



LOVING JESUS, LOVING PEOPLE, PLOWING A COUNTER-CULTURE

TEXT: Acts 17:1–34

MAIN IDEA: In order to reach people with the gospel, we must contextualize God’s truth to show its relevance to our hearers.

LEADERS:

- Boxes of Love, y’all! Want an opportunity to bless a family this Thanksgiving? Grab an empty box at a Sunday service. In the box, there’s a shopping list. Fill it with the groceries and return it to us by October 30.. A family in need will receive it and will be blessed in Jesus’ name.
- Family Dedication is coming up on November 13th. If you or someone you know has a child or children under five who have not yet been dedicated, here’s the opportunity! Sign up on . . . wait for it . . . *the Digital Bulletin!!*
- We have a night of worship coming up on November 20th at 7:00 pm at the Totowa campus. All are welcome.

GETTING STARTED:

- Watch this week’s Community Extras Video.
 - **Icebreaker:** What are some films that communicate important spiritual truths? Bible movies are off-limits for this question!
 - **Opener:** What stood out to you from this week’s sermon?
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COMMUNICATING THE GOSPEL THROUGH THE SCRIPTURES

In this section, we see Paul, Silas, and Timothy proclaiming the gospel among Jewish people in synagogues. This gives us insight about how reach people who already accept the Bible as God’s truth.

- ☺ What kinds of people would fit into this category today?

Read Acts 17:1–9.

Leaders: Verse 5 is one of the many places in the New Testament where “the Jews” refers specifically to the Jewish leadership. It did not have the derogatory connotations that the expression sometimes has today.



Verse 3 tells us that Paul spent three Sabbaths “explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead.” Why did he need to explain this and prove this to the Jewish people he was trying to reach?



In his ministry to the Thessalonians, we are told that Paul focused on two things: First, that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to be raised, and second, that Jesus is the Christ (i.e.,



the Messiah, the king). In your experience, what biblical truths do we typically need to contend for in our culture, as we seek to share the gospel with people? What can you do to better equip yourself to be able to better communicate those truths?



In order to turn the city authorities against the Christian missionaries, the Jewish leaders argued that the message of Jesus was politically subversive—proclaiming Jesus as king (“Christ”) was a challenge to Caesar’s kingship. In what ways is this true, and in what ways is it misleading? How is the gospel politically subversive today?

Read Acts 17:10–15.



The Bereans’ response to the gospel message stands out because they were “more noble,” in that they “received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so” (v. 11). What can you do to equip yourself to follow the example of the Bereans?



In the sermon, Ryan noted that it is our job to simply share what the Scriptures say with people, because the Word of God, combined with the work of the Spirit, has the power to change hearts and compel minds. How does this give you increased confidence in sharing the gospel with people?

COMMUNICATING THE GOSPEL THROUGH CONTEXTUALIZATION

“Contextualization” refers to the process of communicating God’s truth differently to different people, depending on their background beliefs and assumptions. It acknowledges that, while we do share a common humanity, cultures differ widely from one another, and the wise Christian evangelist will use wisdom in adjusting his or her approach to meet people where they’re at.

Read Acts 17:16–21.

Leaders: Here we are introduced to two kinds of philosophy: Epicureanism and Stoicism. We are probably intended to suppose that Paul calibrated his message to speak into the worldview of these groups. Both were skeptical of more popular forms of Roman religion (e.g., the worship of “idols” in “temples made with hands”).

- Epicureans believed that mental pleasure (as opposed to physical pleasure) was the highest good. They believed that the gods refrained from interfering in human affairs.
- Stoics believed that the pursuit of right ethics and virtue led to true happiness. For them, god is a life force that animates the entire universe, as a spirit does to a body.



Paul did not wait for people to come to him, but rather purposely made connections wherever he could, seeking opportunities to share the good news of Jesus. In Athens, this meant going to both the synagogue and the marketplace. Where are your modern day “synagogues” and “marketplaces”?



Paul exemplifies a “go and seek” mentality. What causes churches to lose this perspective?



Read Acts 17:22–28.

  In his address to the Areopagus, Paul makes as many points of contact as possible, highlighting the points of agreement between the pagan philosophers and the biblical worldview, rather than first drawing their attention to places where the gospel says they are wrong. Why is this a wise approach?

  In what ways do we fail to do what Paul is doing here, and in what ways do we succeed?

 What point is Paul making when he mentions their altar “to an unknown god”?

 What points does Paul make in verses 24–28, and how do these serve to soften the hearts of his hearers to the truth of the gospel?

 Is Paul being manipulative here? Why or why not?

Read Acts 17:29–34.

The turning point in Paul’s message comes in verse 30: “The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent . . .” Until he has spoken in line with the philosophical worldview of his hearers, musing on timeless truths that guide life at all places and in all times. But now, something has happened that changes everything, and requires all people to respond with either repentance or unbelief.

Paul’s audience seems to be tracking with him throughout the majority of his speech. It is the mention of the resurrection that causes them to mock him. Physical resurrection from the dead was unthinkable to Gentile audiences. In fact, one Greek writer (Aeschylus) tells us that when the Areopagus was founded, Apollo proclaimed, “Once [a man] is slain, there is no resurrection” (*Eumenides* 648).

  Why do you think Paul introduces Jesus by speaking about his judgment of the world?

 Notice how Paul ends his speech by announcing the resurrection. He doesn’t mention points that are typically associated with the gospel, such as his sacrificial death on the cross or forgiveness of sins. Why?

Leaders: First, note that verse 32 seems to indicate that Paul does not seem to have taken the initiative to stop here. Rather, the mocking that the concept of resurrection instigated probably indicates that they were no longer willing to hear him. Second, notice that Paul’s speech did intrigue some, and led to several conversions, who would then have been disciplined more fully. Third, the mention of the resurrection, as the most controversial point, is probably meant to illicit further discussion, forcing his hearers to grapple with the truth of the gospel itself.



🧠 In order to contextualize the gospel effectively, we must be able to tell the difference between “repackaging” the message to appeal to our hearers and actually changing the message. In what ways might Christians be tempted to change the message today in a way that compromises God’s truth?

🧠 What are some appropriate ways that we can contextualize the gospel to more effectively reach people in our culture?

Leaders: Jordan shared that we can do this by appealing to two problems felt by all people: The problem of purpose (“what is my reason for living?”) and the problem of security (“on what do I stand when my world comes crashing down?”).

PRAYER TIME

Praise God for giving us a gospel that is true and relevant for all people at all times.

Pray that the Lord would give you the wisdom to be able to contextualize the gospel to effectively reach the people in your life.