

"18 And also some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him. Some were saying, "What would this idle babbler wish to say?" Others, "He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities,"--because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. 19 And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is which you are proclaiming? 20 "For you are bringing some strange things to our ears; so we want to know what these things mean." 21 (Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new.) 22 So Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects. 23 "For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, 'TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.' Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you. 24 "The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; 25 nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things; 26 and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, 27 that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; 28 for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His children.' 29 "Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man. 30 "Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, 31 because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead." 32 Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some began to sneer, but others said, "We shall hear you again concerning this." 33 So Paul went out of their midst. 34 But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them." Acts 17:18-34.

In many cultures including our own it is not unusual to hear someone ask "What is this new teaching you are proclaiming?" Many would like to claim that we are a Christian nation but this is not so. In many of our non-immigrant communities there is a total disconnect to the bible and any idea of biblical Christianity. I use the word biblical as an adjective because there are many forms of Christianity that recognize Christ in some way but deny the truth of what Scripture says about Christ. There are cults that recognize Christ, there is a form of cultural Christianity that assumes people are Christians because that was how they were reared and church becomes a central part of a communities social equation, but the Christ of the bible is missing.

The essence of what Paul is teaching in this passage is what we want to address today in light of the concerns we have for our community and many of the at risk behaviors that are causing grief for many families.

What Paul is essentially saying is that there are two fundamental ways of understanding the universe in which we live - in other words a worldview. One is from man's point of view and the other is from God's.

Mixed in man's point of view may be many various forms of expression including many religious ideas but a common thread with most of them is that man is essentially good by nature and that in the end a man's good will outweigh his bad and therefore he will be pleasing to God, who is defined by men as they desire him to be, and spend eternity in heaven. Now of course this would not apply to a true atheist who denies any deity or a pure nihilist.

A Nihilist is one who has a viewpoint that traditional values and beliefs are unfounded and that existence is senseless and useless. It is a doctrine that denies any objective ground of truth and especially of moral truths.

It is also related to a doctrine or belief that conditions in the social organization are so bad as to make destruction desirable for its own sake independent of any constructive program or possibility. Nihilism was the program of a 19th century Russian party advocating revolutionary reform and using terrorism and assassination. This has a true contemporary counterpart.

So how do we define morals or morality when we say we want to teach our children moral values. Well this term has pretty much been displaced by family values which is subject to a much broader range of interpretations.

Homosexuals and lesbians want to convince us that they should be married and adopt children and that they promote good family values. But this is only possible because they are attempting to redefine family by any norms whether biblically or secularly. A heterosexual family unit will promote what they call family values. But what does this mean?

In both settings the men or the women may engage in pornography, drunkenness, drug use, having a tongue that is full of gossip or backbiting or foul language as a normative expression. Ethnic hatred, or what we call racism may exist. All of these may

The world in which we live is actually an amoral place. It really does not care about morals in an absolute sense and so immorality is very much tolerated, by matters of degree. Immoral behavior, according to God's standard, is tolerated by the world depending on the circumstances of how one is affected by certain immorality. Often, if something immoral by God's standard has no direct effect on a person in the world, then it will be tolerated, as long as it does not interfere with one's personal choices or belief system. I'm OK-you're Ok just don't get in my face.

So this brings us back to the idea of worldview and Paul's message on Mars Hill.

Acts 17:8 And also some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him. Some were saying, "What would this idle babbler wish to say?" Others, "He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities,"--because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.¹⁹ And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is which you are proclaiming?²⁰" "For you are bringing some strange things to our ears; so we want to know what these things mean."²¹ (Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new.)

Two of the predominant worldviews of the Greeks were Epicureanism and Stoicism. They were different in details yet originated from men, therefore essentially the same.

Epicureans were followers of Epicurus (who died at Athens B.C. 270) or adherents of the Epicurean philosophy. This philosophy was a system of atheism, and taught men to seek as their highest aim a pleasant and smooth life. They have been called the "Sadducees" of Greek paganism. They, with the Stoics, ridiculed the teaching of Paul Ac 17:18 They appear to have been greatly esteemed at Athens.

Stoics were a sect of Greek philosophers at Athens, so called from the Greek word where they have been called "the Pharisees of Greek paganism." The founder of the Stoics was Zeno, who flourished about B.C. 300 He taught his disciples that a man's happiness consisted in bringing himself into harmony with the course of the universe. They were trained to bear evils with indifference, and so to be independent of externals. Materialism, pantheism, fatalism, and pride were the leading features of this philosophy. It appears that both still exist today.

Paul's teaching about Christ and the resurrection are fodder for their ridicule. That has not changed and there is a primary reason for it. Remember we said that for most people there is a belief that men are basically good by nature if they believe in some kind of a god and those who do not could care less about the nature of man.

When the Gospel of Jesus Christ is presented it forces someone to have to reason against what men want to believe about themselves and what God says we are. The only reason there is a need for a Savior who dies and is resurrected is because men are not basically good by nature - they are wicked and depraved, not from a human understanding of those terms but by God's own righteous and moral standards.

And if this is so, it is a quantum leap for people to acknowledge this because it is so foreign to what we want to believe about ourselves. In every religion other than biblical Christianity there is some way to get it worked out before meeting God. There is some process or ritual or other mechanism that will make me OK with God in the end. But the bible teaches this is impossible. It takes just what Jesus did to make it ok with god for us and therefore we must repent of our wickedness our sin and believe who Christ is and what He has done for those who do so.

This means there is nothing we can do to make it ok with God and we hate that notion which in the end means we hate God, which is exactly what the bible teaches. No man naturally and of himself loves God or seeks God according to God's standards.

Rom.1:18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness,¹⁹ ¶ because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them.²⁰ For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.²¹ For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. ²² Professing to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures. ²⁴ Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them.²⁵ For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

All men are in this category until God changes them by His mercy and His grace.

This is why we have the moral ambiguity we discussed earlier. Pornography,

homosexuality, drunkenness, abuse of our bodies with drugs, food or anything else, is ungodliness and unrighteousness from God's point of view. But we say this is how I get my pleasure, it does not make me a bad person.

So how do we address this? Let's look at what Paul did.

22* ¶ So Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects.

23* "For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, 'TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.' Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you.

He had observed the Athenian's culture and their religious culture was very prominent. Yet, he was able to discern their superstitious religious mindset. They had statues to all kinds of Gods for all kinds of reasons. He would have seen many temples and even the prostitutes of certain temples.

"First of all we observe that the Greek religion is a religion of purely natural growth. No prophet has initiated it, or claimed a new revelation to supplement the older views. It has come from primitive times without a visible break even down to the Athens of Plato. This explains at once why so many time-honored stories of the Olympic deities are very gross, and why the gods seem to give countenance to moral views which the best public opinion has long since called scandalous and criminal. The religion of Athens, in other words, may justly claim to be judged by its best, not by its worst; by the morality of Socrates, not of Homer.

Secondly, this religion is not a church, nor a belief, but is part of the government. Every Athenian is born into accepting the fact that Athena Polias is the divine warder of the city, as much as he is born into accepting the fact that it is his duty to obey the strategi in battle. To repudiate the gods of Athens, e.g. in favor of those of Egypt, is as much iniquity as to join forces against the Athenians if they are at war with Egypt;--the thing is sheer treason, and almost unthinkable. For countless generations the Athenians have worshipped the "Ancestral Gods." They are proud of them, familiar with them; the gods have participated in all the prosperity of the city. Athena is as much a part of Attica as gray Hymettus or white-crowned Pentelicus; and the very fact that

comedians, like Aristophanes, make good-natured fun of the divinities indicates that "they are members of the family."

Thirdly, notice that this religion is one mainly of outward reverence and ceremony. There is no "Athenian church"; nobody has drawn up an "Attic creed"--"I believe in Athena, the City Warder, and in Demeter, the Earth Mother, and in Zeus, the King of Heaven, etc." Give outward reverence, participate in the great public sacrifices, be careful in all the minutia of private worship, refrain from obvious blasphemies--you are then a sufficiently pious man. What you BELIEVE is of very little consequence. Even if you privately believe there are no gods at all, it harms no one, provided your outward conduct is pious and moral." A Day in Old Athens, by William Stearns Davis (1910)

It's like Michael Coreolone in The Godfather attending his kid's baptism while at the same time he has a hit squad whacking some other wiseguys.

Paul observes and notices however a shrine to the unknown god. Just in case they miss one they want to be covered. That is similar to people who get in trouble and mock God all the time and start saying "please, please get me out of this." Who are they talking to? Or crossing your fingers hoping something will go your way.

Then Paul proceeds to tell them about the unknown God and presents the biblical argument for who God is.

Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you.

24 "The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands;25 nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things;26 and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation,27 that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us;28 for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His children.'29 "Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man.

And this is what we do in preaching the Gospel. We present God and who He is as fully expressed in Jesus Christ. And there is no way of escaping the truth that is God's word that all men are held responsible for their sin.

30* "Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men

that all people everywhere should repent,^{31*} because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead."^{32*} ¶ Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some began to sneer, but others said, "We shall hear you again concerning this."^{33*} So Paul went out of their midst.^{34*} But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

Since Christ has come He is the fullest expression of who God is and based on the revelation of who He is and that He demands repentance and faith, all men will be judged by Christ. Christ is the New Covenant Lawgiver and the Savior of those who believe. Men have always been condemned by their own conscience as we read earlier in Romans 1. All through history, men could only be saved by Christ. However, Christ was never before as fully revealed.

In vs 30, "Overlooking" does not mean indulging or ignoring the ignorance of the nations. We know this because in Romans 2:12 Paul says, "All who have sinned without the law will perish without the law." In other words, judgment will be according to the knowledge at a person's disposal. But all people in the world have enough knowledge of God in nature and in their own conscience, which they do not live up to, that they will be judged on account of it. God does not indulge or ignore sin during the times of ignorance. That is not what "overlook" means.

It means that God took no notice of ignorance, as it were. Instead of tending to it, he looked the other way and let it be. This is confirmed by Paul's words in Acts 14:16. He is preaching to the unbelievers at Lystra and says,

In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways.

In other words, the times of ignorance God "overlooked" in the sense that he allowed them to walk in their own ignorant ways. He did not come forth in immediate judgment nor did he come forth with the revelation of the mystery of Christ. He let the nations go their own way, as he says in Acts 14:16.

And so I infer that the "times of ignorance" were part of God's sovereign plan for world history. Not that God instilled ignorance into innocent people, but that he withheld revelation from guilty people. And he did so according to the dictates of

The revelation of the mystery of Christ was kept hidden for ages. But when the iniquity of the nations was complete (Genesis 15:16) and when the fullness of the times was come (Gal. 4:4), God sent his Son into the world to die for sinners and to rise again. And that leads us to the second thing we learn from comparing the times of ignorance and the hiding of the mystery of Christ.

The times of ignorance are over, and from now on Jesus Christ is the necessary object of all saving faith.” John Piper

Without Christ there is no god.

After Paul spoke, some mocked, some left, some asked some more questions. The same thing occurs today.

Let’s finish with some practical application.

Human morality without a changed heart by God’s regeneration and miracle of rebirth is really no morality at all because it is only relevant to cultures and individuals.

Our children hear time and time again that drinking and driving is reckless behavior, yet their friends are killed every day doing it and some never learn a lesson, even if for nothing other than self-preservation. Reason and logic can to some degree spare us from some things.

People of all ages engage in dangerous sexual behavior despite and in spite of all the warnings.

All the psychologists and psychiatrists and counselors in the world will never have an absolute solution for these problems. Some of them are just as guilty as their patients of indulging in dangerous behavior.

It is difficult for us to admit that we are the way we are as God see us. It is difficult for us to say that we and our children put ourselves at risk because we have bad hearts. Our very nature is bent on destruction of itself.

Does this mean that we cannot, without God, ever do any good. No. It just means that doing that good will not get you any points with God, if you believe in God.

Do this mean that all of us are capable of doing what we see others deliberately do, horrible and despicable crimes against humanity that we just cannot understand. The answer is yes.

Our very nature, without a change of heart that only God can bring, is our master no matter how small or large the act of sin may be. The possibility for the worst is embedded in every human soul since Adam sinned in the Garden.

This goes against most of what the world believes and it is one of the reasons why so many walked away from Jesus, and from those who preach this truth, whether in Paul's day or ours.

And that is the real problem. Simply put we are all sinners regardless of how it is expressed publicly or privately. I am not a sinner because I have sinned. I am a sinner because I will sin. It is my very nature and it condemns me before God.

But God is gracious and merciful. Even though the Gospel is regarded as being nothing but foolishness according to man's wisdom, God's word says it is the power of God unto salvation. God is gracious to open our dead spiritual eyes and heart to know these truths when by His grace we have truly heard the truth that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior and that in Him alone is forgiveness for our sin and the opportunity to be born again to a living hope, for He is alive and those who believe are alive in Him. When we repent and believe and show a desire for more of God's truth, it is the evidence of a new heart and that God has done this work in us.

Can we solve some of the problems that disturb us so much with out a changed heart?

Yes, in a temporary way and it can be beneficial because of the wideness of God's mercy to all sinners. But only a changed heart by God's grace can help us toward a permanent solution.