

Sermon Overview

Title: The Pursuits of a Passionate Church, Part II

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Text: Acts 17:16- 34, John 4:35

Topic: Paul sharing the message of the Gospel in Athens

Big Idea: The message of the Gospel is so important that we need to know what message we carry in our hearts, what message the emerging culture is open to and how to share that message in a way that others can receive it.

Preparation:

This message completes a two part series on Paul's approach to reaching a community with the Gospel message.

Sermon Outline

Introduction

The message of the Gospel is forever relevant, but in an ever-changing culture it is important that we communicate this message in an accessible way. As we learn to become careful observers of the world around us, we will discover the open doors within our culture that present us with an opportunity to share how Jesus can transform a life. As people who want to be used by God in this emerging culture, we also need to be careful observers of our own lives, to ensure we are authentically living the message we are trying to convey.

Paul in Athens

As Paul walked through the city of Athens, he was astonished by the sheer amount of idols and places of worship. There were gods for every conceivable circumstance. Paul initially speaks in the synagogue and then the Greek marketplace. The marketplace was the place of ideas and the street preachers – a huge coffee shop, where philosophers hung around all day and talked. Being a competent speaker, Paul gathered a crowd and got into debates and conversation about Jesus. His answers to people's questions were not the ones that people expected. As a result some called him "a babbling." The people who said this about him were:

Epicurean and Stoic Philosophers

Epicurean (Indulgence)

Life is all that there was – focus on all that you get out of life, not what you could put into it. Therefore pleasure the highest and most wonderful – perhaps even the God given gifts that people could experience. This gave way to the view that it was ok to be self-indulgent. In fact life was so short and so hard – if you got the opportunity to indulge – then you should.

Stoic (Discipline)

To really understand life you need to remove the desires that drive you from your life. Desires hold you back from truly understanding what really matters in life. They believed in sublimating and controlling their desires until they no longer prompted them– the popularisation of Stoicism was self-discipline.

21st Century Epicurean and Stoic Philosophy

As we study our society closely, you see a similar divergence of opinion.

Either:

- Trapped in self-indulgence – leading to all kinds of conditions – we hear a lot on obesity, the need to deal with binge drinking, drug abuse, and addictions. Self-indulgence is clearly a fundamental component of our society.
- If we got the opportunity by a lottery win to do and have what we wanted, there would be a strong impulse to indulge ourselves and we would be commended. The Epicurean spirit/philosophy is one we understand well – one where we hope for the day when we can be self indulgent

Or :

- Stoicism. If we're not over eating – then it's over exercise. People sustain injuries by training too much, people travel too far to work, work too hard for too long. They need the mentality of a marine/soldier to even function in the workplace and need an incredible amount of self-discipline in order to make it.
- The health, fitness and image industries focus on the self-disciplined route. This can spiral down to behavioural disorders like eating disorders we see both the good and the bad of the stoic angle.

(At this point Mike Breen uses the illustration of the “American Idol” reality TV show. It may be more appropriate to use an illustration from within your own context).

The Epicurean and Stoic philosophies have been repacked and re-presented as the way to feel, see life.

Paul's Response

Paul offered a way to/through life that rested on a particular individual – Jesus. People couldn't quite get it.

Public speakers required a council certificate in order speak in the marketplace. Thus Paul had to present his message that he wanted to share on the streets of Athens to the council. He wanted to shape his message so that educated and cultured people would listen and think deeply about their lives so that they would respond to Jesus.

The church in UK and the Church of England in particular has (mistakenly) emphasised communicating to the intelligentsia and the social elite for much of history. The cultured Anglican sermon has been the epitome of how to preach in church. “The Five Card Trick” consisted of an introduction, three points and a conclusion. Paul did this with his own educated audience! [What is the equivalent to “The Five Card Trick” for your situation?].

Paul's 5 Card Trick

Introduction

- Paul tried to make people feel OK about the situation. Preachers today use bad jokes to get people on their side, it opens people's ears and hearts (they feel sorry for you).

Part I - God made the world

- God is the one who made heavens and earth and not contained in temples and cannot be confined by anything a human hand can make (vs. 24).

Part II - God made you for a relationship

- God wants a relationship with you – (vs. 27). He set up the world so that we can find him in the world that he has made. Everything around us leads us to find him, though it may seem he is far away (vs.28).

Part III - Don't worship idols

- They are not God, if you worship them you won't find him (vs. 29). Don't focus your affection/attention on things – but on HIM.

Conclusion: There's a day of judgement

God will judge you for how it is you've tried to seek him in your life, how you've lived and the way you've sought to have a relationship with him. Paul states it will be a man who has been raised from the dead. The person who will judge is JESUS (vs.31).

The Response of Paul's Audience

Some thought Paul was “ a babbling.” Others who had been seeking after God wanted to hear more and eventually became disciples. Paul shares, hopes he gets a hearing, those who hear become his disciples and believed.

What about us? This is a technical talk, but what is our presentation of the gospel so that people can follow us as we follow Jesus? The needs of today's people are the same of those in Athens.

Today's 5 Card Trick

Introduction

Anything!!! The last film I'd watched, TV, music the news ANYTHING!!!! Just below the surface of most people are deep questions waiting to emerge. Society's communication with itself through the arts reveals the questions and the way in. Keep your eyes open, ears open and the opportunity that some circumstance may afford.

Revelation - God loves you

The revelation for our culture is that “God loves you”

People need to know that God really wants to heal, transform, and meet us

People flocked to Jesus – a powerful preacher, healer, and leader. But people were convinced about God, because he loved them.

Relationship - Ruined by an enemy

An enemy has exploited our self-focused lives and taken away our chance to know God and be with God. He has twisted the world to such an extent that we feel totally out of control. As a result, people live with high levels of anxiety. Living lives of excess helps to numb the pain and deal with the increasing levels of anxiety. People seek significance in sexual relationships, cling to friendships of any kind.

What do you say in response? That there is an enemy who has ruined our world. We need to agree with them and acknowledge that we don't have the answers, but that we know someone who gives us PEACE and POWER.

We have peace regardless of the circumstance we face because we have peace with God. We have power from God that deals with our enemy, and God uses us as a channel of healing and transformation.

Response – respond to the love of God and embrace the solution

Jesus is calling revolutionaries who will stand with him in his peace and power to turn back the tide. If you embrace the solution Jesus gives through his death and resurrection, you will find that he will never leave you or forsake you.

Note: SIN is not mentioned. Sin can be explained as part of the ruination of the world, but people are not as conscious of sin as they are of their own anxiety – we have to start with where people are, not where we are. People are where anxiety is – NOT where guilt is. People want primarily to deal with anxiety and fear.

Conclusion

The world is out of control, but you can change the world. How? Because your life can be changed right now and the world gets changed – one life at a time.

Conclusion (of the sermon)

If we look and listen carefully, we will discover the hopes and fears underneath society's surface. We need to learn how to notice what society is actually saying, and how to communicate the Gospel as a response in an accessible way.

Yet the way we can be most accessible is if that message is communicated through our lives. Transformation starts with you being transformed. Others are changed because you are changed. The more you are changed – the more you'll become the change agent of God. People will look at your life and want to know Jesus. How changed are you?

Response

Consider the fact that in the congregation there may be those who

- Are considering making a commitment to Christ
- Are Christian but are aware that they need to recommit their lives to Christ and his mission
- Are living with defeat and anxiety rather than power and peace

How can the conclusion of your service facilitate a response to those who are challenged by the sermon?

Is there an opportunity for people to respond to Christ for the first time?

Is there an opportunity for people to receive God's power or his peace?

Would it be appropriate to conclude with prayer, time to reflect, worship?