

Sermon: Christ in the Capital

Text: Acts 17:16-34

Introduction:

We discussed last week that Paul's decision to go to Berea after leaving Thessalonica (Acts 17:10-15) signaled a conscious choice on his part to head to the south—taking him in the direction of Athens (as opposed to continuing due west and in the direction of Rome). On the surface, this might not seem like it was such a big deal. But a deeper understanding of the world of the Roman empire in Paul's day opens our eyes as to why this was such a significant decision.

Back in the fourth century before Christ (BC), a man named Alexander the Great essentially conquered the world on behalf of Greece. In so doing, he “spread” Greek culture, language and religion around the world—something we now refer to as “Hellenization.” The center, or capital, of Greek thought and religion was the city of Athens (in much the same way that we think of Hollywood being “the center” of the spread of American ideas and culture through film and media). Socrates (born in 470BC in Athens) is known as the founder of western philosophy. He trained up Plato, who in turn trained up and mentored a man named Aristotle. These three men had a SIGNIFICANT impact on the way people around the world thought and believed. And you get the picture—Athens was where all of this happened.

Rome, on the other hand, was the capital of the Roman empire which came a few hundred years after the Greek empire. Without trying to be overly simple—Rome became the POLITICAL capital of the world. Rome was the seat of power and control. Whereas, Athens was viewed more as the seat of religion, thought and philosophy.

Which brings us back to the decision that Paul made when he left Thessalonica—intentionally deciding (I believe) to take the Truth of the Gospel “into the lion's den” of Greek religion. This was not a battle for world dominance and control (politics)—this was a battle for TRUTH (faith). And Paul knew that the truth of God's Word could hold up in the face of any scrutiny or examination. More than that, he knew that people had to hear to the truth to repent & believe.

He also knew that it wasn't going to be easy. Think about it—these Athenian philosophers believed to the core of their being that they had the absolute corner on truth. To convince them otherwise was to completely undermine their identity—and take away their power.

- Think about our world today. What concepts, beliefs and “truths” permeate our western (and specifically American) culture? How deeply do people hold these truths?
- I mentioned Hollywood as a place where various beliefs have been “broadcast” to the entire world. What has been Hollywood's “message”? How influential has this “voice” been? Are there other “centers” of influence and teaching in the world? Where?
- How challenging is it to bring the message of Christ and the Gospel to people who hold so deeply to cultural or (false) religious beliefs?
- As we'll see in the text today, Paul is especially troubled by the many idols that he saw all over Athens. What idols do you see people worshipping today?
- What can Paul's example in Athens teach us about reaching people today for Christ?

Examination:

- Read **Acts 17:16-34**

- Paul entered Athens—known for its enlightened thinking, immense culture and majestic idols. What was Paul’s immediate reaction to Athens when he arrived? (v. 16)
- How did Luke summarize the city in verse 21?
- As we’ve seen in the cities that Paul has visited up to this point, he had a very definite strategy of first going to the synagogue to share the Gospel. Why do you think Paul almost always STARTED in the synagogue?
- In addition to the synagogue, where did Paul also “reason daily” with those who would listen? (v. 17)
- What branches of philosophy did Paul encounter? (v. 18)
- What did the people of Athens think of Paul?
- The philosophers took Paul to a place called “the Areopagus” (Mars Hill), which was an area where legislative and judicial councils met. What question did they ask Paul? (v. 19)
- What differences do you see in the reactions of the philosophers as opposed to the reactions of the Jews that we’ve seen in Paul’s journey to this point?
- How did Paul connect with the crowd? (v. 22) Why is this important?
- What inscription found on an altar did Paul use to begin his sermon? (v. 23)
- How is Paul’s sermon to the Philosophers different from the one that he preached to the Jews back in Acts 11:16-41?
- Do you see Paul’s NON-use of Scripture here as a strength or a weakness?
- Paul presented a great picture of God to the crowd. He proclaimed Him Creator, Provider, Sustainer, Ruler, Judge, and Father (vv. 24-31) How did those listening respond to these descriptions? (v. 32)
 - Take some time right now to thank God for how He fulfills these roles in YOUR life.
- How did Paul indicate his knowledge of Greek poetry? (vv. 28-29)
- Why did God create and provide everything for us? (vv. 26-27)
- Did anyone repent and believe after hearing Paul’s sermon? (v. 34)
 - How did the response in Athens compare with Berea? (17:12)
 - With Thessalonica? (17:4)
- What can Paul’s example in Athens teach us about reaching people today for Christ?
 - How should we treat people with different cultures and beliefs?
 - Could you share the Gospel with someone without quoting the Bible in a culturally relevant way?
- An idol is anything that is a God-substitute—any person or thing that occupies the rightful place of God in our lives. What idols are people serving today?
- In verse 24, Paul tells us that God “does not live in temples built by hands.” How do you explain why we call our church “God’s House” or why we say that God is with us at church? Has this view changed for you this past year?

Application:

As God looks at your heart, what idols sadden Him? Take a moment to repent of those idols.