

## Moving Beyond the Idols

[Acts 17:16-23](#)

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We are all tempted to bow before some idol. The classic idols are money, sex, and power. But you can also turn a relationship into an idol, or a job, or a dream. An idol is anything that is designed to save your life. The gospel of Jesus Christ, by contrast, is designed to introduce you to the resurrection, which is something you can't experience until you give up trying to save your life.

\*\*\* When the Apostle Paul arrived in Athens, he discovered it was a place where people spent their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new. Actually, that sounds a bit like Washington, D.C., which is filled with people who love information, especially new information. It doesn't even have to be true, just new. The latest about who's in and who's out, who's up and who's down, and who is our latest great hope.

So it is not surprising that Paul also discovered Athens was filled with idols. That's because they kept having to make room for the newest and latest hope people wanted to worship. Athena's huge gold and ivory idol stood in the midst of the city. Ancient scholars tell us the point of her gleaming spear was visible as much as forty miles away. Surrounding her were images of Zeus, Neptune, Apollo, Venus, Diana, and the rest of the Greek pantheon. There were idols to the lesser gods of Olympus, to the gods of the waters, earth, and the underworld. In Athens, there was always room for a new god. All you had to do was place it alongside the others.

We are told that when Paul saw all these idols he was deeply distressed. The exact word in the Greek for distressed carries the connotation of a seizure of the soul. His soul ached and twisted at the sight of all this idolatry. Remember as a Jew, Paul grew up in a tradition that had seen how angry God became over idol worship. The worst judgements Israel faced in its history always came in response to worshiping before idols. An idol is anything, or anyone, on earth in whom you trust for your salvation. Throughout the Hebrew history, there would be times when the people grew tired of looking for salvation from a God who was so demanding. So they would turn their hearts towards the gods of wood and stone that they could fashion with their own hands. These gods promised fertility and prosperity, made little demands, and didn't care how you lived. That's the benefit of an idol.

You would think that Athens, the city of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, the birthplace of classical culture, a city filled with really smart people would not worship so many idols. But in fact, just the opposite has always been true in history. The smarter we are, the more tempted we are by the illusion that we can control life and save it through the right idol. Even today, in our contemporary post-modern city, the idols of materialism and power abound. No, being smart doesn't free you from the temptation to idolatry. It just gives you the opportunity to worship many idols at the same time. Many of us knock ourselves out at work to become successful, thinking that will help. But because we are smart and know life has to be more than work, we also try to be supermom or dad. And because we know the kids will someday leave home, we try to save for retirement. And because we know retirement is no good if we're sick, we try to stay healthy. And we try recreation, and education, and the market, and a bigger house, and, and, and.... None of these things are idols in themselves, unless you are expecting them to save your life, which is exactly what we expect. Since we are smart, we've learned to diversify. We've got a lot going. John Calvin wrote, "the human mind is a perpetual factory for idols." Surely, we think, one of these things will work out.

But late at night when you are laying in bed staring at the ceiling, you wonder if you're doing enough, because in spite of all you are doing, it feels like something is missing. Paul noticed that the Athenians even had an idol to The Unknown God. That's the idol to which we are actually most devoted. It's the one we haven't yet discovered. The Unknown God invites us to get a different job, house, or spouse. It says you haven't found the right thing to save you just yet. You better keep looking.

Worst of all, The Unknown God makes us frantic with worry about the unknown. So again, late at night, it tears your mind apart with fear. You toss and turn worrying, "what if?" One awful scenario after another invades your thoughts, and all these voices of doubt and anxiety just keep banging around in your head. Well, I declare to you, that is not the voice of the true God. Because the true God is not frantic, and he does not make you panic. So that is the voice of an idol you are listening to late at night.

Jesus said that the sheep recognize the voice of their shepherd and come only when he calls. They will not come when a stranger calls because they do not recognize the voice of strangers (John 10). So the most important thing in the fold of God is to learn the voice of your Good Shepherd. That is why we worship, and pray, and read our Bibles daily. It is all a way of spending time with the Shepherd. And you have to do that, you just have to, or you will be drawn by the voices of those idols who make you fear and think you have not yet done enough. That is why Paul's soul turned in seizures over all the idolatry in Athens. He knew the idols were relentless taskmasters that were tearing apart the hearts of the people with fear.

Paul began to preach in the places of worship where devout people were gathered. Clearly, even religious people can be drawn to idols. The church can be an idol if you expect it to save you. Just because your name is on the membership rolls, that does not mean that you know God. Paul also preached in the marketplaces where people were bowing before the idol of commerce. And he preached to the Epicureans and the Stoics: two competing philosophical schools that are very much alive today.

The Epicureans taught people that the world was a hard thing to control, so people should just carve out a little serenity in life for themselves. The Stoics, by contrast, told everyone to pursue their duty, responsibility, and assigned roles in life. It is significant that these two philosophies developed just five years apart in the third century B.C. Apparently, the existence of one calls for the other. After a while we get tired of doing our duty and look for a little serenity in life. But now that we have all been overindulging in serenity, our leaders are knocking themselves out to get us back to our duty in society. In fact, there is no serenity apart from serving the true God. And duty, apart from worship, is only a way of turning our own hard work into an idol.

As Paul the Missionary talked about the God who revealed himself in Jesus Christ, the Athenians took him to the Areopagus to tell them more about this God. Paul began by offering a more accurate description of The Unknown God to them. He is not just one more competing demand upon your soul, Paul claimed. He is the Creator God who does not live in shrines made with human hands. Just as the Stoics claim, "In him we live, and move, and have our being." So far, everyone was still listening, because this sounded very good and reasonable. But then Paul went on to say two things that were not so popular. He spoke about the judgment and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

We have never been fond of hearing about the judgment of God. We think we left behind all that angry judgmental talk in the Old Testament, and that in the New Testament we discover a more loving, compassionate God. But even the most cursory reading of the Bible reveals that in both Old and New Testaments the love and judgment of God live side by side. It is because he loves us that God reveals his judgment to us. The opposite of love is not judgment or even anger. The opposite of love is indifference, and God is not indifferent about you. He loves you so much that by grace he presents his judgment upon your bad turns in life. Trying to get rid of the judgement of God is like getting rid of the North Star. It leaves you lost on the sea, not knowing how to turn the little ship called your life. So the purpose of God's judgment is not to condemn us, but as Paul tells the Athenians, to invite us to repent, or turn from the idols who have led us astray.

Then Paul really loses his audience by saying, the way we find the North Star, the way we turn toward the right way of living life, is through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. It is then that people began to scoff at Paul. It is not just the church's message of judgment that makes people doubt. It is our message of hope. The judgments have been written on our hearts, and we know there is a right and a wrong. But the hope is pretty hard to believe. Paul later tells the church in Corinth that the whole gospel stands or falls with the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. So if you are going to reject the gospel, at least do so for the right reason. And if you are going to accept the gospel, know why. It all turns on the resurrection from the dead.

This is not the same thing as the philosophical belief in the immortality of the soul. The Greeks believed that long before Paul showed up. The immortality of the soul promises that you live on as an individual forever, even after you shed your body. We in the church do believe that the soul perseveres, but that is not at the heart of our faith. Our hope is based on the resurrection, which claims that Jesus has defeated death for us. So we don't have to be afraid of physical death, or even the death of our relationships, dreams, health, or jobs, all of which we will eventually lose. Knowing that we will lose these things is what made us afraid, and it was our fear that made us sell our souls to the idol du jour.

To be clear, the resurrection doesn't claim we won't experience death. It claims that death is only the beginning of new life. We can have that new life today if we go ahead and die to our right and need to have the things we are so afraid of losing.

I had a young uncle named Bobby who scoffed at the message of Jesus Christ because he was too addicted to the idol of money. He was born poor and swore he would never die poor. Last Wednesday, he died suddenly of a heart attack at the age of 56. So he died rich, but is still just as dead as a poor man. His obituary tried to romanticize this by saying he died "dancing barefoot on a beach in the Bahamas." What the obituary didn't say was that his idolatry of money cost him too many marriages or that his relationships with his children was strained, or that he was so lonely. That is what an idol will do. It steals your soul and every important thing in life away from you, with a promise you can die dancing on a beach. But is that really the legacy you want to leave? Wouldn't it be better to have an obituary that says during your short life you gave yourself to making this world look a little bit more like heaven?

Neither the biblical authors nor the Early Church fathers spent much time speculating about heaven or life in the next world. All of their concern with the resurrection of Jesus from the dead was to free us to live right in this life. The point of the resurrection is not to have individuality without limit but to free us to give ourselves to the right things without fear. Athanasius, a fourth century bishop in Alexandria, asked, "Do you want proof of the resurrection? Look at how the followers of Christ live." For more than 300 years the church was often persecuted and oppressed, but it eventually won the empire because the members of the church were not afraid. And they were not afraid because the members of that church had already died to this life. So they were not preoccupied with vain idols or their silly promises for this life. They were free! Free to give themselves to right things, free to turn back to the North Star, and free to pursue justice and kindness.

That is what our society today is dying to find. We need justice for the poor and the hungry. We need right relationships between nations and races and, hardest of all, between family members. In our hearts is written the judgment that offers the right way of life, but we cannot follow it because in our anxiety we are bowing before idols that promise what they can never deliver.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is not one more thing to try to save for yourself. It is an invitation to die with Christ that you may finally discover new life and, at long last, give yourself to things that make an eternal difference. Amen.