical guru that we think has a good morality and an interesting way of living. He's our redeemer. He's our Savior. He's our brother.

He's our friend, and we have come to worship Him as believers today. And as believers, we believe in His great work covenantally through not just individuals but through families, and that is our belief and hope in baptism, that as we share Him with our lives and as we pray for Him as a community, and as children, that they rise to come to faith themselves in the knowledge of what God has already done in Jesus Christ.

And so there's also, as we close in an inevitable challenge, He always does that. He says that God in Christ and Jesus Christ is the redeemer, and He's also the judge.

And there's a recognition that as He says in verse 30, there's a, and now a need to repent, to turn round, in other words, to stop having gods that are idols or stop replacing Jesus a God in our lives with other things and turn back to Him for forgiveness and help.

So as we share our faith, it's not enough really for us to be dispassionate and just simply give the facts, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, this, this, this and this, but we long for people to turn to Jesus Christ because that's what we recognize as transformed our lives, is that two-sided reality, which is why people don't like the good news, because Jesus is both Savior and Judge.

[26 : 58] There is a judgment day, and we are idolaters, we're lawbreakers, we may not fall short of our own standard or the standard of those around us, but we do of God's, and He is the one who is judge, because we worshiped created things rather than the Creator, but Christ has paid the price to put it right.

And you may, when we throw up our hands in horror and say, oh, you can't believe in judgment today, you can't believe in that old Victorian idea, but that's what the cross is.

That's exactly what the cross is. The cross is about God, the Father, judging in His own Son the sins of His people and redeeming and setting us free.

So, I went on too long. I just finished with recognizing that along with the challenge, there was also a response, and you can look at that yourselves in the last couple of verses, the different responses there was.

There was mockery, there was curiosity, and there was faith. And all I'm saying is that's what we will find. That's what we will find when we live our lives, share our faith respectfully, lovingly, gently, powerfully, challengingly, we will find some will mock, they will just sneer and laugh at it.

[28 : 20] God's telling us that's what happens. Some will be curious, it's interesting, I want to hear you again, but again and maybe again, without any real serious recognition that He demands a response.

And also faith, that there was those who came to faith and whose lives were transformed. Because it is by telling people about Jesus that other people come to faith.

Telling their friends, telling their family, praying for them, loving them. Not preaching at them, loving and serving and sharing.

That's the message we have, tell them about Jesus and Him crucified. That's what we need to do, that's what we're called to do. He is, you know, in any other area of our lives, if something as radical and transformational would have happened, we would be buzzing to tell others.

But we don't, and I recognize that in myself, because I'm afraid. Because I know the response in others. And it's not simply neutral good news as it were, but it pierces into our very hearts and conscience.

[29 : 36] But we know the Bible says that how will they hear about Jesus unless someone tells them how beautiful are the feet of those who bring the good news.

Now feet are particularly ugly, but your feet are beautiful if you use them to walk metaphorically into people's lives with the gospel and love them in the way Christ has loved you.

And that should, that does transform everything. And we are all responsible to respond to God and His Word and the challenges of Jesus Christ, His death, and His resurrection.

It's interesting that the focus is here so much on the resurrection. It's so important that we have a risen Savior and ascended Savior. And it's just His living Word and that He's coming back because He's alive to judge first in salvation, second in judgment, very significant, very important.

May we respond, each of us, renewal, refreshment, crying out for the first time, taking us out of that rut sometimes of not caring and sharing Jesus Christ.

[30 : 52] So let's bow our heads briefly in prayer in response. Father God, help us to respond to you by faith, to love you more, to serve you better, and to share our faith personally, flexibly, intellectually from our hearts in a reasonable way, in a passionate way also, and be unperturbed by the audiences that we will face.

And sometimes they are tremendous intelligence and cynicism or apparent massive disinterest. Help us to persevere and help us to pray and help us to see many people coming to faith in days and months ahead in St. Columbus through our contacts and our prayers because that is what we really want.

Not only in covenant families, which is wonderful, but also among our friends and those that we are placed beside. Hear our prayers, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.