HIGHLIGHT: Acts 17:22-34

22 Paul stood in the middle of the Areopagus and said: “People of Athens! I see that you are extremely religious in every respect. 23 For as I was passing through and observing the objects of your worship, I even found an altar on which was inscribed: ‘To an Unknown God.’ Therefore, what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you. 24 The God who made the world and everything in it—he is Lord of heaven and earth—does not live in shrines made by hands. 25 Neither is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives everyone life and breath and all things. 26 From one man he has made every nationality to live over the whole earth and has determined their appointed times and the boundaries of where they live. 27 He did this so that they might seek God, and perhaps they might reach out and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 28 For in him we live and move and have our being, as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we are also his offspring.’ 29 Since we are God’s offspring then, we shouldn’t think that the divine nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image fashioned by human art and imagination.

30 “Therefore, having overlooked the times of ignorance, God now commands all people everywhere to repent, 31 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.”

32 When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some began to ridicule him, but others said, “We’d like to hear from you again about this.” 33 So Paul left their presence. 34 However, some people joined him and believed, including Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

EXPLAIN

Leaders: Feel free to use any of the “Explain” materials to guide discussion as it is needed or to expound on a certain area of the text as it comes up during your Life Group time, but the purpose of this section is to deepen your own personal understanding of the Word. Your members have access to all of this material as well.

Paul, Silas, and Timothy got separated at one point in one of their missionary journeys. They were going to meet up in Athens, but Paul got there first, so he did like he usually did and began
speaking about Jesus in the synagogues. There, he caught the attention of some philosophers, engaged in debate with them, and gave us a prime example of how believers can interact with a disbelieving world.

vv.22-23 The Aeropagus is a little outcropping of rocks just northwest of the Acropolis in Athens. According to Greek mythology, it is where Ares was tried for murdering Poseidon’s son. It overlooks the city of Athens and was a popular place for debaters and thinkers to get together and discuss their ideas.

In 1 Corinthians 9:22, Paul tells how he was willing to be “all things to all people” for the sake of the Gospel, and here we get a glimpse of how he did that. We know first of all that Paul studied under Gamaliel—a prominent and important rabbi in the first century. He was a masterful teacher who educated his pupils not only in the Torah, but in Greek philosophy. We can see Paul’s Greek education at work in his letters—particularly the letter to the Romans, which is a textbook example of Greek rhetoric (Rhetoric is the art of building a persuasive argument) that we still have in the ancient world. Paul used his understanding of Greek thinking to be able to speak to the Greek philosophers at the Aeropagus in a way that would help them understand him.

v.24-25 Paul was a master at tailoring his message for his audience. He didn’t open by quoting Jewish Scriptures like he did in the synagogue at Antioch (13:16-41), because he knew that referring to history these Greeks didn’t recognize or citing a book they didn’t believe was holy wouldn’t carry any weight with them. He didn’t talk about how God is the one who gives rain and crops in their season like he did at Lystra (14:15-17) because Athens wasn’t concerned with agriculture like Lystra was. Instead, he begins by citing their common ground: an understanding of Greek philosophy, Greek culture, and, as we will see, Greek poetry. As he speaks, notice that Paul does three things with his address:

1. Gives them a genuine compliment (“I see that you are extremely religious in every respect”)
2. Establishes common ground (“I even found an altar on which was inscribed: ‘To an Unknown God.’”)
3. Gives spiritual truth in doses (God is the creator—>God created them—>They have basic dignity because they were created by God.)

v.28 Rabbis practiced something called stringing pearls, which is where they would reference two different scriptures and relate them together in order to make a theological point. Here, Paul does exactly that, but with Greek poets. The first is from 600 BC poet Epimenides, in which he writes of Zeus:

They fashioned a tomb for thee, O holy and high one—
The Cretans, always liars, evil beasts, idle bellies!
But thou art not dead; thou livest and abidest for ever,
For in thee we live and move and have our being.

The second is from the Cicilian poet Aratus in about 300 BC:
It is with Zeus that every one of us in every way has to do, for we are also his offspring.

As we bring the gospel to an unbelieving world, we must be willing and able to meet them where they are and share the truth about God in a way that they understand.
APPLY

Your Leader Guide will have material that the member guides do not have. The **bolded** material is what the people in your group will have, the other material is only for you to help guide discussion.

This guide can be as strict a script or as general a resource as the leader needs it to be.

1. **What stuck out to you or challenged you in what you heard in the sermon or read in the text?**

2. Paul used elements from Greek culture and thought to help people understand the Gospel. **Why is it important to adapt a gospel presentation to the people we’re talking to? What is something in your culture that will help you share the gospel with someone?**

We’ve all seen gospel presentations that were way off track—people with megaphones shouting at crowds of people, holding signs at music festivals detailing the types of people who are destined for hell unless they repent, and so on. If we want someone to take us seriously, we have to be willing to speak to them on level ground.

Consider what Greg Wilton trains people to do to help get to a God conversation no matter what culture they’re in, and brainstorm how it could be adapted for your context, specifically.

- **Get Connected.**
  Establish a genuine, real connection with the person you’re talking to. Be mindful of the opportunity at hand AND the relationship with the person you’re talking to.

- **Get to a God Conversation.**
  “Do you ever feel like there’s something more to all this?” You don’t have to jump to the fine points of theology. Just get on a track that leads you to God-things!

- **Get to Lostness.**
  “We’re all just trying to live good lives, aren’t we? We’re all just trying to get our sins forgiven.” Everyone has an idea of what a “good life” is—which means that there’s a “bad” option. The world’s system says you live a good life by doing the right things. Christ requires the opposite: faith that He was the perfect sacrifice and that we are not.

- **Get to Gospel.**
  To pay the penalty for our rebellion, God sent Jesus, His Son to die in our place. If we confess that Jesus is Lord and believe that God raised Him from the dead, we will inherit eternal life with Him.

- **Get to a Decision.**
  Offer a chance for them to respond to this good news.
3. The Athenians’ idol culture showed both their hunger for God and their inability to find Him. **How does our society demonstrate its hunger for God today? What false idols do people worship instead of God?**

In his 1945 novel *The World, the Flesh, and Father Smith*, Scottish writer Bruce Marshall showed his main character, Father Smith, talking to a seductive young woman. She eventually comments that she thinks the celibate priest’s religion is just a poor substitute for a relationship, but he fires back with a counter: “I still prefer to believe that sex is a substitute for religion and that the young man who rings the bell at the brothel is unconsciously looking for God.”

We look all over for things to satisfy our souls. We seek personal gratification, something to fill the dead time in our busy days, financial security, ideal relationships, or anything else you can imagine. Humans will always find excuses to worship themselves before worshippers their Creator.

4. Paul’s sermon had three responses: mockery, delay (“I’ll make a decision later”), and belief. **When is a time you’ve seen someone have one of these three responses to the Gospel? What was Paul’s response to the people who didn’t believe? What is yours? Why is Paul’s response a difficult one to have?**

Paul’s response in verse 33 reminds us of what Jesus instructed His disciples to do when He sent them out on a short-term missionary journey. Matthew 10:14 says, “If anyone does not welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet when you leave that house or town.” Paul understood when it was a proper time to have a debate (like in the verses just before our selection today) and when you don’t press the matter any further. It is not up to us to make anyone believe—our success is in the sharing, not in the saving.

5. Many Athenians were on board with what Paul was saying until he talked about the Resurrection. **Why is the Resurrection still a hangup for people today? Why do (or don’t) you believe in the Resurrection? What do you think a powerful gospel presentation looks like in your context?**

**RESPOND**

Take a few moments to respond:

- **Thank God for the Gospel and for its power to transform our lives.**
- **Write out your Gospel presentation from the last question and pray for an opportunity to share it with someone this week.**

Encourage one another through email, text messages, or coffee dates throughout the week to build up and encourage each other.