

Sharing the Gospel with the Religious

Acts 17:22-31 (NIV)

²² 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. ²³ 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. ²⁴ "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. ²⁵ And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. ²⁶ 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. ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.' ²⁹ "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. ³⁰ In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. 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."

83% of the 75,000 people who live in Layton claim to be a part of an organized religion. We live in a religious community. However, at the same time, only about 7% of the people here say that they belong to a Christian faith, and less than .5% say that they share our faith. We live in a religious community, but not a community centered on what we believe.

The Apostle Paul was in a similar situation when he was in Athens, Greece. He stood in the Areopagus, Mars Hill, which was an Athenian court that oversaw matters of education and religion, and said, "People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious." (verse 22) How did he know that? "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..." (verse 23a) These weren't the gods that Paul worshiped, and it distressed him. Yet, he still observed and commented positively about the religiousness of the Athenians, how they took their worship seriously with their many objects of worship and even an altar to an unknown god just so that they wouldn't be in danger of forgetting someone who is worthy of praise, to not exclude any god that existed.

You and I live in a very religious community, but how do we interact with it? Do we note the things that are commendable, praiseworthy, or do we approach with a very judgmental mindset? Do we see people who value families and family history or do we just see people who have turned families into idols, that nothing comes before family, including God? Do we see people who care about their neighbors and help them, or do we just see people selfishly trying to punch their tickets to a better afterlife? Do we see people who are very generous with their charitable giving, or do we just see people who are forced into a financial stranglehold by their religion? Do we see people who consider it important to spread the message they believe to others, or do we just see deceiving charlatans like the Pharisees who trick people into their religion for their own power and importance?

To a degree, how can we not come in with a judgmental mindset against another religion? We did not come to our faith lightly. There was study, research, wrestling, prayers, commitment. We know the Word of God. We have Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life. So, we don't need to learn about their religions or take them seriously because they're wrong. And they think the same about us. We have judged them as not worthy of our time to talk to them, let alone understand them.

What if Paul had taken that approach in Athens? What if, in his distress over the religiousness of the Athenians to false gods, he said at the Areopagus, "I see that in every way you are very wrong. Let me tell you how you are wrong."? That would have killed the speech, wouldn't it?

When we did the Everyone Outreach workshop back in January, we were shown a picture of someone's new design for a wheelbarrow. When presented with a new idea or something that goes against our frame of reference or our worldview, typically most of us respond with a judgmental mindset. We state how the thing won't work, how wrong it is, or we just plain say, "No." We've judged it unworthy of our time and don't want to trouble ourselves to look at what is behind this idea, this design, how they got there, what they want to use it for.

With a judgmental mindset, we might be right, but we also pretty much kill any follow up conversation, and the person will feel dismissed. Just think about yourself. Do you want to engage in conversation with someone who always comes off as judgmental? Will you express an opinion to them, let alone a personal religious conviction, if you know that it will be met with a dismissive

condemnation? Wouldn't you instead stay away from that person, never open up to them about what you believe? Wouldn't you even push them away and never talk about religion because you will be judged and not cared for?

Forgive me, Lord, for my judgmental and dismissive mindset that has caused me to kill conversations where I could have shared with you the great and wondrous things you have done for me and for that person. Forgive me for being more focused on judging someone and their beliefs than to observe them, get to know them, connect with them, care for them like Paul did. Forgive us all for when we have been quick to judge and dismiss instead of learning more about others and what's important to them and seeking how to share our God with them because we care about them.

Thankfully, God did not just judge us on the spot at our very first sin or for all the subsequent ones. But a day of judgment is coming, as Paul told the Athenians after connecting with their religiousness: "In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. 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." (verses 30-31) But that day is not here yet.

Before that day, we have a God who has drawn near to us. He is the God who is the Lord of heaven and earth. Although he does not live in temples built by human hands and is not served by us as if he needed anything, he is the one who gave us life. Why? Because it was owed to us? No, but because it pleased him so to bring us into existence. "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." (verse 26)

But he didn't do this just so that we would exist. He wanted to give us a perfect and joyous existence, as Paul said to the Athenians, "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." (verse 27) That's what the Athenians are doing. That's what God wanted them to do.

God put us in this world at this time specifically so that we would seek him out. He put people in our lives who showed him to us. He did this very specifically according to his plan so that we would know what he has done for us. As Peter told us in our second Bible reading, "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit." (1 Peter 3:18) He brought this message to you and me, that Christ suffered and paid for our sins and was raised from the dead, by putting us around people who believed it, who told us, who cared about us enough to want us to have this. They wanted us to be saved from the Day of Judgment, that you and I would be declared not guilty of any sin we have ever committed because Christ paid the price, suffering and dying to pay for our off-putting, quick to judge attitudes, and instead he brought us to him, clothed us with his righteousness, his perfection. God saved us by creating us and putting us in a time and place with other religious people who knew him and would share him with us.

We live in a religious community. God has put us here to engage with the people in it. So, how will we? Follow Paul's example to the Athenians. He learned about them. So we ask questions of our neighbors. We fight our judgmental mindset with curiosity. We learn more about them. Learn more about what's important to them. Learn what they are struggling with. Curiosity invites those conversations. Find out about their family, why they treasure them so much. Show them how God has made you a part of an even bigger family that will be together forever, that heaven is about having a forever perfect relationship with a God who will never abandon you. People in our community work hard, give generously. Ask them why they do this. Ask them if they ever feel like they have done enough. Listen to their stresses. Then share the God who has paid the price and lived perfection for us, completed all the work, to put his righteousness on us so that we are whole and complete now and that this is what spurs us on to be generous and to work hard in thanksgiving to God.

As we fight our judgmental mindset with curiosity and learn more about the people in our community, we will also show them that we care about them. Hopefully, when we have done that, then they will care what we have to say about God, just like what happened to get Paul this hearing in the Areopagus.

What will be the results of our efforts? Will we be that Acts chapter 2 church growing by 3000 in a day? Maybe. But that's up to the Good Shepherd as the Lord of the Church. What we can expect is the same results as Paul in Athens. Some sneered, but some said that they want to hear more about this God who is not far from us, the God that they didn't know. Through Paul's engagement with them, people believed. They have been judged right with God by what he had done for them. They were saved! It was worth it. In the same way, it's worth it for us to engage with the people of our community. With God's help, using a curious vs. judgmental mindset, more people in our community will be judged right with God as we share what Jesus did for them. Amen.