

Summary

Keller Sermon Series "Acts"

The Gospel to the Philosophers Acts 17:16-34

Life in Jesus.church

Sunday, September 12, 2021

Introduction

In the days of the early church, Rome was the power center, but Athens was the intellectual center of the Empire. For us, it would be like having all of the Ivy League schools in one city...it was THE center of thought. And Paul presents the gospel there in a famous message. While it has been examined by many in great detail, Dr. Keller says he wants to expand on three general, high level observations. In his message, Paul points out the problems of culture, the greatness of God, and the outrageousness of the resurrection.

The Problems of Culture

Paul was bold. The "Marketplace" was the center of everything in Athens...financial, literary, art, political and cultural ideas were all debated there, and the ideas forged there traveled out into the entire Empire. It had enormous influence...and Paul dived right in...Paul knew the gospel could stand up in the public square!

It says, "He reasoned". Socratic reasoning was practiced there...true engagement. Paul has full confidence that the gospel has what it takes to engage the thinking elites...it can challenge the dominant ideas of the time.

He didn't preach, but he wasn't hiding...he was engaging. He didn't seal off his faith from his work (like we tend to do), but he didn't stand on the corner and preach either. He believed the gospel and he engaged people with it!

Paul addresses the weakness in their culture...the soft underbelly, and we know now that within 300 years, the gospel swept that culture. How? There were two main schools of thought in those days.

The stoics...were moralists. The meaning of life was to have virtue...to live by moral absolutes and to be strong. Be good and grin and bear suffering. But the average person couldn't handle that...they couldn't live that way. Christianity came along and instead of demanding strength, it offered hope.

The epicureans were relativists. When you die, that's it, so just live life in a way that brings pleasure...sexual freedom...freedom in everything! Of course, that sounds good, but living for self really just leaves one empty and lonely. The Christian view of sex looked restrictive, but in the end, it led to happiness, fulfillment, and stronger families.

The culture of the time had a weak underbelly that was addressed by the gospel, and our culture today is really much like theirs. The Christian view of sex seems behind the

times. Sexual freedom seems modern, but it was the culture of the Greek and Romans, and it was defeated by the gospel because in the end, people are left lonely and sad. Every culture has a soft underbelly...cultural norms can't provide people with the satisfaction they seek...that was true in Rome...and it is true in our culture today.

The Greatness of God

Paul addressed the most intellectual audience in the world at that time, and the main thing he did was give them a big view of the real God. Greek and Roman gods were petty and egocentric...a projection of us. Their gods were appeased, but not worshipped and adored. Paul paints a picture of a bigger God...infinite and beautiful.

Verse 24...He made everything and doesn't live in temples made by man.

Verse 25...He is dependent on nothing...He is not served by human hands.

Verse 26...Everything that happens, He controls!

Verse 27...God did this so that people would seek him and find him. God is intimate, tender, and He desires our fellowship!

Then Paul says...you already know something about this God...you have an altar to him..."To an unknown God". He says, "You sense that he exists!" Paul is helping them realize that what they sense is in reality true! You know God exists...but you don't acknowledge him!

Dr. Keller gives a contemporary example of this same kind of behavior. A non-believing anthropologist studied a primitive culture in Africa and was bothered by their treatment of women. Their response to her concern? "Don't impose your white, western, individual rights culture on us!" The anthropologist admitted she didn't believe there were any moral absolutes...but she felt strongly their treatment of women was wrong. Paul would say to her..."Your working for women's rights in Africa is you serving an unknown God. You say there are no moral absolutes...but you are living as if the author of moral absolutes, God, is actually real! If you sense that your premise (no moral absolutes) is wrong...then change your premise!" To the philosophers Paul is saying..."You are working to please your gods, and still life is empty. Change your premise! Serve the God you sense is there!"

This view of a big God isn't just an argument for the head, but it's also an argument for the heart. How big is God? *Verse 26. God has marked out people's times in history and the boundaries of their lands in his plan.* Everything about our lives has happened because of God's plan...not a popular thought.

Popular view of God: If I try to be good, God owes me a good life. If he doesn't deliver...forget about Him. That is believing in a "small God" of our own making. If you realize God is BIG, you can finally relax...you can trust...you can find rest for your heart.

Dr. Keller shares a talk by Elizabeth Elliot (after her missionary husband was killed by a South American tribe they were serving). She said, "He was speared to death in the course of his obedience to God." If that shakes your faith, your God is too small! Elizabeth then added, "God is God, and if he is God, he is worthy of my worship and my service, and I will find no rest except within his will, and that will is infinitely... immeasurably beyond my largest notions of what he is up to." Another quote: "If God were small enough to be understood, he wouldn't be big enough to be worshipped. "

The Resurrection is Offensive

Paul was interrupted by the philosophers...he really never mentions the name of Jesus. But he does say, (verse 31) "God has given proof of this by raising him from the dead". At that, some sneered, some said, "We want to hear more"...but then Paul left the council. The resurrection was the end, and it shows that Paul saw the resurrection as the real proof. **We know God exists because of the resurrection!** Everything on earth dies and decays...but look at Jesus and the resurrection!

The resurrection is offensive because people (the philosophers and me) like to be in the driver's seat. "I like this...not that". But if Jesus was raised from the dead, there is a God beyond this word, and their preferences didn't matter. The philosophers realized that, and it was offensive!

Dr. Keller references a story about an escaped convict on a killing spree. As he confronted a hostage, she explained, "You need Jesus". For the killer, that word threw everything off balance. He realized that if he believed in Jesus, he must stop killing, but "If I don't, who cares? I can do what I want." He realized how profound a difference the resurrection makes! Do we? If the resurrection is true, I need to surrender (..if not, I am free to live any way I want). There is no middle ground...you can't dabble in Christianity.

Those of us who believe should end up modeling the gospel with our lives. Paul was upset by seeing the idols in Athens...so he went to the marketplace and opened up his heart. He was mocked...but so was Jesus. But then Jesus was raised and now he is at the Father's right hand, working all things out according to his will. **"Jesus, may we be trophies of your grace and ambassadors of your gospel!"**