



## NG Study Guide: Acts 17:16-34 :: “The Power to Engage” [3.12.23]

### Love God + know the Bible better:

1. Read the passage cited above, and try to answer the questions below before your group meets.
2. *Leader note: Please review the brief instructions for leaders at the bottom.*

### The Study

**Thesis:** As followers of Jesus, we want to be disciples who make disciples of Jesus. Engaging people for Christ, as empowered by the Holy Spirit, can be the first step in making disciples. Let’s discover how.

**Subject:** Paul shares Christ at Athens

**Object:** Engage people for Christ

Context: After departing from Thessalonica and Berea in Macedonia (northern Greece), Paul headed south towards Athens and Corinth (17:1-15).

#### A. Relate: (16-22)

*While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. <sup>17</sup> So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. <sup>18</sup> A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, “What is this babbling trying to say?” Others remarked, “He seems to be advocating foreign gods.” They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. <sup>19</sup> Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? <sup>20</sup> You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean.” <sup>21</sup> (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.) <sup>22</sup> Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious.*

#### 1. Have compassion for people’s spiritual condition (16)

Paul was at Athens waiting for Silas and Timothy who had remained in Berea, and were coming to Athens (16). Athens was an amazing city. It is the cradle of Western Civilization. Athens was a cultural and intellectual epicenter of the ancient world. About three to four hundred plus years before Christ, Athens was home to philosophers like Herodotus, Euripides, Socrates, Aristotle and Plato; and great mathematicians and scientists like Pythagoras, Archimedes. Athens is the home of the Parthenon and the worship of Athena the city’s protector, and goddess of war and wisdom in Greek mythology. The city had more than three thousand shrines, statues and altars to various pagan gods. As Paul spent time in the city he was grieved that the Athenians were spiritually minded people, but they were worshipping false gods. The Athenians did not know Christ (God the Son), His gospel or God the Father.

A carpe diem life lived primarily for adventure or pleasure is simply another form of idolatry.

#### 2. Meet people where they are at (17-18)

Paul went to the synagogue and engaged Jews and Gentile seekers (17). We are told, Paul *reasoned* with them. These were people who had familiarity with the O.T. Scriptures. Paul would show them from the Scriptures the evidence why Jesus is the Christ. Paul also went to the *marketplace daily and reasoned with people there* (17). The *agoura* or marketplace was where people generally gathered. There Paul encountered philosophers who debated with him as he proclaimed Jesus and the resurrection (18).

### **3. Discuss philosophies (worldviews) (18-22)**

Philosophy relates to seeking truth and principles for being, knowledge, or conduct. The Greeks, like every culture, attempt to make sense of life. The *Epicureans* (18) lived for pleasure and to satisfy desires. In essence, 'Eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow you die.' The *Stoics* (18), on the other hand, sought to discipline themselves to be freed from emotions and desires. Paul was declaring a worldview that makes sense of life and is centered in Christ and the gospel. Some were not impressed with Paul's oratory, and others were curious about a potential new god as he spoke of Jesus' resurrection (18).

They brought Paul to *the Areopagus* (Mars Hill) to present his *teaching* (philosophy or worldview) (19) to the philosophers who regularly gathered there to consider new ideas that might help them make sense of life (20-21). This group of thirty members determined moral and religious matters and considered new philosophies in Athens.

Paul addressed the group, and commended the people of Athens as *very religious* or spiritual people (22). Paul doesn't call them heathen idolaters. As we engage and relate to people we are seeking to build, not burn, bridges. Later, Paul will reference the Athenian poets (28). As we engage and relate to people we are building bridges of understanding, and bridges to Jesus and His gospel.

Philosophy and religion are a set of beliefs that attempt to explain what life is all about, who we are, and what are the most important things that humans should spend their time doing. The gospel of Jesus confronts all other philosophies and religions as inadequate for humanity, false in their foundations, and dangerous in their tendency.

### **B. Reveal the unknown God (23-28)**

*<sup>23</sup> For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you. <sup>24</sup> "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. <sup>25</sup> And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. <sup>26</sup> From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. <sup>27</sup> God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. <sup>28</sup> 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'*

#### **1. God exists and can be known (23)**

About six hundred years before there was a terrible famine. In an effort to stop the famine sacrifice was offered to all the gods including the "Unknown God" to whom they erected an altar. Paul uses this dynamic to explain that the God that they have offered sacrifices to, can be known, but they don't know Him yet.

#### **2. God is their Creator (24-25)**

*God made the world and everything in it* (24). Since He created us, we cannot create God. *Since He is Lord of heaven and earth* (24) He cannot be contained in any temple made by man (24). Since He is the giver of life, all provision, and transcends all, He does not truly need anything from man (25).

#### **3. God is Sovereign (26)**

God determines the pre-appointed times and boundaries of every nation. Thus, the rise of Athens, the spread of her influence, and decline were all under God's control for God's purposes.

#### **4. God is brought near through Jesus (27-28)**

God allows difficulty so that humanity will seek the Lord, search for Him and find Him (27). Yet, *He is not far from each one of us* (27). To the Greeks and Romans, their gods were detached from man, and you sought to appease them to keep them away. In God we *live and move and have our being* (28). As noted by Athenian poets, *we are his offspring* (28). All of humanity is God's Creation, and we are all His offspring. Yet through faith in Christ (yielding to God) we become children of God (Jn. 1:12). We enter God's family, and are brought nearest through Jesus.

### **C. Respond (29-34)**

*<sup>29</sup> "Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill. <sup>30</sup> In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. <sup>31</sup> For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead." <sup>32</sup> When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject." <sup>33</sup> At that, Paul left the Council. <sup>34</sup> Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.*

#### **1. Called to change our thinking about God, self, and sin (29-30)**

Since God has been revealed through Jesus' words and works there is no longer any excuse for idolatry. God calls us *to repent*, or to change our thinking about God, self and sin, and to yield to His authority.

#### **2. Coming judgment (31)**

*For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.*

God's coming judgment is proven by the resurrection of Jesus. As noted by Harvard Law School Dean, Simon Greenleaf, "According to the laws of legal evidence used in courts of law, there is more evidence for the historical fact of the resurrection of Jesus Christ than for just about any other event in history."

God will judge in righteousness. No one will be able to show that they are good enough to deserve heaven. God will reveal how each of us failed to live up to God's moral perfection and thus deserve to be separated from God (Romans 3:23). God offers all humanity forgiveness of sins as a gift through faith in Christ (Ephesians 2:8-9). Each of us will be responsible for our choice to receive or reject God's offer of restoration of life with Him. Although it is God's love that should lead us to repentance (Romans 2:4), rather than fear of judgement, the reality of judgment should be communicated.

#### **3. Responses (32-34)**

Some mocked (32) and some were curious and wanted to hear more (32). And some believed, received Christ, and forgiveness of sins (34). They began to experience a new spiritual life restored with God, and today you can too. Like Paul, we should engage people for Christ. Whether we are an intellectual center like Athens, or anywhere else, there is no reason to be ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God for salvation to all who believe (Rom. 1:16).

#### **Study Guide Qs:**

- 1. What are some of the challenges to making Jesus known?**
- 2. What have you learned about trying to relate with unbelievers?**
- 3. What have you learned about trying to reveal God to unbelievers?**
- 4. What have you learned about trying to call unbelievers to respond?**

## **“Disciples Who Dig Deeper” (optional or alternative study)**

- 1. Learn more about Acts 17 from David Guzik’s commentary from Enduring Word:** <https://enduringword.com/bible-commentary/acts-17/>
- 2. This creative video series breaks up the narrative of Acts to be re-told from the perspective of different key figures:** <https://app.rightnowmedia.org/en/content/details/348998>

### **Love your neighbors (inside + outside the group) better:**

- 1. Who would like to share how they sought to befriend or build relationship with their neighbors inside or outside the group?**
- 2. Are there some needs that can provide us an opportunity to love our neighbors inside or outside the group?**

### **Disciples who make disciples:**

- 1. Who would like to share how they recently sought to make disciples?**
- 2. Here is a disciple making idea to consider for the weeks ahead:**

### **Prayer [Loving God and Neighbors better]:**

Close the NG meeting with a time of group prayer. Encourage each participant to pray, but don’t force anyone to pray. Encourage the group to keep their prayers brief so that each person can pray.

### **Leader Notes:**

- 1. Seek to involve as many group participants as possible.** A good group discussion time allows people to get to know the passage and one another better.
- 2. Feel free to pre-select the discussion questions that you want to focus on** in case there isn’t enough time to answer them all.
- 3. The “Disciples Who Dig Deeper” section provides some optional or alternative study and discussion activities.** As a group leader, you can choose to focus on the “Disciples Who Dig Deeper” section, include part of that section in your group meeting, or not use it at all. Try to give the group sufficient notice so they can be prepared for the meeting.
- 4. Every time you meet consider asking:**
  - a. What about this passage is particularly exciting, challenging, or confusing?** If a leader is uncertain about a question of doctrine or theology don’t hesitate to follow-up with your coach during the week. Then revisit the issue(s) when the group gathers next time.