

Session 3

GOSPEL CONVERSATIONS PART 2: SHARE THE GOSPEL

Acts 17:16-34

Memory Verse

“Therefore, having overlooked the times of ignorance, God now commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has set a day when he is going to judge the world in righteousness by the man he has appointed. He has provided proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.”

– ACTS 17:30-31, CSB



Gospel Conversations Part 2: Share the Gospel

THEOLOGICAL THEME: Paul's speech at Mars Hill is one of the most important in the New Testament and one of Paul's most famous. Paul showed how the message of Christ can connect with a pagan culture.

Have you ever wanted to be Batman or Superman? Maybe you wanted to be Maverick, Captain Marvel, or Katniss Everdeen. We love stories about individuals standing up for what is right, and something in us desires to be the kind of heroes found in these stories.

Paul's speech at Mars Hill is one of the most important in the New Testament and may be Paul's most famous. We can learn a lot from this account, but Paul's primary focus wasn't on technique. Paul was not focused on winning an argument or making his unbelieving audience look dumb. The idolatry in this culture bothered Paul, and he wanted to see the men and women of Athens saved by Jesus Christ.

Very few of us will have the opportunity to engage in public debate in the way Paul did. And there is a difference in the way we should engage in a public debate and the way we engage in personal evangelism. However, can understand how to engage with our culture and share the gospel passionately through Paul's example.

 What do you know about apologetics? Why is it important for Christian evangelism? Why is more required in evangelism than just knowing the right answers?

? In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul said love is a more excellent way. How can you defend your Christian faith with truth and love? Why is this important?

Session Summary

In the Greek language, the word *apologia* means “to make a defense.” When Christians speak of *apologetics*, they reference that Greek word. Thus, an apologetic ministry focuses on defending the Christian faith. And Acts 17:16-34 is one of the most important apologetic passages in the Bible.

As Paul left Berea in Acts 17:10-26 and headed into Athens, he encountered a different culture. The rampant paganism that plagued Athens broke Paul’s heart. He reasoned in the synagogue, as was his practice, but every day outside of the Sabbath, Paul went to the marketplaces to share Christ’s teaching with others.

In this apologetic encounter, Paul was not primarily focused on winning an argument. Paul wanted to win people to Jesus. Your efforts at evangelism and apologetics must never become an ego trip to win arguments. Instead, you must always be consumed with a love for Jesus and a love for the lost.

1. Earn a Hearing (Acts 17:16-18)

Paul went to Athens to wait. He was not on a mission or ministry trip in Athens; he was waiting for his traveling companions to catch up so they could head on to Corinth. While Paul waited, he went to the Synagogue to “reason” with the Jews, and he spent time in the marketplace. There, Paul was provoked, or stirred in his spirit, by the idolatry of the city.

? Do you typically have enough margin built into your life that you are willing to let God interrupt your plans for something different? Why does this matter? When has God changed your plans?

Paul loved the Lord, and he loved people. The lostness of this pagan city drove him to tell them about Jesus. As you look around your city, do you see the brokenness of the people? Do you see idolatry and need? As followers of Jesus, it can be easy to see the drastic changes in our culture and grow angry about the shifts instead of becoming broken for those who have been taken captive by idolatrous ideologies. Many of the sinful changes in American culture come about because of misplaced desires—idolatry. Rather than seeking to glorify the true and living God, people have exchanged the truth of God for lies and have chosen to bow down and serve creation rather than the Creator (Romans 1). Instead of growing angry at these people, Christians must be broken over their sin, like Paul was in this passage and as Jesus was for the inhabitants of Jerusalem (Matthew 23:37).

? How does your life give evidence that you love the unbelievers you encounter? If it doesn't, what might need to change?

As Paul looked around in Athens, he was angered, sad, broken, and motivated. He ministered in the synagogue, but he didn't stay there. Paul didn't earn his invitation to the Areopagus in the synagogue or other religious environments; he received his invitation to speak at Mars Hill because he went out from the synagogue. In the marketplace, Paul met people and told them about Jesus. In the marketplace, people discovered Paul was interested in them and in their lives. Paul didn't go to the marketplace to buy or sell but to share the gospel.

? Application: Evangelism requires intention and effort. Where do you go or what do you practice regularly with a desire to open doors to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with others?

Paul shared freely with all sorts of people. He spoke to the Jews, the Epicureans, the stoics, and other people in the market who just came to buy and sell. Paul did not demand to be set in front of the people at the Areopagus. He met people where they were and earned the right to be heard. Evangelism and apologetics should be driven by love, not a desire to win arguments. Increasingly, we will have to earn the right to be heard. Paul spent time with the people of Athens, and as a result, they were willing to hear more of what he had to say.

2. Finding Connection (Acts 17:19-21)

Remember, Paul went marketplace because he could meet people there. But Paul found other points of connection too. Athens was a city of learning, where “all the Athenians and the foreigners residing there spent their time on nothing else but telling or hearing something new” (v. 21). Paul was a teacher, and he had a message to share. And he connected with his hearers intellectually by sharing the message of Jesus.

 How was Paul uniquely qualified to connect with the philosophers of Athens? How did God use those things in this setting?

Instead of being sullen or combative, Paul used the marketplace to explain his own beliefs about Jesus Christ. The culture of free exchange allowed Paul to be heard, agreed with, or disagreed with based on the merits of his ideas and the response of his audience. While many rejected Paul, others wanted to hear more. The culture in Athens allowed for that. We too live in a pluralistic society, where many ideas exist side by side. Like Paul, we can use our cultural climate to engage others with the gospel.

Your points of connection will probably not be the same as Paul’s. You likely don’t regularly encounter Epicurean or Stoic philosophers—and that’s okay. Paul was educated as a Jewish leader and as such was well-qualified to engage in deep conversations with the philosophers of Athens. Your points of connection may be the place you work, the school your children attend, or the sports team you cheer for.

 What things are you passionate about? How might you use your hobbies or other passions as vehicles to share the gospel?

The great truth to take away from Paul’s ministry in Athens is not that you must minister the same way Paul did. The truth is you can minister with the same passion as Paul in the places where God sends you. Remember, Paul was in Athens waiting

on people, and God had a special mission and purpose for him in that place. God has a purpose for you in the places He sends you also. You may believe you are simply waiting in a checkout line or watching a little league baseball game, but God may have bigger plans.

Look around at the people God puts you in contact with and seek a heart of compassion. Just as Paul was broken by the idolatry of Athens, consider how you need to be broken for those around you, looking for a point of connection that might open the door to ministry.

? Application: Name some people you encounter on a regular basis who don't have a relationship with Jesus. What do you have in common that could be used as a point of connection?

3. Speaking Truth (Acts 17:22-34)

Paul put himself in a place where he could minister, and he observed of the culture around him. He spoke to the Athenians of their religious convictions and of their various idols, but he pointed specifically to “The unknown God.”

Commentators and theologians for the past two thousand years have spilled much ink debating and theorizing about the identity of the unknown God. Many have suggested that Paul was telling them that this “unknown God” was the true God who was revealed in Christ. Some have suggested that Paul was merely pointing to the fact that the Athenians were so committed to idols made by human hands that they even made an extra one to the “unknown God” just in case they missed one.

? How do the idols of our culture look different than those in ancient times? What are the greatest idolatrous struggles within the church today? How might the idolatry of Christians hamper their ability to effectively communicate the gospel with others?

Paul did not give as much clarification as we might want. Why? For Paul the idol to the “unknown God” was merely a pivot point to get from the Athenian’s paganism to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul could have spent hours debating and pontificating about the idols of Athens, but he was not primarily concerned with idols. Paul was focused on Jesus, and he moved to the truth about Jesus as quickly as he could.

Paul might have enjoyed longer debates with the philosophers and students of Athens, but he refused to get lost in the margins. When he went to the Corinthians, Paul said he “decided to know nothing among [them] except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2). He carried the same singular focus up Mars Hill.. He spoke to them about Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection. Some people mocked Paul, but he spoke the truth anyway.

? What kinds of marginal debates can distract Christians from the message of the gospel?

As culture increasingly turns against Christianity, it can be easy for Christians to get lost in debates over politics or culture. There are many important issues that Christians need to be certain about, but an argument about politics is not as important as the gospel. Whether it’s who you voted for or what college team you prefer, refuse to get lost in the margins. Speak the truth of the gospel first. The other things can wait, but the gospel “is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16).

Finally, as you consider the need to speak the truth, always call for a response. This may not be formal every time—you will not do an altar call to share the gospel with your flight attendant. You might not even always get to ask someone if they want to be saved today. But you can always try to continue the conversation. Share as much about Jesus as you can, and then ask for another conversation in the future. Seek to deepen your relationships. When you can, leave your evangelism encounters on a good note and try to get some contact info to continue the conversation. The response may not be a yes to Jesus today, maybe just a yes to a future conversation.

? Application: Who is God calling you to seek a gospel conversation with? How might you move toward obedience?

Conclusion

Paul’s ministry gained enough notice that he was invited to the Areopagus. The Areopagus was the site for debate, teaching, religious instruction, and even governing in the ancient city of Athens. The Areopagus was located on Mars Hill—a hill named after the Roman god of war, Mars. On Mars Hill, Paul reasoned with the philosophers and teachers of Athens, but his message was very different than the message he taught to the Jews.

With the Jews, Paul began with the Messiah. With the Greeks and Romans, Paul had to begin with creation itself. Paul referred to the paganism of Rome by noting the various public altars and pointing them beyond their “Unknown God” to the true God of the Scriptures. Paul could not begin with the Old Testament law or even with the Messiah because these concepts were unknown to the people of Athens.

Most importantly, Paul still proclaimed the gospel. In fact, it was not until Paul began to speak about the resurrection of the dead that the Greeks began to ridicule him. But some said, “We’d like to hear from you again about this.” Paul did not win everyone to Christ, but the gospel seeds he planted opened doors for more ministry in the future.



How might Christians have to share about Jesus differently today than thirty years ago? What has changed in culture that requires us to shift the way we share the gospel?



Why might it be necessary for Christians in twenty-first-century Nashville to begin their gospel presentations with creation rather than with Jesus?



We don't know much about the receptivity of the Jews in Athens, but Jews in other cities were offended because the gospel of Jesus didn't fit their preconceived expectations. What can make the gospel offensive to the people of our city today? How can we seek to overcome hesitations to offending others with the gospel message?

Here's How to Become a Christ-Follower:

Read the following verses and ask after each one: "What does this say to me?"

- **All have sinned:** Romans 3:23 & 1 John 1:8
- **The wages of sin:** Romans 6:23 & John 3:18
- **But while we were sinners, salvation was provided:** Romans 5:8
- **Become a Christ-follower:** Romans 10:9-10 Confess and Believe

Accepting Christ is Just the Beginning:

Next Steps:

- Publicly profess your faith by being baptized (Matthew 10:32-33; Luke 3:21; Romans 6:4).
- Join a church which follows the Bible, where you can grow in your faith through prayer, Bible study and fellowship with other Christians.
- Get involved in groups for encouragement and accountability.
- Begin a daily personal worship experience with God where you study the Bible and pray.
- Share with others what Jesus has done for you. Tell your story (Romans 10:14; Matthew 28:19-20).
- Begin to live for God (Romans 12:1-2, 9-18; James 1:19-27).



FOR NEXT WEEK

Don't Just Go to Church—Be the Church

Main Passages

- Colossians 3:12-17

Session Outline

1. Let Peace Rule (Colossians 3:12-15)
2. Praise the Lord (Colossians 3:16)
3. Make a Difference (Colossians 3:17)

Memorize

“Therefore, having overlooked the times of ignorance, God now commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has set a day when he is going to judge the world in righteousness by the man he has appointed. He has provided proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.”

- Acts 17:30-31, CSB