Acts 17:16-34 - DiCicco

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[0:00] In the 1900s, there was this movie called The Matrix. A man named Neo learns that he has lived his life stuck inside a computer program.

! He's offered the choice. Take one pill and leave the lie behind to wake up in the real world or take the other and forget everything he's discovered.
I should just say here, if anyone offers you a pill or two pills, don't take either one of them. Go in the other direction. But more recently, Ryan Reynolds was in a movie where he also played a character stuck inside a computer program.
Except that in this movie, he's not human. He's a piece of code that somehow comes to life inside the game. So for him, there is no escape. There is no reality outside of the game.
And his moment of decision comes in the movie, not like in The Matrix, as an escape from the lie to find the truth. His moment of decision is in making his own truth.
[1:06] And finding meaning in this life that is inherently meaningless. Because it is a game and he is a piece of computer code. These movies have come out 21 years apart.

And I think in some ways they accurately represent the shift in the way a lot of people in our culture think about truth. Less and less people see truth as something out there.
Something to be discovered. And more and more they define truth as something in here. Something to be made. And the advice given in the Ryan Reynolds movie is essentially, live your truth.
I think the question that Christians face today, maybe especially Christians who have been going through the book of Acts and have been feeling this burden to join in the work of the gospel as it spreads throughout the world, is how to live for truth in a world convinced that maybe there isn't such a thing.
We love facts in our world. Truth in that way is very important to us. Get your facts right. But anyone can own a fact. If there is a truth, it is essentially and inherently exclusive.
[2:17] If you're here and you're not convinced of the truth of Christianity or that there is any truth at all, I hope this passage in particular might be persuasive to you. Because it speaks exactly to this.

But as Christians, we hear Luke as he speaks to Christians. And Luke, as we will see, he presents Paul, a preacher, surrounded by philosophers, sort of standing in the marketplace of ideas of the ancient world.
And Paul, with full confidence, provides us with an example of one who believes that the truth is unbeatable. That in the marketplace of ideas, truth enjoys a strong monopoly.
It has cornered the market. And so I want to take as a title this morning the advice that's been given already, live your truth. We don't normally use titles, and I would never normally say this, but to the Christians in this room, because the gospel enjoys a monopoly in the marketplace of ideas, live your truth.
Paul shows us how to do this in three steps for you note takers. To live your truth, Christians, first, live as if it's true. Second, find points of contact.
[3:38] If you want the full title of that point, find points of contact in your contacts. And finally, stand firm on gospel grounds. We're going to need some help if we're going to clean up the mess that I just made, so let's turn to the word and ask the Lord for help.

Almighty God, would you give me the tongue of one who has been trained by you, that I may with the word know how to sustain those who are weary. Would you give us ears to hear, that we may live and do according to all your word.
Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. We've been going through the book of Acts, and where we left Paul last week, we left off, he had been shipped off to Athens to escape the intolerant and

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violent response to his preaching.
I'm sure that the idea was that Paul would now lay low and wait for Silas and Timothy to come back him up, but the problem is, it's the apostle Paul.
Maybe he tried, but I don't think Paul can sit still for long, because he can't escape the idols. They're everywhere. He would have seen the temples on the hill as his ship sailed into the harbor of Athens, walking the streets lined with statues on his way to the city, going up the hill.
[5:02] The town center was full of altars and idols and shrines. Even the road out of the city center was called the tripod, because of how many idols were set up on three-legged stands, lining the streets.

Everywhere you turned in the town, it was studded with statues. Maybe primarily Athena, the goddess of wisdom, the one after whom the city is named, or Ares, the god of war, whose hill sat outside the city.
We'll get to that in a second. Or Dionysius, Zeus, Apollo, Aphrodite, Persephone. The things that we've dug up from Athens are legion. And to Paul, these shrines are not simply cultural expressions of tradition.
They represent the acceptance of a lie. Like Neo living in the matrix, idolatry has deceived hundreds, thousands of people in this city, people who are brushing by him in the marketplace as he walks up and down the streets, who are buying food from the same stalls.
And Paul is provoked by this blatant display of idolatry, of untruth. It's an interesting word there in verse 16, provoked.
[6:16] It's fairly neutral. And I would imagine we tend to read Paul's provocation the way we understand ourselves.

Is Paul provoked to anger at this offense against God's holiness, like the prophets? Is he provoked to compassion, like Jesus? Seeing the people of Israel harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd?
Whichever it is, Paul's example provides the first answer to our question, how do we as Christians live our truth? In the first place, we live as if it's true.
Paul is provoked by idols. Let me pose the question to us this morning, what provokes you? As you go to work each day, as you go week after week, every election cycle, what provokes you?
We might not live in a city full of idols, but even non-Christians recognize that doesn't mean that we aren't worshiping. He often used and maybe overused quote from David Foster Wallace in a commencement speech.
[7:26] He said this to a college graduation. He said, This coming from an atheist.

Everybody worships, he said. The only choice we get is what to worship. So there may not be shrines on display, but everyone we walk past has some sense of ultimate meaning.
Whether they think there's some truth out there like Neo or they've created some truth in here like the other guy, people have been told to find their truth, to choose what to worship, and we have made countless idols in our modern world.
Shrines to meaning. They're at the mall, if you still go there. Or the school, the workplace. We find meaning at the voting booth and the drive-thru, the NFL, the PGA, the NBA, FIFA.
We pretend to be God and we make from almost nothing meaning for ourselves. And then we wrap ourselves up in this meaning and tie it to our identity and make them our defining values.
[8:33] Whether it's fiscal discipline in the national budget or gender identity or the endurance of traditional values or sexual expression. When truth and value claims fight for first place in the marketplace of ideas, how are Christians supposed to step into the ring how are Christians supposed to live their truth?

In a world where truth is so slippery already, how do we get traction? We live as if it's true. That's why Paul is provoked. The idols of Athens illuminate the depth of human deception.
So get provoked. Again, we tend to read Paul's mood as a mirror of our own. And maybe you don't find that true. But what's your instinct when you come up against the idols of America?
Is it anger? Compassion? What gets stirred up in your heart when you're provoked by our idolatry?
If you tend towards anger, maybe we learn an instinct for compassion.
To see first the human who's mistaken, who's taken in by an answer in their search for meaning. If you tend towards compassion, learn an instinct for anger, towards what is a rejection of God as true, of his ways as good.

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[9:54] We call it a zeal for God's holy name, if that makes you feel better. But to live your truth in a world that's confused, live as if it's true. Get provoked.

It's this that moves Paul to reason. Did you notice that first he starts in the synagogues, as he has been throughout his travels. He reasons with the Jews first. Paul's message in the synagogue would have looked a lot like what we saw last week in Acts 13.
Paul can tap into the expectation of a Messiah, a redeemer sent by God. He can use Exodus 12, like we read, to point to the sacrifice of Christ. He can preach Jesus as the Christ.
But Paul also reasons in the marketplace. Truth might enjoy a monopoly in the marketplace of ideas, but that doesn't let Paul sit back.
He doesn't lay back and say, well, I know what I believe is true. I can let all of these people go on with their lives. Truth drives him forward. He begins to reason in the marketplace with whoever happens to be there.
[10:58] Paul is moved by a city filled with idols. Even more so by a city filled with idol worshipers. So he reasons with them. Day after day.

I think this point for me has been the most personally challenging part of our passage. I'm better at the first half of living as if the gospel is true. I am moved when I see others who are deceived by the options on offer in the marketplace of ideas.
But do I move toward them? Evangelism can be uncomfortable. We did a lot of it in New Zealand with YWAM.
It's not my strength. I am introverted to the max. But if I believe what I say I believe, should I continue to live the way I live?
Do I live as if it's true in my daily life? And Paul does. And he is noticed.
[12:00] You see in verse 18, some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, what does this babbler wish to say? Babbler was an insult.

Describes the kind of person that scavenges bits and pieces of information from different sources and tries to put them together but doesn't actually make, you know, a reasoned whole.
A bad philosopher. The picture is like a bird picking up seeds here and there. What does this babbler wish to say? Athens was the city of philosophers. Home of Socrates and Plato and Aristotle.
And hearing Paul, the philosophers of Athens, mock him as a scrap monger. He's heard a lot of good things but none of it really makes much sense. Some of them offer a more generous interpretation.
Maybe actually he's preaching something new. These are foreign divinities. And since, as Luke tells us right in verse 21, all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing of something new, Paul is invited to the center of public philosophical discourse, the Areopagus.
[13:09] And those good readers, as we head towards Paul's speech, we should be asking ourselves the question, how is Paul gonna do this?

I mean, we've seen him in the synagogues. We know what he says when he has some sort of traction with his audience. Shared identity, shared values, shared authority in the scriptures.
But in Athens, how can Paul preach to philosophers? To the Jews, he can preach Jesus is the Christ, but to the philosophers, Jesus is what?
We've seen Paul stand against intolerance, but in a place where everyone spends their time listening to whatever new comes along, how does the gospel speak to tolerance? It sounds a little bit like our day.
How can we live the truth in a world where one truth is as good as any other? Paul is about to show us. Paul moves toward his audience first by finding a point of contact.
[14:13] They may not be Jews, they might not be waiting for the Messiah, but that doesn't mean there isn't common ground. So if we are gonna live our truth today, we need to learn from and follow Paul's example.

So let's dive into his speech. Verse 22. Paul stands before the council on Mars Hill. This is where Socrates had stood 400 years earlier.
A fact, probably not lost on Paul, probably not lost on Luke or his readers either. When Socrates' trial was over, he drank the hemlock and died. Yet for Paul, the stakes are much higher.

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Paul's life is not on the line because in many ways, he's already died. Right? In Jesus, Paul had found new and everlasting life. Hemlock or not, he's gonna live forever with Christ.
The poisonous hemlock is not a danger for Paul, but actually, everyone in his hearing has been drinking the poison of idolatry their whole lives. And Paul has one shot, one opportunity, to convince them not to spare his life, but to save theirs.
[15:28] Paul, right here in verse 22, begins by winning over his audience. I perceive that in every way you are very religious, he says. This word could be translated as devout, as concerned with ultimate realities.

It's laudatory, one dictionary says. And even though the Stoics and the Epicureans who had brought Paul were almost complete philosophical opposites, Paul finds a way to compliment them both.
You guys actually care about the way things are. Paul makes a point of contact first by complimenting what he can, even in a city filled with idols.
I think if you and I are gonna follow Paul's example and find points of contact, it begins with this impulse to compliment what we can in others. Paul seeks this connection not only because if they're guard down, he can make progress in preaching the gospel, which sometimes can come across as a kind of tactical, rhetorical advantage and feels a little bit, I don't know, something. Politicians put this to use all the time, maybe that's why. But, I think when you and I genuinely look for the good in one another, when we compliment what we can with people outside the faith, there are two benefits.
[16:45] First, we learn to see the person and not just their ideas. And secondly, we discover that we may actually have things in common and that provides fertile ground for sharing the gospel, which is where Paul goes next.

Paul praises their piety, something he could not help but notice as he passed altar after altar and shrine after shrine and then he finds the inroad in verse 23. I saw this altar with an inscription to the unknown God.
So what you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. How convenient. Paul has the answer in verse 24. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man.
The Stoics would have loved this. One Stoic I read this week said that Zeus was present in all his works. You could learn from Zeus wherever you were. You didn't have to travel to go see the famous statue of Zeus.
Just look at the grass. He's not stuck inside our temples. Yeah, Paul goes on. Neither is he served by human hands as though he needed anything. Well, the Epicureans would have liked this.
[17:52] They had the sort of disposition that God doesn't care for human affairs. He's too far out there for us. There's probably less gods than we think and they care about us way less than we think they do.

This is what Paul connects with his audience by presenting his truth in terms that they understand. And yet we hear echoes of Isaiah. Echoes of what we heard in Psalm 149 this morning.
At this point in Paul's speech they're just little breadcrumbs but it's real truth revealed by the God of truth that will towards the end confront the Athenians. God is not like us.
This is the first stage of Paul's argument which is everything from 23 to 25. God is not like us. And yet Paul can make this point without distancing himself from his audience too much.
He affirms the Stoics. Yes, God can be known and let me tell you about him. And yet he challenges the Stoics. God is not what he has made. He's not in the grass.
[18:54] Not quite. The creator is distinct from his creation. At this point the Epicureans are cheering until Paul flips it back. The creator might be distinct yet he's actually not far from each one of us.

You see what Paul says in verse 27? He created every nation of mankind from one man and then verse 27 so that they might seek God. Paul affirms the Epicureans.
Yes, God is far above his creation and he challenges them. He's made us to seek him and to feel our way toward and to find him. He might be far above us but he has not hidden himself from us.
And to ground this point Paul doesn't appeal to scripture the way he has in the synagogues there's no point of contact if Paul brings up Psalm 19 which would work so well here.

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No, he quotes the Stoics. The creator's not far from us, Paul says because in him we live and move and have our being and we are indeed his offspring.
[19:58] Paul leans so far into finding a point of contact that he grounds his points in the words of idol worshippers. Paul has so much confidence in the truth he's willing to call out truth where he sees it even if he sees it in a verse of poetry from a pagan poet.

Are we this confident in the truth of the gospel? I mean, how comfortable are we in sharing the gospel on others' terms? If truth does enjoy a monopoly in the marketplace of ideas then there is no threat to truth.
No matter how volatile the market gets down here there's no threat. And when we find true things outside of the gospel we can put them to use without diluting the gospel.
So if it meant convincing a friend of the truth would you quote Seinfeld or Steinbeck Michael Jordan Michael Scott Obama or Oprah Marx or Malcolm X why not?
Are we this confident in the truth of the gospel? I think Paul's example shows us that it's not wrong to know what the world is thinking even to put this to use.
[21:19] Paul knows what they're thinking even to the point of being able to quote one of their philosophers from memory on a random I don't know Wednesday. Don't quote me on that.

I think we should be careful everything we take in has some effect on us don't go filling your head with trash with the excuse of understanding your neighbor better. There was trash in Paul's day just like there was in our day.
If we're going to take in the thinking of the world we need to make sure we do it in a responsible way that doesn't lead to sin or away from God yet we can't make points of contact if we never try. So read the Quran.
Watch important movies. Find points of contact. It's not wrong to call truth truth when it comes from the world as long as it's truth.
If Paul doesn't make the point she should here's Augustine. He says this is Augustine if philosophers have said anything that is true and in harmony with our faith we are not only not to shrink from it but to claim it for our own use from those who have unlawful possession of it.
[22:38] Augustine says if there's anything true out there it doesn't belong to them it belongs to us. This is where he goes into his whole thing on plundering the Egyptians. And this is exactly what Paul does because he knows that truth and joy is a monopoly in the marketplace of ideas so he's unafraid to call truth out where he sees it.

So as we seek to be Christians in a culture where the gospel seems to have no purchase of its own look for points of contact. Be generous in finding truth in another's position.
Make it a game if that helps you. When you get riled up at something take a second stop and try and find some way to make a point of contact. Is there a truth you can get behind?
Is there an assumption someone is making that you can resonate with? Is there even just an intent behind someone's wrong position that you can agree is a laudatory intent?
Something you can applaud. Truth enjoys a monopoly in the marketplace of ideas so let's not be shy about calling it out. Let's be like Paul a scrap monger taking pieces of truth wherever we find them so that we might win others to the gospel no matter where they are.
[23:49] Scavenge for truth and make contact with your neighbor. Be provoked by the deception at work in the world and let it drive you outward toward your neighbor.

Maybe you're already asking this. Eventually we run out of room, right? There's only so much of a runway before the plane actually has to take off and we need to preach the gospel.
Can we actually preach the gospel just from points of contact? Well, thank you for asking. Let's finish Paul's speech. After applauding the audience and arguing from both sides of the aisle that God is in fact God, that the creator is not his creation, Paul takes a turn.
What has been a sort of yes and kind of speech becomes a yeah, but Paul stands firm on gospel grounds. See this from 29 through the end.
Verse 29, Paul takes the turn. He says, being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. Paul brings the consequences of God's nature down on the practice of idolatry around him.
[25:01] God is the one who formed all his creatures. He cannot be formed by them. The altar to the unknown God that Paul mentions is the perfect point of contact because it reveals that there's an acknowledgement somewhere of this truth.

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That there is a being perfect in his nature who cannot be imaged formed idled into anything that resembles him because he is not his creation. I should say this is probably not at all what the Athenians thought about this altar but Paul is putting it to good use anyway.
And Paul doesn't just break with the philosophers on this point. He drives the implications of this home. To the council that executed Socrates Paul says the times of ignorance God has overlooked but now he commands all people everywhere to repent because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness.
Paul's not afraid of pulling punches. He's made points of contact this is different. He knows that nothing can touch the truth. He's not vying like so many other philosophers who come to Athens and preach in the markets like he had to prove his truth claim.
Paul asserts it. He stands firm on gospel grounds. If truth and joy is a monopoly in the truth doesn't matter what these people think Paul just proclaims the truth.
[26:28] Doesn't matter how many philosophies are at war on Mars Hill they can't touch the truth. And Paul comes right out and says it God has overlooked your ignorance and he commands repentance.

Paul's claim doesn't just hang out there. He has established ground. He's embedded the truth of the gospel and the findings of their philosophers.
Now he draws out the implications. If God is who I say he is then he has the right to command all creation. He has the right to be angry at idolatry and he has the right to judge.
The good news is that the creator of all that is good is a good judge. A righteous judge Paul says he'll judge the world in righteousness. The bad news is unless we repent we're going to be on the wrong side of judgment.
People often talk about preaching or evangelism in a pluralistic age in terms of success or failure and so we tend to think the response is up to us and in a way this is true.
[27:40] We've seen Paul do this very carefully here. He's carefully crafted his argument but what people have often done is strip the gospel of the things that offend our culture in order to get a hearing from our culture.

But Paul doesn't shy away. I mean telling people about the judgment of God was as offensive in the first century as it is today. And yet Paul presses into the heart of the gospel.
Because like Peter at Pentecost Paul is driving towards a response that these philosophers might be cut to the heart and ask what then shall we do? First Paul calls them to repent.
He stands before the philosophers and says outright you need to change the way you think. God has overlooked your ignorance but now you are without excuse. He's overlooked your ignorance he hasn't given you the judgment you deserve but that judgment is coming Paul says.
Secondly Paul situates judgment in the person of Jesus. Like in the synagogue there is no gospel without the Christ. Paul may have been sort of down playing Jesus up until this point focusing on points of context that there is no escaping that the gospel hinges on this son of God.
[28:59] God is far above us he has made himself known to us and ultimately he has closed the gap himself by this man Jesus. In this presentation of the! gospel Paul highlights Jesus as the righteous judge.

! three grounds of the gospel that Paul will not let go. They're not certainly not all of them but they're interesting that Paul brings them to bear on the philosophers.
The third thing he brings Paul preaches the resurrection. Paul's message that God will judge the world in righteousness by this appointed man has been given assurance because God has raised him from the dead.
I think one thing to note here is that Paul doesn't flinch from preaching what we could call the absurdities of the gospel. We touched on this a little bit when we started Acts.
The hinge that the witness of the apostles hangs on is the resurrection from the dead. Jesus is who he says he is he fulfills!
[30:09] He the scripture and all of this has been proven by his resurrection. And the point is that the claims of the gospel are meant to be startling. If resurrection was normal then it wouldn't be a proof of God's incredible work.

The resurrection works as a witness because it is absurd. People don't get up after three days in the grave. Yet there were 500 witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus!

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And I don't think we should forget that this is not normal. Again the first century is not very different from the 21st century. The claim to the resurrection is absurd to the philosophers on the Areopagus. It's as absurd to them as it is to the people on the city bus. You see their reaction in verse 32 when they heard of the resurrection from the dead some mocked.
Let's not forget that this is not a normal story the gospel. It's a beautiful story. It's more intricate and elegant than anything fashioned by a human mind but it is absurd or as Paul calls it in first Corinthians foolishness.
[31:21] But don't let this absurdity get in the way of faith. All truth claims sit on an absurd foundation. Anyone who doesn't recognize this I think is lying to themselves.

Is it really any less absurd that matter is eternal than that there is an eternal God creator? The question is not in our marketplace of ideas which truth claim does away with the absurdities of the others but which claim is actually true?
And Paul stands in front of the Areopagus with this absurd message and asserts that it is true. Because it is. Truth enjoys a monopoly in the marketplace of ideas.
It doesn't care how absurd it sounds to the other truth claims. It is true. So Christian live your truth. Stand firm on gospel ground.
As we close let's just take a look at the last few verses. Let's look at how all this plays out because the aftermath illustrates the point. Did you notice the responses to Paul's message in Athens?
[32:35] First response is simple rejection. Paul mentions the resurrection and some scoff and they mock. By some the gospel is rejected out of hand. To these people the gospel is simply not worth their time.

Do you know anyone like this? Sometimes the gospel can seem weaker because people we know to be smart maybe even people whose opinion we value reject it scoff at it see it as stupid or weak or irrelevant and yet even in pluralistic Athens in the face of those who are rejecting it who I'm sure he can see it written on their faces Paul is unperturbed he's not disturbed by this he's confident in the truth of the gospel because it is the work of God in history and he and so he won't shy away from the absurdities in it to appease these people because it's true.
Still others are intrigued. Some mock says verse 32 but others said we'd like to hear you again. Sometimes the gospel gets people interested like in the matrix when Neo first hears this message that he's not living the life he thinks he's living he finds it hard to ignore.
It's intriguing. He moves from passing interest like these in Athens to a moment of decision. Sometimes the gospel all it does is prick people's minds.
It's not up to us how they respond. Because our goal, our definition of success is not only getting people to accept the message like Dionysius and Damaris in verse 34 which is the third response but our goal is to present the truth as the truth.
[34:12] Because if we do this we force a moment of decision. Not the one like Ryan Reynolds faces in his movie where the person is left to decide if this is true for them if they want to accept this truth.

No, you and I get to be like Morpheus from the Matrix. To offer the truth. Except unlike Morpheus there is no second pill.
There's no going back to the way things were. Because when we live our truth, when we witness to the truth, the worst we can do is put a rock in someone's shoe.
To point out where their truth claim actually butts up against truth itself. So that whether they mock or they're simply interested, they can't forget, they can't escape our confidence.
In the marketplace of ideas, truth enjoys a monopoly. So live a life that puts rocks in people's shoes. Get provoked.
[35:13] Make points of contact. Stand firm on gospel ground. Live your truth. Let's pray. Almighty God, creator, sustainer, true and only source of life, would you grant us confidence in your truth.

Teach us to live more and more in line with the truth we confess and bring us by your son into a rest from our searching. We ask this in his name.
Amen. Thank you.

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