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4-6-03

Wherever you go in the United States today one thing is obviously clear. You cannot turn on the radio; you can't turn on the television, or pick up a newspaper, for that matter you can't go to work or the grocery store without hearing that the United States of America is at war. It is a very obvious thing. Some people agree with the war, and some people disagree with the war. I was excited when I looked at your bulletin board and saw that you have some articles up about some of the great things that God is doing among our troops spiritually during this time; about all the neat things of our soldiers coming to give their alliance to the Lord Jesus Christ. I don't know how many of you have seen it, but in some of our major news magazines they have pictures of baptisms that are taking place, and that's exciting. It has been exciting for me to hear about how we as Southern Baptists, through our support of missions, actually have missionaries that even prior to the start of the war were on the borders of Iraq waiting to go in to bring relief and most importantly to share the gospel message with the people of Iraq. What an exciting and what a wonderful privilege it is, but you know I want you to understand today that though we are well aware that the United States of America is at war, there's another war that we are involved in that we tend to overlook. And it is a far greater war. See, the United States is not only in a war against terrorism, and we are not only in a war against Iraq, but we're in a spiritual war. When we look around, and realize the things that go on within our own borders. When we see that even after all these years, abortion continues in this country. When we see after all of these years and after all of the things that have happened and after September 11th that still over 90 percent of the state of New Hampshire is unchurched. When we see that even in places in the old south that's supposed to be the Bible belt like West Virginia has many cities that are 60 percent plus unchurched, we need to realize that we are at war spiritually within this country.

Open your Bibles to Acts 17. You see, the only way we're going to have an impact in the United States of America and the only way we are going to win this spiritual battle in the United States of America is to get a church in every community, and have the churches already within a community reach their community for the Lord Jesus Christ. You see the mission work of the church extends to the end of the world, yes, but it starts right here in this community and in the surrounding area. We must reach our communities for the Lord Jesus Christ. As we come to Acts 17, we find Paul on his missionary journey, he is forced to leave Berea. In fact, he has to leave or he is going to die. And so he sneaks out of town, and he goes to Athens, and he leaves some of his missionary team behind with the plan that they are going to wrap some things up and then they are going to meet him in Athens, and they'll continue on their missionary journey. As we come to Acts 17, he is waiting in Athens for his missionary team to catch up to him so they can continue the work that they had planned to do. But God moves upon his heart, and he is moved with compassion for the people of Athens. There are two primary things I want you to see from this text. Number one we find that Paul established a precedent.

“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. Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshipers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there. Then certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him. And some said, ‘What does this babblers want to say?’ Others said, ‘He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods,’ because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection. And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, ‘May we know what this

new doctrine is of which you speak? For you are bringing some strange things to our ears. Therefore we want to know what these things mean.” For all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing.” (Acts 17:16-21, NKJV)

As we look at the precedent that Paul sets before us in these verses, there are many things that we can consider, and there are many things that look very similar to the days in which we live. I want you to understand that though this country was once a Christian nation, it no longer is. You don't have to look very far to realize the fact that we have given ourselves over to idols. No, most people in America don't have a little statue that they worship, but the fact of the matter is that they worship themselves or they worship their possessions, but there are many things that come between the people of this country and an Almighty, Holy, and a Righteous God. As we come to the passage today, even though we could look at all the details, there are three things I want you to see from these verses. If we are going to reach our community, we must reach the religious community. Number two we are going to have to reach the business community, and number three we're going to have to reach the educational community. Did you see it there as we read through? Look at verse 17 again as we see what Paul begins to do. It says, “Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshipers.” If you've read through the book of Acts, you know that anytime Paul would enter a town if there was a synagogue, he would go there first. If there wasn't a synagogue he would go down to the river or some other place where other Jews and Gentile worshipers might come together to worship Yahweh, and he would go to that religious community, and he would look there, and he would start to share with them that the Messiah has come. Now I understand things are a little bit

different today, and I understand the he was dealing with people who believed in the Old Testament but didn't know about Jesus. He was coming to tell them about Jesus, but I want you to understand that our religious community is full of unbelievers. Every Sunday in America there are thousands of people who go to church who don't know Jesus as their Savior. There are thousands of people who go to church to try to earn their way to heaven. It's not by the things that we do, but it is according to His mercy that He saves us. And yet there are many who go to church every week for that very reason. They are religious people, but they're lacking a relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. Over the years that I've been in ministry it has been my privilege to see several people who were members of churches come to know the Lord Jesus. In fact, I've seen members of Baptist churches who had been members for a long time but had never trusted Jesus personally as their Savior come to faith in Him. In fact, I've had the opportunity of seeing two deacons come to know Jesus as their Savior, and I've had the opportunity to see a pastor come to know Jesus as his Savior. I even had the opportunity to see a professor at a Bible college come before the school and say, "You know what? I've been preaching it, but I never really gave my life to the Lord Jesus Christ."

If we are going to reach our community we have to start with the religious community. We've got to start right here within our own church of preaching and proclaiming the gospel and even among our friends and those in this community that are religious in nature understanding that there is a difference between religion and a relationship. But let's move on. In verse 17 we see not only must we reach the religious community, but we must reach the business community. Look what he says there in the latter part of the verse, ". . . and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there." He said, "In the marketplace daily with those who happened to

be there.” Do you understand the marketplace in Athens at this time was a place where you went to purchase the things that you needed? Maybe you went there to get some furs that you would make things out of, various things, but within that business section of Athens, Paul went into the business world to share the gospel with the Lord Jesus Christ. Listen to me, I want you to understand today that when you go to work, you may be going there to get a paycheck, but you’re really there as an ambassador of the Lord Jesus Christ. The way you do your job, the way you fulfill the tasks that are set before you should be a testimony to the Lord Jesus Christ. The way you spend your break time, the way you spend your lunch time, the things that you do with the people within the business world as you interact with them should be a testimony to the Lord Jesus Christ. One of the men in our church has really gotten a hold on this concept. He’s a car salesman to pay the bills, but he’s really selling cars so that he can share Jesus with other people. If you were to walk into the show room to his desk, you’d find his Bible lying there. He tells me over and over every week how he got through selling a car to someone, and they say, “Hey is that a Bible you got there?” And he’s being a witness to all those people he works with and the people he sells cars with, and he understands that we have to carry the gospel into the religious community but also into the business community.

Third, I want you to see that we must share the gospel within the educational community, even as the apostle Paul does in the precedent he establishes for us. Look at verse 18. It says,

“Then certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him. And some said, ‘What does this babbler want to say?’ Others said, ‘He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods,’ because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection.”

Stop there just a minute. Did you catch that about the foreign gods and Jesus and the resurrection? They had no idea who Jesus was, and they didn't understand this concept of resurrection at all. As Paul was telling them and confronting them with the truth of Jesus Christ, they thought he was talking about foreign gods, plural. One of them's name was Jesus and the other one's name was the resurrection. They completely misunderstood what the Apostle was trying to say, and so they said, "We want to hear more about this." Look at verse 19.

"And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, 'May we know what this new doctrine is of which you speak? For you are bringing some strange things to our ears. Therefore, we want to know what these things mean.' For all the Athenians and foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing."

See, what Athens was known for - though it was a commerce center, though it was a place of extreme wickedness - what it was known for most was for their educational system. Their philosophical system. You see, in the Areopagus was a place where you would go if you were invited, and you were able to share your philosophy on life, your world view. And you could stand, you could proclaim it, and all of the key philosophers of the city would listen. If they thought that it was worth listening to, they'd invite you back, and they would continuously invite you back as long as they liked it. And there would be debates and discussions about philosophy, and education would just abound within the place. If over time your arguments seemed very strong they might even promote you to be one of the judges who would judge the other

philosophies that would be presented within the place. Paul was working within the business community, but now all of a sudden God opened the door for him to move into this philosophical - this educational community. So he goes, and he shares the message of the Lord Jesus Christ. Throughout all of human history it has been understood that if you want to change a nation, you change it through the education of their children. It's a fact. It's happened right under our noses within the United States of America. You see, you can look back over history in men. In Moses's day they tried to train him in all the ways of Egypt. You look back throughout Israel's history where they would take and they would teach the Word of God to their children, and by the age of 15 at the latest, a young man should be able to quote the first five books of the scriptures and be able to quote them verbatim. Why? Because they understood, train them while they're young. In modern history we can consider what's happened in China in the Communist regime of training their children from babies, from infants, in the communist philosophy. It happened in the USSR during my growing up years, and it's happened right here in the United States with secular humanism.

Folks, I want you to understand that you've been affected by secular humanism, and you've been affected by evolution, because it has been so much a part of our educational world. If we want to impact this country, we've got to take back the educational system. We've got to find ways, creative ways, to getting in there and sharing the message of Jesus Christ within that educational system. It is so critical that we follow the apostle Paul's example. It's so critical that we learn to follow the process or the precedent that he laid before us, and we must understand that it's not just a "come and see" but it is a "go and tell." You know so many times when we think of church, and we think of religion we understand as Christians that our job is to be a lighthouse,

and we think of the church as the lighthouse. We're here preaching the message of Jesus, and we're shining out the beacon into the sea of sin around us, and we see what's going on out there, and they can come safely to Jesus, because we're a lighthouse. But if you know anything about seamen . . . though many a seaman have been saved by the lighthouse, many would have been lost if it wasn't for the U.S. Coast Guard going out where they are and rescuing them, plucking them out of the water. And folks, you and I must maintain the lighthouse of the church. So we must go, and we must enter the educational system. We must enter the business system, and we must get out there and reach our community and rescue the perishing, plucking them out of the sin that they're drowning in, sharing the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ with them.

In our passage we see that Paul established a precedent, but I want you to move on with me beginning in verse 22 to the end of the chapter where we see Paul establishes a specific three-step process, a process for reaching our community. Look at verse 22:

“Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, ‘Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you: God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. Nor is He worshiped with men’s hands, as though He needed anything since, He gives to all life, breath, and all things. And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek

the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, “For we are also His offspring.” Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man’s devising. Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.’ And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, while others said, ‘We will hear you again on this matter.’ So Paul departed from among them. However, some men joined him and believed among them Dionysius the Areopagite, and a woman named Damaris and others with them.”

In this section first we see Paul establishing a process for reaching our community that you and I can understand and take and begin to use. Paul starts where people are. Second, we see that Paul shares what people need, and third Paul sees how people respond. Look at how Paul starts where people are. In verses 22 and 23 we find the apostle Paul comes in, and gets the opportunity to speak. He stands up, and everyone in the Areopagus is waiting to hear what the Apostle has to say. And he says, “Now I have perceived that you are very religious.” He started where they were. “You are a very religious kind of people even so much that it’s moved to superstition, and you are so afraid that you’ve missed the God that I saw an altar, and it said ‘To the Unknown God.’ An altar that’s out there. Because you want to make sure that you don’t miss any. I mean, you want to make sure that if there’s a god out there and you missed him that

you somehow can give honor to him because you are afraid of him, and you're superstitious." And he says, "I understand that religiosity that you are involved in." But I want you to understand though Paul begins where the people were, he moved very quickly to tell them what they needed.

It's important that we learn to begin where people are. Paul had already told them about Jesus and the resurrection and they kinda scratched their heads, and they really didn't know what he was talking about. You and I do the same kind of thing. We use church language, and we'll see someone and we say, "Man, you been saved?" And they just look at you like saved from what? They don't understand what we're talking about. We have to learn to start where people are. These people were so afraid they were worshipping all these foreign gods, and they didn't know what to believe or what to think, and they even had this altar "To an Unknown God." Paul understands this, and he builds a bridge to them understanding their baggage but very quickly moving to the truth.

The apostle Paul comes and says, "Now I understand you have an altar to the unknown god. I am going to declare Him to you. And by the way, He is the only true God." In fact he starts, and he says, "He is the Creator of everything that exists." He moves on to say, "It's in Him we live and move and have our being, so He is not only the Creator of everything but He is the sustainer of everything." Paul said if He were to turn His back, we wouldn't breathe. We wouldn't be able to live because He created it all, and He sustains it all. He keeps it together. God did create us. He created us in His image, and we shouldn't think that God is something we make out of gold and silver with our hands and by the artistry and the devising of men.

He is an awesome, awesome God. Paul began where the people were, but he also spoke about the need that the people had. And you and I need to do the same thing. We need to look for those bridge building opportunities. But very quickly we need to move to the gospel presentation. We must never compromise the truth of God's Word.

We can share that message with other people. We begin where people are. We share what people need, and third we must see the results. Look with me at verse 32 through 34.

“And when they heard of the resurrection and the dead, some mocked, while others said, ‘We will hear you again on this matter.’ So Paul departed from among them. However, some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius, the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.”

Paul understood something that you and I need to understand. The results are none of our business. God has called you and me as believers. God has called the church to not only pray for missions and give to missions but to go on mission to reach this community for Jesus Christ. He has called you to share the message in the educational system, in the religious system, in the business system, and everywhere that you possibly have an opportunity, but the results are up to Him. Throughout all of human history the fact is some mock at the truth. They do today. They did in Paul's day. They did in Jesus' day and Elijah's and Moses's and Abraham's, and throughout all of history some mock at the truth. Some just contemplate the truth. They say, “I want to hear about it again.” That's what it said there in the text: “some mocked him. Some

said, ‘We’ll hear you again. I want to think about it. I want to just take it in for a little while, but some believed.’” Some believed. The results are up to God. See what Paul did? Paul was faithful to start where people are. Paul was faithful to share what people need, and Paul was faithful just to wait and see how people would respond, leaving the results up to God.

Paul’s given us a precedent that we must follow. We have to reach into the religious community, the educational community, the business community. Paul has given us a process to follow. Start where people are. Share what people need. See how people will respond.