

## **“Eager to Speak”**

Acts 17:16-34

Pastor Jarrett Stephens

Intro. Acts 17:16-34

The title of the message today is: **Eager to Speak**

That’s what we see here in Acts 17 as Paul travels to Athens by himself. We are going to look in detail at his actions when he entered this city and what’s going to be very apparent is that he was ready to talk to people about Jesus.

- Whether it was in the synagogue in Athens speaking to Jews...
- Or in the marketplace speaking to the common working Athenian of the day...
- Or on what is called “Mars Hill” speaking to the brightest and best philosophers, Paul was ALWAYS eager to speak about Jesus...

Now, I love this chapter because I can identify with Paul in some ways in being a preacher. There are just sometimes that you get extra amped up regarding speaking about Jesus to a group of people.

I mean, I’m excited ALL the time to be preaching Jesus to you, but I admit there are sometimes because of circumstances surrounding the message or because of the people that you are addressing, there’s just an added energy.

**Illus. Preaching** - I was thinking this week about when I have been the most excited about preaching a message. I remember my first sermon I ever preached. I was seventeen years old. I had gone to my student pastor and told him that I wanted to be more involved in leadership and that I sensed the Lord was calling me to ministry.

And after a football game one, Friday night, we had a 5<sup>th</sup> quarter and we invited everyone from school, and I remember being more pumped up to preach that message than I was for the football game. It’s all I could think about that week!

I remember, praying, studying and just not being able to concentrate on anything else except preaching Jesus to my friends.

I still have the notes up in my office from that first sermon and let me just say, it wasn’t good at all! In fact, I was embarrassed looking back over the notes, but I remember the excitement. I was SO eager to preach Jesus to my friends.

I also remember, the first time I was asked to preach back at my former church in Dallas. It was going to be the first time I was able to preach in big church.

Now, it was a holiday weekend, so there weren't a lot of people there...safe weekend for Jarrett to preach, but I can remember being so excited. I was 29 years old...this was a BIG deal me getting to do this.

I remember being so excited about the opportunity and at the same time EXTREMELY nervous. This was my first shot and I know it's in God's hands, but I did not want to blow it...and I had gotten so worked up and nervous that week, that I just started praying that Jesus would come back so I wouldn't have preach – TRUE STORY!

Then the third time that I was so eager to speak, I couldn't hardly sleep the night before was my "View of Call" sermon here. For those of you that aren't familiar with Baptist polity...most Baptist churches when they are without a pastor, like you selects a Search Committee to go out and find your next pastor.

God in his grace, led your committee to me, but here's the deal, the congregation has to vote. And I had to have 70% of the vote in order to become your pastor...as I told you, I hadn't needed a 70% that bad since college finals days – and most are gauging me off one sermon!

I didn't mind it though because I knew God had given me a word! He had prepared me for such a time as this and I can't tell you how eager I was to get here Sunday morning and preach that message!

You voted me in by the way! Thank you very much...it's been an awesome year!

That eagerness I felt in these situations to preach...I imagine that is how Paul felt as he made his way to Athens. Recall where we are at in scripture (**SHOW MAP**).

We are in the middle of Paul's second missionary journey (TRACE JOURNEY). Ultimately, Paul travels 200 miles are so down here to Athens.

Now, a couple of things about Athens. First of all, it was one of the oldest cities in the world at the time. It was the birthplace of philosophy, and politics and art and literature. For nearly a thousand years, Athens had been putting out the best and brightest influencing the entire known world at the time as it related to philosophy and culture. The whole world was speaking the Greek language at the time.

When you hear names like Socrates, Plato, Aristotle...all these thought leaders came from...made their home...had their start in Athens. This was also an "uber religious" city:

- Pe-tron-ius, a Roman Historian remarked that it was easier to find a god than it was to find a man in Athens.
- Pau-sani-us, a Greek geographer and historian wrote that "Athens had more images than all of Greece put together."

- Xenophon (Zen-o-fin) a Greek writer and disciple of Socrates wrote that Athens is “one great altar, one great offering to the gods.”

It was a thoroughly pagan city...the name Athens coming from the goddess Athena who had a HUGE temple built in her honor around 438 BC. Here’s a pic of it today, and while there only ruins left of it, you can still see it was quite impressive! (**SHOW PIC – Parthenon**) and here is a rendering of what it might have looked like in that day (**SHOW PIC**)

Now, it’s THIS city that Paul is sent to and for the first time that we know of since his conversion and the time he spent in the Arabian desert, he is solo...he is by himself.

What’s Paul going to do? I mean, up to this point on the 2<sup>nd</sup> missionary journey, he’s been beat with rods and put in prison in Philippi. They were forced to leave Thessalonica...run out of Berea.

And now, he’s here in Athens completely by himself. You know what I would be doing if I was in this town, in Paul’s place?

I’d be finding a spa! I’d be trying to experience a little R&R. I would have taken this as a sign from God that he wanted me to have a little vacation. I would have gone to the huge theatre there in Athens that seated 17,000 and caught some entertainment...for sure I would have gone to the stadium of Lykourgos hoping to catch some Olympic type games being played – that’s what I would have been doing!

But, NOT Paul. Look at **Acts 17:16** – “**Now while Paul was waiting for them** (Silas and Timothy) **at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.**”

Paul gets to this city...a city he has heard about...read about...and I believe was looking forward to sharing Jesus in. Unlike me, he wasn’t there for R&R. His desire wasn’t to site-see, it was to share Jesus.

And as he makes his way through the city, he begins to get disgusted by what he sees! The Bible says his “spirit was provoked within him” because it was full of idols.

Paul saw people worshipping and bowing down to idols. He saw them trying to appease gods that he knew were no gods at all! And What he saw angered him...it brought frustration and angst.

And so, Paul did what Paul always did...he goes to where the people and:

**Acts 17:16** – “**So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.**”

We said it last week about Paul and we should repeat it here: Paul had a heart for the glory of God! This is why he endured and persevered...he knew that God was worthy of whatever price he had to pay.

He also had a HUGE heart for people and so it makes sense being disturbed that the one, true God wasn't being worshipped that Paul takes the scripture he knows so well and he begins to talk and reason with anyone that will listen. He is EAGER to tell people about Jesus.

We need to ask a question of application right here and that is does it disturb you that God isn't being worshipped? Like Paul, is our spirit within us provoked...agitated...angered when we see others NOT worshipping the one, true God but instead worshipping idols of all kinds?

**Illus. India – (SHOW PIC) –** How's that working for you? This is what Paul is saying!

It may not be little statues and graven images like it was here in Athens or like I saw in India, but if we look around, we'll see people worshipping idols all over the place! Anything we turn to or rely on more than God is an idol!

- If we find security and significance in how much we have or the worldly titles that are given to us – it's become an idol!
- If we turn to some kind of worldly pleasure to escape numbness or pain or avoid tough things, whatever it is we are turning to is an idol!
- If we seek to please people over God because we don't want to disappoint or fear people will think less of us, then we've made those people an idol!

Idol worship is alive and well today...don't think for a second, it's not! And I just want to ask, "How's it working for you?"

When we see idolatry in our own lives or in the city in which we live, it should like Paul agitate us...anger us! Cause us to want to speak the truth to those that have been blinded by the lies of the Enemy.

Paul would write to the church in Rome and in doing so, he had to have Athens in the back of his mind:

**Rom. 1:18-23 – “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.<sup>19</sup> For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. <sup>20</sup> For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.<sup>21</sup> For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. <sup>22</sup> Claiming to be wise, they became fools, <sup>23</sup> and exchanged the glory of the**

**immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.”**

This is Paul in Athens...arguing with...debating...reasoning with people who claimed to be wise, but were in actuality fools. And they prove their foolishness in their worship of idols. And Paul is MORE than eager to point this out!

Two of two groups that are specifically mentioned here that Paul is engaging with. We read about them in:

**Acts 17:18 – “Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, “What does this babbler wish to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities”—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.”**

Some brief insight on these two groups. Epicureans were forerunner to the hedonist of the day. Pleasure in life was the highest goal and their motto was basically “if it feels good do it”.

They believed in gods, but they didn’t think that gods were involved in their personal lives or in affairs of humans. In the mind of the Epicurean, the gods they had their own god-stuff to deal with and there was no after-life – this is why pleasure was so important – get it now because when you’re gone, you’re gone.

The Stoics were an interesting breed as well. They were pantheists for the most part believing that god was in everything. They believed fate was going to play itself out...you could do nothing about it so through reason and meditation, you rise above your emotions - pleasure and pain mean nothing – rise above those things and true happiness comes when you are one with nature and the universe – whatever that means!

Now, think about those two philosophies as it relates to what Paul was preaching which was according to the end of (v. 18) – “Jesus and the resurrection.”

And let me just set this up in this way: Jesus and resurrection differentiates the God of the Bible and Christianity from every other philosophy in life!

We’ll come back to this thought more toward the end of our message - Jesus and the resurrection - THIS message is different than what the Epicureans embraced and believed.

- To them, God was distant. But in Jesus, God was brought near!
- To the Epicureans, gods don’t care about people’s personal lives, but Jesus shows us the one, true God does care – that’s why Jesus came in the first place!

To the Stoics who believed they could be one with god and the universe, Paul preaches Jesus who is the ONLY one in history that was one with God and that he is totally different than the universe that he created.

God wasn't just out there in the universe God had created the universe and this God came earth in the person of Jesus. He died on a cross for our sins and was raised to life on the third day.

This is the message Paul was preaching and the response of the people?

**Acts 17:18b-21 – “...And some said, “What does this babbler wish to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities”—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? <sup>20</sup> For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.” <sup>21</sup> Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.”**

Now, the Areopagus – also known as the “Hill of Ares”. Ares was the Greek god of war. The Romans knew this god as the god, “Mars” which is why it's referred to as “Mars Hill” (**SHOW PIC**).

Now, for years and years and years there was a ruling council in Athens that would actually set policy and govern from Mars Hill.

Interesting “did you know” from history, Athens is where it is said democracy was born. In 508 BC, while the rest of the world was ruled by kings and empires, citizens of Athens elected governing officials and they would meet and rule from Mars Hill.

By the time Paul is here, it was a meeting place for philosophers and the council that met here – it consisted of thirty “influencers” if you will...see we didn't just come up with influencers – they had them then too!

These influencers that served on this council served as the philosophy police and they had the power and ability to either give credence to a new teaching or strike it down...or if it was seen as a threat to the State, they could run you out of town!

It's this place AND this people that Paul is brought to and he is given an open door to share about this “strange teaching”. And he goes straight Hamilton on them because he is not “throwing away his shot” to reason, debate and most of all preach Jesus. He is MORE than eager to speak and so, let's listen in:

**Acts 17:22 - “So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus (Now, imagine this scene. Paul stands before them. This would probably be the view – (SHOW PIC 2). Here Paul is on Mars Hill overlooking the great Parthenon – this temple erected in Athenea's honor. There was a huge statue of her within this temple. And Paul:) said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious.”**

Keep in mind, Paul is a brilliant man. A lawyer. Trained in Tarsus. He knows how to reason with people. He knows how to debate. He knows what he believes and why he believes it.

\*\*Remember last week: know like Paul, examine like Bereans, debate with the Athenians!

Now, what I want to do is read what he says in full here and then we'll come back and make some notes regarding it.

**Acts 17:22b-31 – “...Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. <sup>23</sup> For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, <sup>25</sup> nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.**

**<sup>26</sup> And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, <sup>27</sup> that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, <sup>28</sup> for “‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, “‘For we are indeed his offspring.’ <sup>29</sup> Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. <sup>30</sup> The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, <sup>31</sup> because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”**

Now, a slow reading of this passage of scripture takes about three minutes. So, by all likelihood this is just an excerpt of what Paul preached that day. You read the commentaries and I'm telling you, pages are FILLED outlining this message and taking it apart line by line.

We could do that as part of the message today...just dissect what Paul said line by line. If we studied this passage in detail, it shows the incredible rhetorical skill of Paul as well as his ability to reason and argue with the very best.

On pure substance, it's a GREAT message. Paul plays off the fact that they have already acknowledged the possibility there is a god out there they may not know or be aware of. He makes a b-line to explaining this is none other than the Creator of the universe!

Notice, he argues this Creator God is separate and distinct from all other gods. The Creator God doesn't need anything, but rather he gives life and breath to EVERYTHING!

And what's MOST different about this Creator God than any other god is that he wants to be known! He's not some distant deity that is far off or not concerned with the affairs of man.

But instead in Jesus, he has come close and what is required is repentance because judgment is coming. You're not just dead and done (which was the prevailing thought of the day), but instead you will give an account for your life.

It's a good preaching outline...take it, use it, build off of it:

- There's a Creator.
- You can know him.
- Judgment is coming.

The substance part of the message is great...from strictly a philosophical standpoint, Paul answers the major questions of life in this sermon if you read between the lines.

Every single person here wants to know the answers to these questions:

- 1. Who am I?**
- 2. Where do I come from?**
- 3. Why am I here?**
- 4. Where am I going?**

Look at this message. You are created. You are created by a loving God. Your purpose in life is to know your Creator. You'll be resurrected when you are dead.

We could dissect the sermon from a substance standpoint and it's a good sermon! We could dissect it from a stylistic standpoint, and learn a ton!

Just look at how Paul handles this audience - it's pretty amazing! I mean first, he commends them. He doesn't start off mean-spirited and on a rant. He respects his audience and you get a sense that he genuinely cares about the people that he is talking to.

What a lesson! Whenever you share Jesus, care more about the person you are sharing with than you do getting your point across.

If you genuinely care about the person you are talking to, the point you are trying to make...the gospel you are trying to share has a much better chance of taking root in that person's heart than compared with just trying to be heard...just trying to get your presentation in!

Paul commends them for being religious and then he gets creative and uses an object lesson that's going to help him share Jesus with them. He talks to them about this altar they all would have been familiar with that was erected to the unknow god and then quotes some of their famous poets. He's not giving credence to them as much as he is helping identify and build bridges to the gospel.

He sets up a contrast between the Creator God and all these idols that man has created. Then he challenges them to repent. Paul doesn't hold back! He speaks the truth IN love – there's gotta be both when you are sharing Jesus.

Please, don't ever forget this – truth matters! We NEVER sacrifice truth, but tone is important too! We want those we are speaking to to lean in and give us an ear. That comes from genuinely loving and caring for those that we're talking to.

Stylistically, we can learn from Paul. He is loving, connects with his audience, is bold and speaks truth. There's a ton here...we could spend weeks talking about these ten verses!

But, here is what I want to do...I want us to take a step back and just big picture look at what we can learn from Paul, NOT just in his message but by his time in Athens.

There are four points of application/challenge/encouragement that I see here...let's start with this message he was so eager to preach:

### **1. Be faithful to preach Jesus and the resurrection.**

THIS is the message that will save. Don't get overly consumed with substance in the sense, you don't have to have some outline and verses memorized to be a faithful witness.

Don't worry about style...you may stutter and barely make it through or you may be as smooth as silk – it doesn't matter, style may help your listener lean in, but it won't save them.

What saves them is the message...and the message we have to make sure we communicate when being an effective witness is, Jesus and the resurrection!

As stated earlier, this is what differentiates Christianity from every other worldly philosophy out there...it's the resurrection! And this is the message we preach and proclaim.

Paul would tell the church in Corinth. **1 Cor. 15:1-4** – “**Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, <sup>2</sup> and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. <sup>3</sup> For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup> that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.**”

This was the message Paul held to and proclaimed...it was the resurrection of Jesus!

The resurrection was central to God's plan for history and it was in the hope of the resurrection that he based his entire faith upon. The resurrection is what gave Paul confidence and authority, and the same goes for us!

He would say later in (1 Cor. 15) if the resurrection didn't happen than we above all people would be hopeless and our faith would be futile.

If you ever wonder what to do or say to someone that is a seeker or someone that you are sharing with, be faithful to preach Jesus and the resurrection!

### **2. Foster a soft heart toward people**

Paul had a soft heart toward the people he came in contact with! He sees the idolatry and brokenness that surrounded him and he had to do something about it. He saw that people were lost in their sin...the Enemy had deceived them, lied to them and was destroying them.

He loved people. He would say of his own Jewish people in (Rom. 9:3) I'd rather be accursed and cut off than my own people. He didn't want anyone walking in darkness...he didn't want anyone to die in their sin.

Do you have a heart that is soft toward people? May the lost be written on our hearts! We talked a little about this in previous weeks. Paul could have been so jaded by people...suspicious of people at this point. But somehow by God's grace he kept a soft heart toward people.

It reminds me of a saying by a mentor of mine – “Never let anyone outside of your circle of love.” – the emphasis is to keep a soft heart.

There's an old song we used to sing “Break our hearts”...and the chorus would say, “For the sin in our lives break our hearts, for the sin in our land, break our hearts.”

Make this your prayer today. Break my heart God for my neighbor that doesn't know you...my co-worker...my classmate, friend or family member that is not in a relationship with you and begin praying today about God opening a door just like he did for Paul for you to preach Jesus and the resurrection.

**Illus. Easter** – seven weeks away...we're going to preach Jesus and the resurrection! What if you started praying right now for that person in your life and invited them on Easter weekend! I promise on Easter we will preach Jesus and the resurrection.

### **3. Take confidence in a reasoned faith**

Listen, Paul was eager to speak in Athens because he KNEW his faith was a reasonable faith. He knew he didn't have to check his mind at the door when he became a Christian.

He could go to Mars Hill in confidence because this faith once delivered could stand against any worldly ideology or philosophy that existed.

The Epicureans and Stoics took pride in their ability to reason and use logic and Paul peeled their beliefs back, poking holes in it, showing them what he believed was actually logical and reasonable.

Listen, the resurrection will of course sound impossible to a world the Bible refers to as spiritually discerned...of course it sounds crazy! A dead man raising to life! However, its more than logical...more than reasonable.

**Illus. Staff Chapel** – Lee Strobel – he gave an acronym for the Resurrection:

**F – fatal torment**

**E – empty tomb**

**A – appearances**

**T - transformation**

In a world FULL of agnostics and atheists, we don't have to back down or hold back what we believe. Instead, we can stand up and stand firm in what we believe because we have TRUTH on our side!

And speaking of a logical faith and atheism, you are NOT going to want to miss next week.

**Illus. Mark Lanier – “Atheism on Trial” (Promo Slide)**

#### **4. Leave witnessing results to God**

Did you see how this text ended? Paul has a soft heart toward the people. He preaches Jesus and the resurrection. And look at the results:

**Acts 17:32-34 – “Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, “We will hear you again about this.”<sup>33</sup> So Paul went out from their midst.<sup>34</sup> But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite (one of the presiding rulers believed!) and a woman named Damaris and others with them.”**

Some people embrace the gospel. Others will think about it. While some will outright reject it. NONE of these results are on Paul. He's not responsible for the results, he's responsible to be a faithful witness.

You know some people think that Paul failed in Athens. It doesn't appear there was a church planted there. Some think that because of what takes place in Corinth (what we'll look at two weeks) Paul left Athens discouraged.

But, I don't think so...I think Paul did what he set out to do. He preached Jesus and the resurrection to people EVERYWHERE he went. And evidently there were some men (v. 34) along with a woman and “others” that believed and followed him.

And truthfully, had no one believed and followed...his journey still would have been a success because he was faithful to preach Jesus and the resurrection.

When we share Jesus, the results are not on us, that's God. When I give an invitation, I don't get discouraged if no one comes down...I really don't. I want to see it, but I don't get discouraged, that's God's business.

And that's how I want us to close the service out today, by letting God take care of his business.

Will you pray with me?

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*Please Note: This document is not meant to be a published, cited, annotated research paper. It is simply a transcript of a spoken message, provided as a resource. Many commentaries, articles, and other sermon helps were likely studied and contributed to the forming of this message.*