

Lessons From Mars Hill

Introduction. Athens has long been considered one of the most beautiful cities in the world, and certainly the most beautiful in Greece. In 50 A.D., the apostle Paul made a visit to this beautiful city which was wholly given to idolatry. In fact, it is said that Athens had more idols and images than all of the rest of Greece put together. Petronius, a contemporary of Paul, said concerning Athens, "Our region is so full of deities that you may more frequently meet with a god than a man." It is easy to see why Paul's spirit was "provoked" when he saw the city of Athens and its false gods.

However, Athens provided a great opportunity for the gospel. The city had within it many Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. The Epicureans believed that the point of living was pleasure, believed that matter is eternal, denied the immortality of the soul, denied any idea of judgment, and denied the idea that the gods exercised any providential control over human affairs. The Stoics, who followed Zeno and met on porches or "stoa," believed that the world was created by Zeus, believed that all was governed by fate, believed that self-denial was the highest end in life, and denied the idea of the immortal soul.

Paul found himself preaching to an audience that did not even believe in the true and living God! We must pray for our brethren in foreign lands who also must overcome obstacles of ignorance just to get to the gospel! The needs of these Greeks made this sermon very different than many in the book of Acts. Paul had to make them understand about God first, and then teach them about Jesus. He got that opportunity at the Areopagus (Acts 17:16-34).

There were 4 famous hills within the city: Lycabettus, Acropolis, Pnyx, and Areopagus. The Greek god of war was called "Ares" and the hill dedicated to him was called the "hill of Ares," or in the Greek, "Areopagus." The Romans had the same gods as the Greeks but gave them different names. The god of war that the Greeks called "Ares," the Romans called "Mars." Therefore, the Areopagus was often called "Mars Hill." The Areopagus was also where the supreme court of justice was held. It was one of the most sacred and reputable courts that had ever existed in the Gentile world. It is very likely that Paul presented his lesson before the twelve men in the council of the Areopagus.

I. ***Religious Fervor And Spiritual Zeal Does Not Assure Acceptance By God***

- A. God made known through the apostle Paul that these people's zeal and fervor was absolutely nothing in the light of their ignorance (vss. 22-23).

1. Paul observed that they were very religious.
 - a) The Greek word used here is found only one time in the New Testament. It is a compound word carrying with it the idea of being dedicated to something religiously, charged up about something of a "religious" character, or greatly addicted to religious practices.
 - b) It is the combination of two other Greek words -- one meaning "fear" and another meaning "higher being."
2. But zeal and fervor are not enough.
 - a) God wants dedication to Him according to knowledge.
 - b) That is why we are given the injunction of worship in John 4:24.
- B. This is a common theme in the Bible. When we pay homage and reverence to God, He wants us to understand what is taking place.
 1. Paul would stress this again in Romans 10:1-3.
 2. Jesus Himself stressed it first according to Matthew 7:21-23.
 3. What Paul spoke of can perhaps be illustrated by the phrase, "offering the sizzle, not the steak."
 - a) This is what some people expect of God when they think they can show a bunch of zeal with little or no concentration on whether they are abiding in the truth.
 - b) They expect God to be so overcome with the sizzle, that He notices nothing about the quality of the steak. It will not be so.

II. ***God Intends That All People And All Nations Worship Him The Same Way***

- A. Paul argues that divine worship is not established for God, but for the use of His creation (vss. 24-26). The central portion of the discourse was to convince them of the folly of idolatry, and thus lead them to repentance.
- B. A common complaint against the people of God today is that they beat a dead horse.
 1. Some unjustly claim that we preach about the same things; we will not get past baptism, the one true church, and how to worship.
 2. It is not that we put any particular emphasis on those subjects, but God does in His divine message (2 Peter 1:12-13).
- C. These people needed to understand that it did not matter what nation from which they came. God made them all and set their boundaries and demanded the same devotion, in the same way, according to the same teachings.
 1. It is interesting that Paul did not come upon these foreigners and tolerate their teachings because they were foreign to both the Jewish religion and the gospel.

2. In fact, it grieved him to find people worshiping in a way contrary to God's prescribed way of worship.
 3. These verses show that God made all men and His intention was that there would be a uniformity in praise offered to Him.
- D. There are people that you constantly discuss Bible passages with and the discussion inevitably ends up the same way: they accuse you of being caught up in the same areas of the Bible. They want to focus on the "deeper teachings" of the gospel, such as His grace.
1. However, these people are not mature (Hebrews 5:12). They literally need to be taught again.
 2. If people would accept the plain teachings of the scriptures concerning salvation and the worship and work of the Lord's church, we could talk them about other subjects!

III. ***In Order To Find God One Must Seek God***

- A. All of mankind originated from one man, Adam (vss. 27-29).
1. He did that so His people would desire Him, and in desiring they would seek Him, and in seeking Him they would find Him.
 2. We are created for His glory (Isaiah 43:7). In Isaiah 55:6-9, God said that we should seek Him while He may be found and call upon Him when He is near.
- B. Why seek God?
1. Because we need reconciliation (Isaiah 59:1-2). Our sins have separated us from a loving, holy God (1 John 4:8; 1 Peter 1:16).
 2. Because He desires reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18-19). Several interesting observations can be made:
 - a) People will put on their best suit, prepare a professional looking resume, and conduct themselves in such a way during an interview so the president of a particular organization will want them.
 - b) People will engage in every type of frolic from drugs to debauchery just to have their peer group want them.
 - c) People will turn themselves into complete clowns to get members of the opposite sex to date them.
 - d) Yet, the Creator of the Universe wants all people, even though we are quite "unwantable" and most do not even care.
- C. How are we to seek Him?
1. Through the written word (John 6:46).
 - a) Many people search elsewhere for spiritual communion with God -- even Christians get bored with the Bible and begin delving into the junk that fills the book racks today.
 - b) Too many are turning to the eloquent, yet ridiculous writings that are completely devoid of any spiritual substance because they

have created a religion of their own mind and put it down on paper.

2. With a whole heart (Jeremiah 29:10-13).
 - a) An honest and sincere heart is the only one who will take the word and rightly handle it so as to travel the narrow pathway to heaven.
 - b) The sincere heart will not arrogantly base all things religious upon the whims and fancies of the mind.

IV. *The Time Of Repentance Is Here*

- A. God's love, over a period of thousands of years, has preserved man through many a period of ignorance (vs. 30). God tolerated polygamy, divorce, and of course, idolatry. However, it does not mean that He approved of these sins.
- B. No more toleration. His yoke is easy and His burden is light (Matthew 11:30). There is no excuse to the one who will not bear it.
 1. Every minute that the Almighty God gives us is considered by Him to be a minute of opportunity.
 2. He will hold us responsible if we did not use it as such. Let us not be like Felix who was presented with the truth but passed up his convenient time (Acts 24:25).

V. *God Will Judge The World Through Christ*

- A. Paul concludes his dealings with the Athenians by telling them how God will conclude His dealings with the people of the earth (vs. 31).
- B. He will judge at a certain time.
 1. It is appointed unto all men to die once, and after this comes the judgment (Hebrews 9:27).
 2. We may be able to avoid our appointment with the dentist and we may be able to postpone our appointment with the doctor, but our appointment to be judged by God is a divine appointment that we will all keep.
- C. He will judge the world in righteousness.
 1. Many judges, if you are a prominent member of society or have had an otherwise clean record, will be lenient in their judgment.
 2. But God is the perfect Judge. And we can have eternal life but we will still be judged for what we have done (2 Corinthians 5:10; Ecclesiastes 12:13-14).
- D. He will judge the world through Jesus Christ.
 1. God has given Christ the authority to execute judgment upon mankind (John 5:22-30).
 2. Jesus is the righteous Judge and Paul said we can be assured of this by His resurrection from the dead.

Conclusion. The Athenian's response is stated in vss. 32-34. Some sneered, some wanted to continue studying, while others took up their cross and followed the Lamb of God. The study of the Athenian's response illustrates the wide response of mankind to the gospel. But the more prudent question this day is, "What will you do with those same truths?"