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 Sermon  
 February 9th, Septuagesima

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, and for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, well equipped for every good work.

That inspired and well-equipping Word of the LORD which forms a portion for our sermon text this morning comes to us from the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 17, beginning with verse 22:

**Then Paul stood up in front of the council of the Areopagus and said, “Men of Athens, I see that you are very religious in every way. 23 For as I was walking around and carefully observing your objects of worship, I even found an altar on which had been inscribed, ‘To an unknown god.’ Now what you worship as unknown—this is what I am going to proclaim to you. 24 “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples made with hands. 25 Neither is he served by human hands, as if he needed anything, since he himself gives all people life and breath and everything they have. 26 From one man, he made every nation of mankind to live over the entire face of the earth. He determined the appointed times and the boundaries where they would live. 27 He did this so they would seek God and perhaps reach out for him 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 some of your own poets have said, ‘Indeed, we are also his offspring.’ 29 “Therefore, since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by human skill and planning. 30 Although God overlooked the times of ignorance, he is now commanding all people everywhere to repent, 31 because he has set a day on which he is going to judge the world in righteousness by the man he appointed. He provided proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.” 32 When they heard about the resurrection from the dead, some of them started to scoff. But others said, “We want to hear you again on this subject.” 33 So Paul left the council. 34 However, some men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them were Dionysius (a member of the council of the Areopagus) and a woman named Damaris, as well as others with them.**

This is the Word of The LORD!!! The congregation may be seated...

Mercy, Grace, and Peace ARE YOURS from your God and Father and from your Savior from sin, Jesus Christ. Dear fellow Redeemed

Would you describe yourself as “religious”? If someone described you with that word, “religious”, would that offend you? Well, with the way that term is often thought about today, it very well could. “Oh, that person, yeah, they’re very *RELIGIOUS*...” The concept seems to have a very pious overtone to it. Like being religious is somehow a term to describe

someone who considers themselves to be better than the rest of us.

But, if you are religious, which I think all of us are here today, you know the way that concept is perceived is not what real religion is about. Being religious is not about being superior, rather it is about admitting that we are fundamentally flawed. Real

religion is not about trying to claim that we are great people. Real religion is about admitting that we are dead in our trespasses and sins, and there is nothing we can do to fix that. Real religion is not about boasting how great we are. Real religion is about boasting how great our God is and praising Him for the great things which He has done for us.

In our text this morning, the Apostle Paul addressed people who he diagnosed as very religious. Yet they had a problem that a lot of people have. While they were religious, they didn't know the real God, they placed their religious nature in the wrong place. Thus their religiousness was faulty. Paul in this text is trying to fix that. He is trying to take that attitude and point it in the right direction. He was trying to make known to them what they described as an "unknown god".

The more things change, the more they stay the same. Today, it is not popular to be religious. Today, it is more in line with common thought that truth is subjective. Religion is, therefore, something that is subjectively personal, and not something that has absolute truth. "You live your truth, and I'll live mine." The problem with that popular thought is that there is only one ultimate absolute truth: Jesus died on the cross to save sinners. If that is not your truth, then you don't have the truth.

Yet, the beauty of this truth is that it is open to all. God desires all men to come to the knowledge of Him and to repent and be saved. He is not hidden, but rather, as Paul says here, **he is not far from each one of us**. He is our creator, and He is our judge. He is, as the writer to the Hebrews calls Him, "The Author and Finisher of our faith". He Himself has made what we believe in to be valid, and He has given us the proof of that. For some, this proof is inconclusive. But for those who believe, it is proof without a doubt that we shall live with Him forever in heaven. And so we pray: O LORD, SANCTIFY US BY YOUR TRUTH, YOUR WORD IS TRUTH, AMEN!

To understand what Paul is talking about here, first, we need to go over the circumstance that brought him where he was, and the spiritual condition of those whom he preached to. This was near the end of what

is known as Paul's second missionary journey. Paul, Silas, and Timothy went as far west as Troas, and they tried to go north, but **the Spirit did not permit them (Acts 16:6)**. So, they didn't know where to go next, until Paul had a vision. Luke writes in Acts 16, **And a vision appeared to Paul in the night. A man of Macedonia stood and pleaded with him, saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." 10 Now after he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called us to preach the gospel to them. (Acts 16:9-10)**

This call moved them farther west, into the area known as Greece. Many of the areas they would visit on that trip are familiar to us because they would later have letters written to them by Paul. They visited Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, and finally Corinth. A situation arose which left Silas and Timothy in Berea while Paul is sent ahead down to Athens to await Silas and Timothy before moving on.

So here Paul is, waiting for his companions in Athens. What he finds in this city is a very religious scene, although it is the wrong religion. **Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols. (Acts 17:16)**

He walked around and he could see that there were a great many false gods being worshipped in this city. It was said that there were more gods in Athens than people. So vast and famous were the false gods of the Greeks that even we have a common knowledge of them today. They worshipped gods such as Zeus, Poseidon, and Athena (for which this city was named after). This was hardly the first encounter Paul had with these gods. A few chapters back in the book of Acts, Paul and Silas healed a lame man, and as a result, the crowds wanted to worship them as Zeus and Hermes. This was the prevailing religious belief at the time, and while Paul was certainly aware of these false gods, he had never seen a city that was so devoted to them. Their temple, the Parthenon, at the height of its glories, rivaled Solomon's temple. Paul could most likely see this building from where he delivered this sermon.

Their whole culture was so ingrained with this false polytheism that it was dominant. Paul couldn't help but notice how rampant it was. So, when he was talking to people in the marketplace, naturally the subject of the true God came up. Eventually, he was invited to bring his ideas to this Areopagus (which literally means "The hill of Ares" their so-called god of war). While the Athenian culture was overcome with this polytheism, they also considered themselves great thinkers and philosophers. They always wanted to hear new ideas, and consider them, so thus Paul was given an opportunity to speak. Where could he even begin with these people?

If we break down what Paul said that day as a sermon, (which it most certainly was whether they knew it or not), then his introduction is most attention-grabbing! **"Men of Athens, I see that you are very religious in every way. 23 For as I was walking around and carefully observing your objects of worship, I even found an altar on which had been inscribed, 'To an unknown god.' Now what you worship as unknown—this is what I am going to proclaim to you."**

Paul could have started out by stating the obvious: He could've denounced all of their false idols and gods. He could've pointed out that this was all blatant sin, which of course it was. But he doesn't. Instead, he starts with the fact that they were very religious. This was of course true. The problem was that their religious fervor was placed in the wrong gods. But he was going to introduce to them the real God. They already had an altar built to Him, but they did not know who He really was. The altar was built to "an unknown god". They believed in so many different gods, that to cover all their bases, they even had one built to one they didn't know. By introducing the LORD to them like this "unknown god", most certainly they would have been on the edge of their seats to find out more!

One of the most awesome qualities about our God, the One true God, is that He is made known. Paul's job was making known to people all over the earth just who this God is. Here he says **"The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples**

**made with hands. 25 Neither is he served by human hands, as if he needed anything, since he himself gives all people life and breath and everything they have."**

This was indeed a different message than what they were used to. Paul wasn't talking about many gods, as they were accustomed to. Rather, he preached One God. This idea of monotheism, that there is only One God, was foreign to their ears. The idea that there was One God who was responsible for the creation of **the world and everything in it** again would be bizarre to them. Their system said that there was a particular god who was responsible for almost anything. There was a god of war, a god of wine, a god of the sun, a goddess of love. For there to be only One God responsible for all creation was definitely different! Paul also tells them that He didn't reside in one location, nor could He be replicated into idols by human hands. Paul was making known to them by definite detail attributes of the unknown god.

How could Paul make these things known to these people? Well, because they were made known to him! He had a fundamental sense of the One True God since Paul was young, he learned them from the Old Testament. But, there was more to be made known to him. Jesus Himself would call Paul to preach the new message of Christ crucified. This was not different from what Paul had learned in the Old Testament, rather it was the fulfillment of it!

God had been made known to us as well. We too have learned from the Bible who and what God really is. We have the advantage that is the Bible. We can literally pick up the Word of God and read what His will is. When we have problems, we don't have to wonder about what God says to us. It is written down for us! We don't have to seek some oracle at Delphi to determine what His will is or interpret tea leaves or other signs. His Word is expressly written out for us! He made this possible by verbally inspiring men through the ages to record His message. What a blessed gift this book, this Bible, truly is!

Why does He reveal Himself to us? Because He is our Father! **From one man, he made every nation of mankind to live over the entire face of the earth.**

**He determined the appointed times and the boundaries where they would live. 27 He did this so they would seek God and perhaps reach out for him 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 some of your own poets have said, 'Indeed, we are also his offspring.'**

Indeed, one of the first things we read in the Bible is how God created all things. He simply said, "Let there be", and there was! He spoke the entirety of creation into existence. Yet, even though He made everything and it was "very good", He made one thing to be special. It was His creation of man that was different. He created man in "His own image". Genesis tells us that He specifically took the time to form Adam out of the dust of the earth. Then He personally breathed into him the breath of life. We are the only part of creation that has a soul that endures. Paul quotes some of Athens's poets back to them, for they made some correct statements even though they would draw false conclusions out of them. We are indeed, God's offspring!

And that is why God took the time and effort to redeem us! We were made in His glorious image, but that image was marred when we rebelled in sin. Yet, God took the painstaking effort which was required to restore that image back to us! He sent His own Son, Jesus Christ, to take on our flesh and fulfill the law that we failed to keep. Then Jesus was crucified and buried to pay for your sin. Once and for all He suffered, and it was finished!

This had to be done, because if it was not done for us, then we would be lost in judgment! **Although God overlooked the times of ignorance, he is now commanding all people everywhere to repent, 31 because he has set a day on which he is going to judge the world in righteousness by the man he appointed.**

We were dead in our trespasses and sins. We could not respond to God, because the dead can't respond to anything. Yet God made us alive! Now, because we have been made alive, He wants us to repent and believe! The fact of the matter is that all men will have to answer for what they have done!

This was a fact that even the Athenians could get on board with. Many different religions have a concept of an afterlife in them. Certainly, even these polytheists would agree. They had a whole entire god who was responsible for the dead, Hades, the lord of the underworld. But what Paul said in the details is different from what they were accustomed to. Paul said that the world would be judged by a man, One that God appointed. They might have had an inclining to whom he was referring, but he didn't get the chance to introduce Him more fully.

How come? What happened that all of a sudden cut Paul's time down? **He provided proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead." 32 When they heard about the resurrection from the dead, some of them started to scoff. But others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject." 33 So Paul left the council.**

Paul had them going there for a while, but when the subject of the resurrection was mentioned, that was the limit for these men. The subject of Christ's resurrection is the straw that broke the camel's back. This made some of them scoff, others might have wanted to hear more, but his time was now over.

Maybe you noticed from the hymn board or the bulletin, but today is Septuagesima. What does that term mean? There is more information about it in the bulletin, but basically it is the Latin term for "70 days". We are about 70 days away from Easter. These next few Sundays act as a transition period into the season of Lent, which ultimately prepares us for Easter. Even though we are 70+ days away from Easter Sunday, we are never far removed from the subject of Easter.

And it was, of course, that subject that got Paul thrown off the stage. "A man rising from the dead? That is preposterous!" And you could see how it could be for them, after all, they had never seen that happen. But it did happen. Paul sites it here as the proof that this man, Jesus, was the One who would judge the world. He would go on to write to other Greeks (the Corinthians) just exactly what Jesus' resurrection means for us the believer! **But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. 21 For**

**since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. 22 For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. 23 But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming. (1 Cor 15:20-23)**

The fact of the matter is the Jesus' resurrection is the cornerstone on which our Christian belief rests. As Paul said, it is our proof. It is proof that Jesus was who He said He was. It is proof that our sins have been truly forgiven. And it is proof that we too shall be raised. Not only will those who believe in the resurrection be raised, but all mankind. Then, as Paul said here, the MAN, Jesus will judge the world in righteousness.

So, how did Paul do here? Well, perhaps it didn't go over the way he had exactly hoped. He would've no doubt loved to get into the subject a bit longer. But just because it didn't seem to go over well doesn't mean it wasn't effective. There were multiple people who believed. A consul member named Dionysius and a woman named Damaris as well as others. As Jesus states in Luke, **I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance.**

What is the take away from all of this? Well, Paul essentially took a period of time in which he was simply waiting for his companions and turned it into an opportunity to share the Gospel with people who had never heard it before. He told people what real religion was. These people were religious, but real religion is found in the real God. Sure, some scoffed at him. But others believed! We preach the Word in season and out of season.

Just look at the doctrines he introduced to these people. He made known to them their unknown God, the real God! He told them that He was the creator and sustainer of the universe. He told them of the nature of this One True God. He didn't act like the gods they were used to. He wasn't a god who dwelt in a faraway mountain somewhere. Rather He is near to each and every one of us.

The message is still timeless. We who know this God and know what Paul said to be the truth still need to hear the message that those who had never before heard these things heard. The message is a simple one. God is great, and he desires that we repent and believe in Him.

So to us here today, the point is **DO NOT BE ASHAMED OF BEING RELIGIOUS!** There is a temptation with us here today to compartmentalize our faith. We go to church on Sunday, but is that the extent of our faith? Or is it evident throughout our lives?

We often suffer from a weakness of not wanting to look foolish. Maybe we don't want to share this glorious message because we don't want to be seen as foolish. But the truth is something that Paul understood. That day of judgment is coming. We need to tell people that they are not OK living their incorrect truth. There is only one truth, **BELIEVE ON THE LORD JESUS CHRIST AND YOU WILL BE SAVED!**

We may be viewed as foolish for believing that Jesus rose from the dead. That's fine. It is better to be seen as a fool by the world and know the truth by faith! We know that Jesus died for my sins, and we know that because He did that, and rose from the dead, that our sins are forgiven and death is not the end for us! This is the only truth that saves, and it is one that people need to be made known!

Let us not shy away from our personal Areopagus' that are presented in life. We may be made to look like fools, and we may be hated. But it doesn't matter, because what we speak is the truth. Believe and preach the truth! God created us as His own dear children and desires all men to be saved. Repent and believe in the Good News! Jesus rose from the dead, and so too shall we! Our sins have been forgiven, and we shall be with Him forever, for He is with us forever! **AMEN!!!**