



LESSON 37

Paul preaches in Athens

ACTS 17:16-34



The gospel is true.



***“What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you”
(Acts 17:23b).***

Supporting Truths

1. The gospel is about the true God.
2. The gospel calls all people to repent.
3. The gospel is proven by the resurrection.
4. Christians should explain why the gospel is true.
5. Christians should share the gospel with anyone who will listen.

Objectives

1. List up to six truths about God that require humans to respond to Him.
2. Explain why people need to repent.
3. Explain why the resurrection proves the gospel true.
4. Describe how Paul connected to the Athenians without compromise.
5. Describe to whom and where Paul preached.

STUDY THE BIBLE LESSON

Paul preaches in Athens • Acts 17:16–34



Lesson Summary

While waiting in Athens, Paul was very upset by all the idols he saw. So he began to talk about the true God with anyone who would listen. Eventually, he got a chance to speak at the Areopagus, Athens' famous court that often considered moral and religious matters. There he preached about who God really is. Since God is a personal creator who is very much involved with this world, He is calling all people to repent before judgment comes.

Spotlight on the Gospel

The foundation of the gospel is the truth about God. Since God is the creator, He owns all things. Since He cares for all things, He also deserves all our honor and praise. Since He is a person, He has a standard of right and wrong. And since He is completely in control, we will have to answer to Him sooner or later. Therefore, the gospel calls us to repent. Then, once you have repented, it calls you to go and explain the truth to others.

LAST WEEK



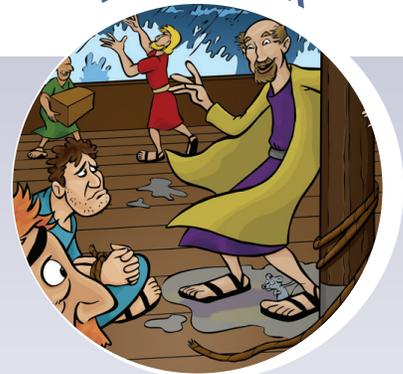
The Philippian jailer is saved
Acts 16:16–40

THIS WEEK



Paul preaches in Athens
Acts 17:16–34

NEXT WEEK



God protects Paul
Acts 27:1–44

THE GOSPEL SPREADS TO THE REMOTEST PART OF THE EARTH

Lesson Commentary

The gospel is true.

The mission of every Christian is to show how excellent Jesus is, both in words (1 Pet 2:9) and in behavior (2:12). But sometimes it's hard to know even where to start. How do you know what to say and when to say it? The book of Acts provides many examples, and Acts 17 in particular provides ten principles for communicating the gospel to others.

Paul was prepared for every opportunity (17:16–23)

The first principle is to have the right motivation. Paul had just escaped from Berea after Jews from Thessalonica had chased him out of town (Acts 17:13). So Paul was waiting in Athens while Silas and Timothy continued to minister in Berea (17:14–15). To some, a chance to visit Athens would have been the opportunity of a lifetime. Athens was still the cultural capital of the world. But Paul was not in awe of the city's greatness. Rather, he was provoked by all the city's *idols* (17:16), for *images or statues of pretend gods* dishonor the true God (Isa 40:18–19) and cause

only harm to those who worship them (Hab 2:18). To be a true witness of the gospel, you must want God to be honored and people to be rescued.



THINK ABOUT IT

Athens was the religious center of Greece, with streets full of statues of gods.

Second, be prepared to talk about Jesus in a way that makes sense. Paul took the time to reason with those he spoke to (Acts 17:17). This means that the gospel is something that can be shown to be true. Sharing the gospel is not just giving your opinion. It's showing why it's true, answering objections, and showing why other beliefs are false. That takes preparation, but the conversation itself also takes time. With preparation and patience, Christians ought to present the gospel in a reasonable way.

Third, seek every opportunity. That starts by taking the initiative to find opportunities. Paul did not wait around hoping for someone to come talk to him.

Instead, he went anywhere people would listen. As he always did, he went to the Jews first (17:17; Rom 1:16). After that, he went into the marketplace to talk with anyone who would listen. He also took advantage of the Athenian's well-known love to hear anything new (Acts 17:19–21).

Fourth, connect. When Paul spoke to Jewish audiences, he started with Scripture (17:10–13). It was something both he and the Jews knew and accepted. But the Athenians knew nothing of the Hebrew Scriptures. So even though Paul taught them biblical truths, he did not quote specific verses. Instead, Paul connected with the Athenians by starting with the two things they all agreed about: there is a God, and the Athenians did not know Him (17:22–23). Later on, he also connected by quoting a Greek poet named Aratus (17:29).

Yet while connecting, fifth, do not compromise. Epicureanism and Stoicism had false ideas about gods and life (17:18). Epicureans believed the gods were not interested in the human world. They also believed humans were purely material, so that when they die, they simply cease to exist. Therefore, they wanted their one chance at life to be as pleasant as possible. In contrast, for the Stoics, the world itself was god. So for them, success in life was being able to face whatever nature might throw at them, without giving in to pain or pleasure. To complicate things even more, some Athenians thought Paul was talking about two new gods: one named Jesus and one named Anastasis, the Greek word for resurrection (17:18). Paul could not speak to them as he spoke to Jews. Jews already had a decent idea of who God is, so Paul mostly talked to them about the Messiah. But in Athens, he had to focus on the most basic question: who is God?

Paul preached the true God (17:24–29)

That is the sixth principle: show who God is. This is the starting point of the gospel, and Paul began at the very beginning (Gen 1:1): God is the creator (Acts 17:24a). Creation is clear evidence that God exists and has great power (Rom 1:20). The world had a beginning, so something (or someone) that was not

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part of the world had to have caused it. Then, since God is creator, that means He is also owner—He is Lord of heaven and earth (Acts 17:24b). Because He made it all, it exists for Him and He has the right to do what He wants with it (Ps 24:1).

Already this God is different than the Stoic and Epicurean versions. But Paul shows even more differences. Unlike the Stoic world-god, God is **transcendent**—He is greater than the world, not a part of it, and not dependent on it (Acts 17:24c–25a; Ps 50:9–12). And unlike the uninvolved Epicurean gods, God is very involved (Acts 17:25b). He is involved by being **sovereign, completely in control of the world** (17:26; Dan 4:34–35). And

He is involved by being **immanent**: He is present in the world and so close that anyone who seeks Him will find Him (Acts 17:27–28a; Ps 139; Jer 29:13).

THINK ABOUT IT

We are accountable to God because He created and owns us (Ps 24:1–2).



Finally, God is a **person—a living being who can make decisions about right and wrong**. This seems obvious, but many people want an impersonal god. If God were only a force, like a law of nature, then no one could say one thing is right and another thing is wrong. For example, a rock is not right or wrong for falling when you drop it. That is just the way gravity works. If God is just a force or an idol made from metal, then He cannot tell us what to do. But God is a person, and we know that by looking at ourselves (Acts 17:28b–29). We are alive, and life does not come from something that is not alive. We have a sense of right and wrong, and that cannot come from something that has no sense of right and wrong. Even Greek poetry acknowledged this—so clearly God is not an idol of wood or stone!

Paul warned people to respond (17:30–31)

This leads to the seventh principle: warn about coming judgment (17:31a). Since God is the personal creator and owner of the world, He deserves all our honor and

love and obedience. He owns us, and we exist for Him (Rom 11:36). But we have not lived for Him, so He has the right and the power to judge His creatures for rebelling against Him.

Judgment leads to the eighth principle: call to repentance (Acts 17:30). This means challenging and comforting. It is a challenge because it is calling people to respond, and it's requiring them to admit their sin, humble themselves, and seek forgiveness (Isa 55:7). But it is comforting because it is saying there is hope. There is a way to escape punishment in the end.

But are we really sure any of this is true? The answer is the ninth principle: tell about the resurrection (Acts 17:31b). The evidence for the resurrection is massive, and despite centuries of attempts, no one has been able to explain it away. There really was a man named Jesus, He really died, and He really came back to life (1 Cor 15:3–5). That is proof that Jesus is who He says He is, which means He will come back to judge just as He said He would (John 5:22–29).

THINK ABOUT IT

The gospel is true—the resurrection proves it!



The people responded (17:32–34)

The tenth principle is this: expect people to respond in different ways. Some made fun of Paul (Acts 17:32a). Some wanted to hear more, maybe out of sincere interest or maybe just to be entertained (17:32b). Finally, some truly believed (17:33–34). Still, it seems the church in Athens remained small. That's not surprising. In places where people pride themselves on their own knowledge, they are not likely to humble themselves before God. And where people enjoy talking about all kinds of new ideas, they rarely commit to believing anything. But Paul had been a faithful witness, and for a few Athenians, it made an eternal difference.

Lesson Outline

The gospel is true.

AGES 3–5 LESSON OUTLINE



1. God is real and in control (17:22–29).
2. God will judge (17:31).
3. So repent (17:30).

AGES 6–11 LESSON OUTLINE



1. Paul was prepared for every opportunity (17:16–23).
 - Paul was provoked by idols (17:16).
 - Paul reasoned wherever he could in Athens (17:17–18).
 - Paul connected to the Athenians without compromise (17:19–23).
2. Paul preached the true God (17:24–29).
 - God is creator (17:24a).
 - God is owner (17:24b).
 - God is transcendent (17:24c–25).
 - God is sovereign (17:26).
 - God is immanent (17:27–28a).
 - God is personal (17:28b–29).
3. Paul warned people to respond (17:30–31).
 - Repent before God judges (17:30–31a).
 - The resurrection proves that Jesus will judge (17:31b).
4. The people responded (17:32–34).
 - Some made fun of Paul (17:32a).
 - Some wanted to hear more (17:32b).
 - Some believed (17:33–34).





Lesson Questions

Use these questions to teach or to review this week's lesson.



Ages 3–5 Lesson Questions

- 1. When Paul was in Athens, where did he preach?**
The Areopagus, also called Mars Hill.
- 2. What did Paul spend most of his time teaching the Athenians about?**
About who God really is.
- 3. Since God is real and in control, what should you do?**
Repent before God judges.
- 4. Did the Athenians believe Paul?**
A few did, but others laughed and others just wanted to keep discussing.



Ages 6–11 Lesson Questions

- 1. What motivated Paul to preach in Athens?**
He was provoked by all the idols—they offended God's honor and they were deceiving people.
- 2. How did Paul connect with the Athenians?**
He started with what they all agreed on, then he spent most of his time talking about the basic truth they didn't understand—who God is.
- 3. What difference does it make that God is the creator?**
It means He is also the owner. If He created us, then we exist for Him.
- 4. Is God part of the world?**
No. He is transcendent—bigger and greater and existing outside of the world.
- 5. Is God so far outside the world that He is not involved in the world?**
No. God is also immanent. He is everywhere in the world and very close to us all the time.
- 6. What is one way to know that God is not an idol made out of wood, stone, or metal?**
Because humans are real, living people. Real, living people cannot come from things that are not alive or personal.
- 7. Did Paul just give the Athenians information, or did he challenge them to do something about it?**
Paul urged them to repent because judgment is coming.
- 8. How many of the ten principles for sharing the gospel can you remember?**
(See the lesson commentary).

Lesson Activities

Choose from the following ideas to introduce, illustrate, and apply this week's lesson.

AGES 3–5



INTRODUCE

CURIOUS ATHENIANS

Are the children familiar with Curious George, the curious brown monkey who appears in a series of books written by Hans Augusto Rey and Margret Rey? This monkey's curiosity takes him on all sorts of adventures. Before the lesson, read a short book featuring Curious George, and talk about what it means to be curious (excited to learn something new). In today's lesson, the apostle Paul meets some curious people: the Athenians.

GOSPEL ABCS

Are the children learning their ABCs? Bring some magnetic refrigerator letters to class and see if the children can correctly identify them. Can the children pick out the letters their first and last names begin with? Talk about why it's important to learn your ABC's—they are the foundation of the English language. We learn them first because they are used to form sounds and words. In today's lesson, Paul teaches the Athenians a different set of ABC's. He teaches the Athenians basic truths about God. They needed to know these so they could understand their need for salvation.



ILLUSTRATE

GOD IS THE OWNER

Paul proclaims that God is Lord (owner) of heaven and earth (Acts 17:24). Because we belong to God, He is right to tell us what we can and cannot do, and we must listen to Him. This truth may be illustrated with one of the children's Bibles. Do they have their name written in it? This shows it belongs to them. They bring it to class, and they bring it home. They get to decide how it's used. You might also use one of the children's coats or other garments that has their name written on it to show ownership.

IDOLS VS. GOD

Bring pictures of idols to class (these can be found in Bible encyclopedias, magazines like National Geographic, or on the Internet). Explain that idols are images or statues that people worship as pretend gods. Talk about ways idols are different from God: idols are made by man, they cannot think, speak, hear, or act, they are not alive, they actually harm those who worship them (Ps 115:8), etc. In contrast, God was made by no one, He does not have a body, He is all-powerful, He knows the future, and He hears our prayers.



APPLY

WE MOVE

See Year 3 Craft Book, Book 2.

Materials: Craft sheet, scissors, crayons, brads.

Directions: Color the different parts of the body of the boy. Cut them. Unite everything with the brads.

We Move
See Year 3 Craft Book, Book 2



TEACH THE BIBLE LESSON

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AGES 6–8



INTRODUCE

THAT THEY SHOULD SEEK GOD

God revealed Himself in man's conscience and the physical world (Rom 1:19–20; 2:25) in order that man might "seek" after Him (Acts 17:27). Prepare the children for this truth with a game of "Marco-Polo" in the classroom. The blindfolded child calls out "Marco," and the rest of the class answers "Polo." Once the blindfolded child finds a child, the game is over.

THAT IS AN IDOL?

Idols are objects used to represent fake gods. When we think of idols, we often picture something carved out of wood or stone in the shape of an animal or person. These are the kind of idols we'll hear about in our lesson today. However, an idol can take many different forms. Show the children a basketball, golf club, textbook, video game controller, money, and toys. What do all these different things have in common? They all have the potential to become an idol in our lives. An idol is simply something besides God that we trust to give us happiness or security. It is something we love more than God, giving it more time, attention, and resources than God.



ILLUSTRATE

LIKE A PLANT

To illustrate man needing God, bring in a potted plant. Show how the plant needs water, soil, and the sun to live. It cannot survive on its own. Humans are like that plant. We need things God gives us. God, however, does not need anything to survive. He is transcendent, greater than the world, not a part of it, and not dependent on it.

PET OWNERSHIP

Do the children have pets? What kinds? Pets are a great example of ownership. Our pets belong to us: we name them, care for them, give them commands, and they respond to us. Oftentimes, we even place a collar around their neck to show that they belong to us. In a similar way, we belong to God. He owns us because He created us. This means that it is right for Him to give us commands and for us to obey Him. And it is also right for Him to judge us when we sin, for since He is our owner, we are accountable to Him.



APPLY

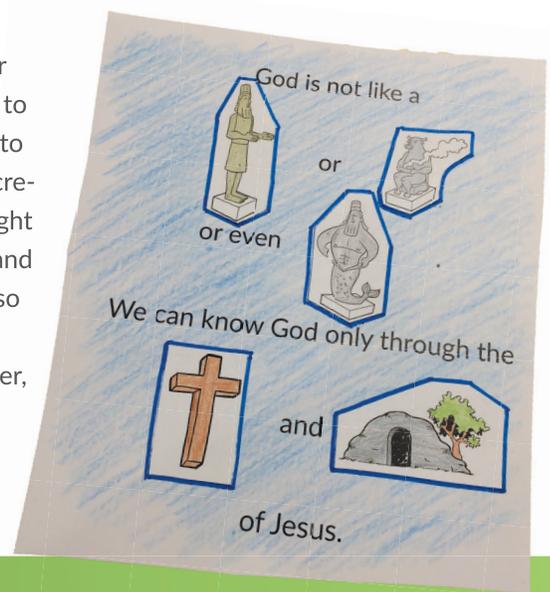
THE UNKNOWN GOD

See Year 3 Craft Book, Book 2.

Materials: Craft sheets, crayons, glue stick, scissors.

Directions: Color the images and the "Unknown God" craft page. Cut the images and glue them in the right space. (Kids can décor the craft with stickers.)

The Unknown God
See Year 3 Craft Book, Book 2



AGES 9–11



INTRODUCE

STOP!

How do you respond when you see someone doing or about to do something that will cause them great physical harm? Maybe a little brother or sister about to stick a metal fork in an outlet? Or someone driving the wrong way on a one-way street? Do you warn them, or do you just pass on by without saying anything? In today's lesson, Paul encounters a group of people doing something far more dangerous—worshiping idols. And he cannot stay silent, for “his spirit was provoked within him” (Acts 17:16). Do you have the same response when you encounter someone worshiping something other than the true God?

NEW KID IN SCHOOL

There always seems to be quite a buzz when a new student comes to school. Everyone is interested in where they came from and what they like to do. Some children might be hopeful that the new child will become their friend. In today's lesson, we are going to meet a group of people who loved to talk about new things. They would gather to talk about new religions or philosophies or ideas.



ILLUSTRATE

YOU ARE NOT MY DAD!

When you do something wrong, who punishes you: your parents or someone else's parents? Why do your parents discipline you and not another's? You belong to them, and God has given them the responsibility to raise up their (and only their) children (Eph 6:4). In a similar way, we are accountable to God because we belong to Him (He created us).

AREOPAGUS

The Areopagus was a courthouse. Paul was not on trial, but he did stand before the officials of the court to state his religious views. Compare it to the Supreme Court, which has a panel of judges and not just one.



APPLY

WHY DO PEOPLE WORSHIP IDOLS?

People worship idols because they are unwilling to submit to who God is (Rom 1:21–23). Ultimately, they kick God off the throne of their hearts and exalt themselves by placing an idol there instead of God. Since the idol is only the work of their imagination, they ultimately exalt not an idol but themselves. This is like a child who doesn't want to obey his father. Because he wants to escape his father's commands, the child says to the father, “You are not my father. I will no longer listen to you.” The child then continues in his rebellion by taking an action figure and saying to it, “You are my father. I will do whatever you tell me.” However, no matter what the child says or does, he cannot change the fact that his father is his father. The idolater is even more foolish than this child.