

- Today as we continue to turn the corner towards Easter, we also near the end of our series through the Book of Acts. And through it we've been asking "What would Ventura County look like if Jesus were King?"
- And today we want to ask the important but tricky question "What would our cultural engagement look like if Jesus were King?" How do we relate to the culture around us?
- And there are few better places to do that than The Apostle Paul's Address to the Philosophers in Athens. And we find this in Acts 17, and we will read verses 16-23

**Acts 17:16-23 NIV** While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. <sup>17</sup> So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. <sup>18</sup> A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbler trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. <sup>19</sup> Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? <sup>20</sup> You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean." <sup>21</sup> (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.) <sup>22</sup> Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. <sup>23</sup> For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you."

## PRAY

- 2,000 years ago, Jesus said to be *in* the world but not *of* the world. And ever since then, people have been trying to figure out what that looks like.
- Where does the church belong? *Where do Christians belong?*
  - Can you be a Christian and be in politics?
  - Can you be a Christian and be in education? Science?
  - Can a Christian be an actor? Definitely not... 😊

- The word culture can be tricky. Nature is what God makes. Culture is what humans do with it. It can be both good and bad!
- **And there are two errors to avoid when it comes to culture:**  
***Isolation and assimilation***
- **Isolation – Which is about *removing* your influence**
  - This is the view of a fair number of Christians. Remove themselves from culture, live off the grid on a farm in a converted Sprinter van
  - But how can you be, as Jesus said, the salt and light of the world *when you avoid it? But there is another mistake:*
- **Assimilation – Which is about losing your influence**
  - Perhaps many more are in this camp. Living with little or no distinction at all whatsoever. Their faith is so private that if it were ever revealed, co-workers would be shocked!
- If you are a Christian, which error are you most prone to make?
- If you are not a Christian, what determines your role in world?
- Well, the passage before us today shows us that we should neither *remove* our influence through ***isolation***, nor *lose* our influence through ***assimilation*** but *bring* our influence through redemptive ***participation***. What does this look like?
- As we have learned over the last few months, the Book of Acts records for us the earliest history of the church, and what the kingdom of God looks like in the lives of men and women under the risen king Jesus. And through its pages we see leaders committed to advancing the gospel from the Jewish center of Jerusalem and further out towards the rest of the world, even leading all the way to Athens!
- Everyone knew about Athens! Athens had an unrivalled reputation for being the Roman Empire's center of thought!
- And our text focuses on Paul the Apostle, who has gone preaching the gospel to the prisoners of Rome's cold cells all the way to the philosophers of Rome's cultural capitol. And from this scene of Paul preaching in Athens, I want us to see three lessons about what the kingdom coming looks like when we engage with culture

### **1. We Engage Culture with Love (Acts 17:16)**

- a. Our text finds Paul waiting for his team in Athens as he had travelled ahead of them in their church planting mission
- b. But as he waits, we find our first lesson. When Paul walks the busy streets of Athens, he does not do so as a tourist, but a man who cares deeply about the souls in this city.
- c. How do we know this? The text tells us v 16 “While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed”
- d. How did he become moved? He looked and he listened... and when he did, he saw the *idols* of the city. Usually, images that reflected who or what they valued most.
  - i. Now what is an idol? Anything other than God that you believe gives you ultimate meaning, value and worth.
  - ii. It could be anything! Idol promises salvation and satisfaction but will never deliver. It could even be a good thing, but made into a GOD thing
- e. He is listening, he is looking and when he sees the idols he is distressed, grieved in his spirit. Why?
  - i. NOTE the text doesn't say “Paul was greatly moved because he wanted to show them they were wrong”. The text doesn't say “Paul was greatly moved because he wanted to be proven right.”
  - ii. Nor does the text say “He was greatly moved and so he bailed” nor does it say “he was greatly concerned so he started a commune outside of Athens”
  - iii. He didn't lash out or peace out!
  - iv. No, he was greatly moved because he wanted them to know God, and this led him to engage with them.
- f. It's not a sentimental love, but the kind of complex love
- g. How do we engage the culture? We look and we listen, we pay attention to our neighbors, or co-workers, we listen to their hopes and fears, their longing and desires, their complaints and disagreements. For as we do, we will discover what may be blinding them to their need for God.
  - i. Because whatever these idols are, **and every city and county has them**, they act like “OFF” switches to their

need for God. The lie that humanity believes is that we think we can get what we really need from anything except God. ***What are people searching for in VC?***

- h. If its anything other than God, our hearts should break.
- i. Before Paul preached to the culture, he was moved for the culture. And this is huge.
- j. If you listen well, you will be moved with compassion!
  - i. Paul's burden for the people of Athens led him to engage with the people of Athens!
  - ii. And do we not see this in Jesus himself! He weeps!
  - iii. So, while many of us may be quite ready to make bold statements on social media about our culture, do our hearts break for the culture?
- k. You must look, listen well and be moved with compassion!
- l. And also, if you listen well, you will speak well!
- m. We can't be cultural hermits and bury our heads in the sand.
- n. I want you to note that for Paul, his looking, listening and caring enabled him to rightly apply his preaching to his hearers. And that leads us to the next point

## **2. We Engage Culture with Truth (Acts 17:17-23)**

- a. If one error is to isolate from the culture, then the challenge is for us to love. But what if we are prone to lose our distinction? See, some of us might not be tempted to lash out or peace out, but maybe we cop out? just say we love the culture without acknowledging the idols?
- b. See, we must engage with love AND we must engage with truth. And that is what Paul did in Athens.
- c. In verse 17 we are told he reasoned in the synagogue and preached in the public square. And in verse 18 we learn that his preaching caught the ears of the cultural elites, the philosophers of Athens! Curious about his preaching they invited him to the Areopagus, or the High Council, which was basically a live studio for the Athenian Ted Talks of the day.

**Acts 17:19-21** "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? <sup>20</sup>You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean." <sup>21</sup>(All the Athenians and the foreigners who

lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.) **Basically 1<sup>st</sup> century YouTube Beta version**

- d. Now, notice that Paul's engagement did not lead to compromise, but truth-telling! Having looked at what the culture was after, knowing the culture, he exposed the idols!

**Acts 17:22-23** Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious.<sup>23</sup> For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

- e. Paul challenges their worldview. But note how! His loving, listening posture enabled him to know *how* to bring truth!
- f. If he was preaching to the Jews, he would not need to start farther back. He knew the Jews believe in God. But these philosophers did not share that view! So, his listening informed his engagement. He needed to start farther back. And when he does, his talk says basically three things:

**g. People are *dependent on God***

- i. He is the creator of everything! V 24! He is not a colleague, a vending machine or a peer.
- ii. He does not need *us*, we need *Him*
- iii. And the things you enjoy in life, come from him! And that is where we get good things in culture.

**h. People are *accountable to God***

- i. If we are made by him, then we must answer to him!
- ii. And now with that framework, he tells the bad news

**i. People are *alienated from God***

- i. We have turned from God. This is what sin is. And it is what taints God's good creation. Its why culture is such a mixed bag of beauty and brokenness.
- j. But notice he didn't just make a banner that said, "repent sinner", he took the time to listen to where they were at and did the work of explaining what they needed to hear in order for the problem of sin to make sense!
- k. But this problem does need to be addressed.

- l. People must hear the truth about God and the truth about our spiritual state.
  - i. For those of you who struggle with truth-telling, you must understand that telling the truth about our situation is one of the most loving things you can do.
  - ii. To put it another way, if you only affirm the culture, but not challenge its brokenness, then you are not actually loving others! Its unloving not to tell the truth!
  - iii. “But I love them too much” Actually, we love ourselves
- m. **But...** if we stop there, with only a Christian framework and the truth about sin, we have not fully engaged as we ought!
- n. The Kingdom of God is not just about the church giving people a Christian worldview or hoping that people embrace Christian values. It is not enough for people to agree with the morals and ethics of Christianity!
- o. Some people think this! “I argued the case for the Christian sex ethic; therefore, my job is done!”
- p. These things are true. But these truths **alone** will not bring never transformation. What ensure that we are both loving and truthful? What brings transformation?

### 3. We Engage Culture with the Gospel (Acts 17:31)

- a. This is where it all leads for Paul. It all points to Jesus.

**Acts 17:31** For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.”

- b. For in Jesus, we see truth and love together!
- c. In love he looked into our hearts and saw it was full of idols! And in love he came and revealed the truth about sin.
  - i. He does not hide this from us. He does not pretend that it does not matter. He does not want you to live in an illusion or believe a lie that would lead to your destruction! **Jesus is full of truth**
- d. *AND at the same time*, He is absolutely and unconditionally committed to your good!
- e. More than Paul ever could, Jesus not only engaged with our world but sacrificed his life for our world!

- f. In truth he reveals the reality **of** our sin... and in love pays the price **for** our sin. This is what is happening on the cross. In Jesus is found the truth and love that transforms us and sends us out into the lives of others. John writes:

**John 1:14** The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

- a. **It's the good news of Jesus that keeps you from being removed.** (What if Jesus never came to our world??)
- b. **It is also the good news of Jesus that keeps you from becoming just like the culture** (What if Jesus never said the hard truths? We wouldn't see our need! We'd be lost!)
- c. We all want to see the kingdom come into our lives and into our culture. And the way that happens is the truth and love of the gospel. (Not the truth OR love, but truth AND Love!)
- g. **Maybe you have not been speaking the truth...** or hearing it! If that is you, confess that today!
- d. **Maybe you have not been showing love...**
- h. God says, "the harshness, indifference, is toxic! For you and others. And it does not reflect the love I have shown to you."
- e. It comes from treasuring Him. See, you don't **create** this power to bring truth and love together, you **receive** it... and reflect it to others. Jesus says "I see you... I love you"
- f. And as you experience this in your heart, it sends you out to others. You hear Christ's voice say, "I see the people in this culture, and I love them."
- g. It is a deep experience of his grace that will enable you to show truth and love together, all flowing from and pointing towards his incredible love that pursues you!