

MISSION POSSIBLE - WITH GOD!
Acts 17: 16-34

Good morning! It is a great day to be in the house of the Lord, Amen? Today we're going to look at the third in a series of messages on the church and its purpose as described in the book of Acts. Two weeks ago we looked in the Scriptures at the beginning of the church when the Holy Spirit was sent in Acts 1 and 2. Last week the Scripture setting was one in which Peter and Cornelius were given two separate visions purposed to bring them together so that we could see that the Gospel - the Good News - and the church is for everyone.

Today we are going to look at the mission of the church - what God in Scripture has to say about our purpose in proclaiming Jesus Christ. Do you remember the TV series Mission Impossible? "Good morning, Mr. _____, your assignment Jim, should you choose to accept it is -----" Well the church has a mission and we are expected to accept Jesus' mandate for assignment. What is a mission? Well the dictionary tells us that a mission is a sending out - or an assignment - or a going forth for a specific purpose. And the Bible tells us that we are on a mission from God!

We - as a church - are on a mission from God! This mission has been given to us by our Lord Who gives it to us for a very specific reason. It is because there is a lot of work to be done and there are a lot of people who don't know God. And God wants everyone to be in this relationship with Him which produces new life and which promises and gives the assurance of eternal life. And when you step back from the stresses and rigors of day-to-day life what could be more important than that? What could be more important than to offer people a gift that is going to last for eternity? That is going to produce new life right now? - that is going to produce the fruits of the Spirit of love, joy, and peace - fruits that they won't receive otherwise. It is the mission that God has given to us - we are on a mission from God!

Jesus says, "Go and make disciples of all nations - baptizing them and teaching them as I have commanded you" Matthew 28.

In Luke 24 He says "you are going to be my ambassadors and my witness."

In Acts chapter 1 He says "you will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth."

In John 20:21 He says "As the Father has sent me, now I am sending you." We have been given our mission marching orders!

Would you pray with me?

PRAYER:

In Acts chapter 2 verses - 1 through 8 - we saw that God gave the power to all believers through the Holy Spirit - and God gave the command to all to go on a mission for Him and win souls for Christ. Christianity isn't passive - although sadly it has become passive in a lot of Christian churches today - and it has for several generations which is why the church today is in decline. And there have been many studies about that and we have seen those articles in the front page of most newspapers and news magazines for years now.

The myth is that Christianity is in decline - the church is dying - people are going to move toward more rational, more scientifically based understandings and world views of things and they are going to move from the superstition and the "wish upon a star" nature of faith. But that is not Christianity and that is not a fair assessment. In many parts of the world - Africa, South America, China - the church is flourishing and growing rapidly even in the face of severe opposition. Look a little deeper beyond the headlines and you will see that God is still able to work - and He is still working and moving through the hearts of His church - in this country and around the world. Though at times we get discouraged and ask how are we ever going to reach the world for Jesus - we need to look at the many areas where He is at work powerfully and remember what He promises in Matthew 19:26 that "All things are possible with God!"

Even though the times are not necessarily favorable for sharing the faith - even though we live in a world where countries persecute Christians just because they are Christians so it drives the church underground - it makes illegal to the point that people have to risk their lives in order to proclaim their faith - in order to admit publicly that they are Christians - but still they do it - can you imagine? Can you imagine living in a country where if people found out that you were a Christian - you could be executed? This is the reality of the world that we live in and it is happening in the world around us all the time.

So we can relate when we read in the New Testament that there are people like Peter and Paul and Barnabas and Silas and Timothy and Lydia and others who are out and about and they are sharing their faith - proclaiming their faith - and doing these things in times that are not at all favorable - Paul is thrown in prison over and over again - and the faithful saints continue to battle in the face of opposition and to declare that we are saved by God's grace - and by God's grace alone. We are on a mission from God to share that Good News with those around us - to tell people the truth of God - that it is His grace that saves us - that it is our faith and trust in this God Who loves us so much that He gave His own Son to die for us and to put our sin to death! And this God raised Jesus from the dead to raise us to a new and everlasting life. We can't say that enough - we can't share that enough - we can't proclaim that enough - that's our mission.

Our Scripture today is from Acts 17: 16-34. If you are reading along in the pew Bible in the racks in front of you that passage begins on page _____. So turn with me to Acts 17 and we will begin at verse 16 and see how Paul can educate us in the sharing of the Gospel:

SCRIPTURE: Acts 17: 16-34

Paul has a lot to teach us and we can learn from Paul how to communicate the Gospel. I think we can all agree that communication is extremely important.

Especially when we are trying to tell - and show - someone about the love of Jesus Christ. Professional golfer Tommy Bolt was playing in Los Angeles and had a caddy with a reputation of constant chatter. Before they teed off, Bolt told him, "Don't say a word to me. And if I ask you something, just answer yes or no." During the round, Bolt found the ball next to a tree, where he had to try to hit under a branch, over a lake and onto the green. He got down on his knees and looked through the trees and sized up the shot. "What do you think?" he asked the caddy. "Five-iron?"

"No, Mr. Bolt," the caddy said.

"What do you mean, not a five-iron?" Bolt snorted.

"Watch this shot."

The caddy rolled his eyes. "No-o-o, Mr. Bolt."

But Bolt hit it and the ball stopped about two feet from the hole. He turned to his caddy, handed him the five-iron and said, "Now what do you think about that? You can talk now."

"Mr. Bolt," the caddy said, "that wasn't your ball."

Communication is very important!

Paul learned how to adapt his presentation so it was the most effective with the Athenians. We too should ask the Holy Spirit to direct the way we communicate so it has the greatest results. The Spirit is able to empower, enable and influence the outcome of our communication if we will trust Him and ask for His wisdom.

Paul the apostle spoke to the Athenians by doing his homework first about their cultural background and trusting the Lord to move his lips in a way that would stir the hearts of his listeners. Let us look at some of the key components of communications from the example Paul gives us in Acts 17.

To set this in perspective, Paul is on a long missionary journey to proclaim Christ wherever they will listen. We see earlier in chapter 17 that he was in Thessalonica and the Jews cause a riot and the other believers sent Paul and Silas away at night to keep them from harm. Then they went to Berea where the

message was received more eagerly, but again the Jews came and stirred up a commotion and Paul left for Athens. The city of Athens was a very "religious" city. Within the city there were over 30,000 idols. One scholar noted it was easier to find an idol in Athens than to find a man. While highly religious, these people were confused about which god to worship... and so they worshipped them all. AND in fact, just in case they missed a god – they erected an altar to an "Unknown God."

Now, before you dismiss these people as uneducated hayseeds you need to know that Athens was a center of learning in its day. It was here that the idea of Democracy took root. Many of the world's great early philosophers and thinkers lived here: Euripides, Plato and Socrates. Here in Athens they had one of the greatest universities of the ancient world. It was a center of philosophy, literature, science and art. This was a city dedicated to truth... dedicated to wisdom. And yet in the midst of all this pursuit of "truth" and "wisdom" - there was confusion - because (when it came to God) they did not know WHAT TRUTH to embrace. They didn't know which god to hang onto and so they believed that all their gods were somehow equal.

They were kind of like the Peanuts cartoon - In one of Charles Schulz's Peanuts comic strips, Linus and Charlie Brown are engaged in serious conversation. "I have a theological question," says Linus, "When you die, and go to Heaven, are you graded on a percentage or on a curve?" "On a curve, naturally," Charlie responds. Linus asks puzzled, "How can you be so sure?" Charlie brightly answers, "I'm always sure about things that are a matter of opinion."

So Paul is surrounded with a culture that believes in all kinds of idols. Is that any different from what we are surrounded by in our culture as we seek to communicate Christ? I John 2:16 says that the world is full of the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life. Now, what's the biggest idol you've seen in America? And, can you name the idols that you have seen in our town? Our modern cities are no different than Athens - and in some ways - they are

worse. We have more things today to distract us from church, Christ, and God than ever before and often, these things become idols to us: Sports, hobbies, TV, movies, shopping, entertainment of all sorts, etc. Let's be honest about this and think about our own idols that need to be put away!

All of us who speak for the Lord need to do the best that we can to communicate Christ effectively. And certainly many of us as pastors fall short of the mark. One man said, "My young son asked what was the highest number I had ever counted to. I didn't know but asked I about his highest number. The son said it was '5372.' 'Oh,' I said. 'Why did you stop there?' 'Church was over.'"

What led Paul to do whatever it took to communicate Jesus Christ? What was the driving force behind his desire?? Well, Paul was convicted of the need! He saw all these seekers of the truth going in all directions - who were believing this and believing that - and it broke his heart. We also must be convicted of the need! Religion gets relegated to a matter of personal taste rather than objective reality. Kind of like our tastes in clothes or the color of our houses. There's no right and no wrong to it. It's just a matter of your personal tastes. If you like Hinduism as opposed to Buddhism it's no big deal! It's like preferring Big Macs to Chicken McNuggets. And if there is a God... well He'll understand. Everybody was just trying to reach Him in different ways. It shouldn't make any difference – as long you're sincere.

Paul was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. Paul was distressed over idolatrous people. Are you? Most of us often seem not distressed. We may think, "Live and let live." They can do their thing and I will do my thing. Let them worship their idol and I'll worship mine.

Paul possessed the desire of the heart of God for people. HE WAS DISTRESSED OVER LOST PEOPLE. What about you and me?

A northern Kentucky woman believes she is the smallest woman who ever gave birth to such a large baby. Stacey Herald, 33, gave birth to an 18-inch daughter who is not much smaller than her mother. "I'm 28 1/2 inches, head to heel," said Mrs. Herald, who was born with osteogenesis imperfecta. She said, "My whole life I've been told that I wasn't able to have children, (and) I would not live through the pregnancy – that with the size of my body, the baby would grow up underneath my lungs and smother out my lungs and my heart, and we would both die. Something inside me just didn't believe that."

When Mrs. Herald became pregnant with Katira, they warned that she and the baby would be endangered and they advised her to schedule an abortion. "We said, 'No, we're not doing that,' and my doctor said, 'Okay,' she said, 'We'll do it. We'll provide the best medical care we can provide. You provide the faith and we'll see what happens,'" Herald said. That little woman wanted a baby so badly that she was willing to risk her own life to bring her into this world. How badly do you want to see people 'birthed' into the kingdom of God? What risks are you willing to take? How far are you willing to go? How distressed are you over lost souls? How convicted are you?

Matt. 9:36 *"When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."*

Matt. 14:14 *"When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick."*

Matt. 15:32 *"Jesus called his disciples to him and said, 'I have compassion for these people...'"*

Matt. 20:34 *"Jesus had compassion on them and touched their eyes. Immediately they received their sight and followed him."*

Mark 1:41 *"Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. 'I am willing,' he said. 'Be clean!'"*

Jesus always showed COMPASSION! Do you have compassion for people? For lost, idolatrous people? If you don't have it, you need ask God to give it to you!

Another principle of good communication we learn from Paul is that Paul gave the message of the Good News Gospel to all! To everybody! We must emphasize Christ in all our communications. Paul preached Christ as the Savior who came to save people from their sins. We may not be the most confidently cheerful and optimistic communicators - but we always succeed when we seek to communicate Christ as the Savior, Who is the solution to the root problem of all problems.

WE MUST PREACH THE GOOD NEWS ABOUT JESUS! Paul literally preached about Christ and His resurrection from the dead. He simply pointed them to Christ. He said, "I see that you are religious. Let me talk to you about God and how you can come to know Him." I Peter 3:15 tells us, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have."

And Paul communicated the Gospel to everyone. Verse 16 tells us that " he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there." Paul also went to the market place. How interesting! How would we apply this to our day? How about Wal-mart, the grocery store, the mall, etc.? Yes, this means that we can witness in these places. Have you done this? Do you look for opportunities to reason with people about Christ?

And as the text says Paul reasoned with them. Paul did not lecture them or insult them. He used a profound simplicity. People do not respond well to the authoritarian approach. Paul's sermon and discussion with the men of Athens was very logical and easy to follow. One of the mistakes that preachers - and all of us - sometimes make is that we give a message that is too hard to understand or hard to follow. Paul was very wise to use the cultural setting he was in and to compare and build on what the people already had been exposed to. Paul led

the people through what they already know to the unknown truths. He admired their culture, literature, philosophy, and even religion before he presented the gospel.

We should look for the points of unity, similarity, agreement, and common histories between the people's culture and the scriptural messages. Draw links, bridges, and comparisons between the two. This will improve the context of our messages.

One thing that has gotten Christianity into trouble with people down through the ages has been that we HAVE to tell them that "Yes it does make a difference what you believe!" So Paul - while he reasons with them - and leads them by what they already know - guides them into truth and ties the elements of truth together - and by so doing he brings out the full truth. **Paul spoke the truth and built upon what they knew!**

Jesus said: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." John 14:6

Peter declared: "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved." Acts 4:12

And here in Acts 17 Paul is telling the Athenians the very same thing:

"we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man's 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 all men by raising (Jesus) from the dead."

Do you catch what all this is saying? Paul is telling us that God has no intention of being tolerant any more. In the past God overlooked such ignorance – but not anymore. Now, God calls for repentance - not open-mindedness.

People will not get into heaven by being Hindus

They won't please God by being Muslims

They won't get in the gate by flashing their Buddhist statue

God's calling for us to repent, because there WILL BE a day of judgment.

Intellectual types are fond of telling people that no one has the right to tell someone else that what they believe is wrong... it's just not nice.

What Paul is declaring is – it's NOT nice NOT to tell people they are wrong.

Judgment's coming.

AND if people don't recognize that what they believe is wrong, the consequences can be deadly.

You can't be open-minded & tolerant when it comes to God.

Even smart people ought to realize this has got to be true. In just about every other serious field of knowledge – broad mindedness and tolerance is not allowed

There is no room for tolerance in a chemical laboratory. Water is composed of two parts hydrogen and one part oxygen. The slightest deviation from the formula – not allowed.

There is not room for tolerance when it comes to music. The skilled director will not permit his first violin to play even so much as 1/2 note off from what is written in the music.

There is no room for tolerance in the mathematics classroom. Geometry, calculus, or trigonometry does not allow any variation from exact accuracy. The solution of the problem is either right or it is wrong

There is no room for tolerance in biology. If they are investigating a theory and – if one result out of a thousand is different from the rest – it will invalidate an entire theory.

There is no room for tolerance in the garage. The mechanic says the piston rings have to fit the cylinder walls within one thousandth's of an inch – and that's the way it has to be. There cannot be any variation if the "motor is to run smoothly."

Every other serious field of knowledge refuses to allow for tolerance of truth.

AND here in Acts 17 Paul says it's the same with God. There will come a time of judgment. God is the great scientist and there is nothing anti-science about faith. God is the One Who creates the great laws of physics - physicists just discover them. God is the greatest scientist Who ever lived. And some of the most noted scientists on the face of the earth today - like Francis Collins - probably the most noted scientist of the last decade or two - involved in the human genome project - which completely changed the way that the scientific world sees genetics - Collins is a man of great Christian faith and he wrote a book on that. The most brilliant scientific scholars on the face of the earth - many of them are people of devout Christian faith and they see no contradiction whatsoever.

Paul tells us in verse 31 *"that God will judge the world"* We don't have to defend the Bible or any Bible doctrine. I mean, it's important to know the answers to questions BUT we don't really need to defend the Bible. What we need to do is proclaim Jesus Christ.

Paul wrote: *"we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength."* I Corinthians 1:22-25

I've always liked the saying I saw on a church sign: "If I'm OK and you're OK – explain the cross" We need to tell the truth - God's truth as given by Jesus!

Now I want you to notice – Paul didn't win a debate here. No mad rush of converts came rushing to the stage. In fact, the crowd's response was mixed. Acts 17:32 "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."

There are many scholars who maintain that Paul's preaching at Athens was

failure because it was so poorly received. But I don't think Paul would have said that. Paul was not deterred. Why? Because Paul was faithful in proclaiming Jesus to these people: "A few men became followers of Paul and believed."

In the 1800's a famed British preacher named Alexander Maclaren once got a skeptic to promise him that he would attend his church for four Sundays and listen as Maclaren presented the basic tenets of Christianity. The skeptic was faithful. He listened intently to Maclaren's sermons. And after the fourth message he became a believer. Maclaren was delighted and could not resist the impulse to ask which of the four sermons brought him to this decision. The skeptic replied, "Your sermons, sir, were helpful, but they were not what finally persuaded me." What changed his mind, he said was an elderly woman he helped on a slippery walk. He said "She looked up into my face and said, 'I wonder if you know my Savior, Jesus Christ. He is everything in the world to me. I would like you to know Him too.'" Sometimes its not the words we use, but the love we show.

We should expect jealous skeptics whenever we try to communicate the gospel and the truth of Christ. Acts 17:5 indicate, "But the Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city." Take up the full armor of God so that you can stand firm in the evil day.

There will always be a need to be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might.

As Paul had a passion for his mission - we must have a passion for our mission! Have any of you been home to the church you grew up in and found the church in decline? I have - my Baptist church - which my grandfather literally helped to build - is in a little town, but it always had strong crowds of attendance. It had two large sides to the auditorium and balconies and in its day they were always filled. But as time progressed - the church got involved in their own divisive disagreements - they split on more than one occasion - they started going in

different directions - and they lost their mission. Now the church - which had been a Baptist church for over a hundred years is gone - and it breaks my heart. The last few times we were there while they were still in operation there was a handful of people there - and there seemed to be no passion to their mission. They lost their mission.

Some of you have experienced that and many of you have heard that mainline churches are in decline - and evangelical churches are growing. Well not any more - evangelical churches are starting into decline also. Why - because they have lost their mission - the mission that God has given to them - to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ - to be the ambassadors and witnesses for Jesus Christ - to go to the ends of the earth - to have a passion for the Gospel. There has to be a passion. And as we look at our mission we need to check our passion - we need to see if we are still on our mission. Paul was on a mission for God.

We may say that well its hard today! Well it was hard for Paul also - he kept getting thrown in prison. People kept falling away. Paul didn't have it easy. Neither do we, but we are on a mission from God Who gives us the power and the ability to carry out that mission! God gave us the mission - but He didn't just give it to us and leave us - He promised He would be with us through it all! We're not alone - He will never leave us! That is what turns our mission from Mission Impossible to Mission Possible. God is in it - God has ordained it - God supplies the power for us to be used to accomplish it.

We have to keep the passion - we have to be aware of our mission. I am not sure where churches lose that - but somewhere along the line it becomes all about me. Did I like the service today or not? Did I like the music today or not? Did I like the message today or not? Did I like the appearance of the sanctuary and the flowers? - is that what it is all about? Is it about what we're getting out of it? Then we're missing the whole point. God gives us His grace and His love and His forgiveness - not to just bless us - but so that we can be nourished and we can

go out - so that after exercising with the body of Christ we can go out and be the church Monday through Saturday.

When is the last time we looked at it that way? Honestly - how many people are we sharing Jesus Christ with these days? How many names just came to mind? How many people are popping through your head - who don't know Jesus Christ - because we are living in a nation where a lot of people don't. And we are living in a community where a lot of people don't. How many of those people are we - are you - reaching? How many of those people do you carry in your heart? That you want to share God's love with them - because you love them - because you can't stand the thought of them facing eternity apart from Christ?

And so it inspires you and so it moves you and you start to realize that your Christianity isn't just about breathing it in - its about God moving through you. Oh what God did with 12 faithful apostles - according to the book of Acts - what He did - how the church grew from just a few to more than 3,000 in just one day. Oh what God could do with 250 of us who are filled with His Spirit - who have a heart for this mission that God has given to us. People who don't have their own agendas but want to live for God's agenda. Who say I want to live for you - I want to surrender my life to You - so that I may serve You - so I can glorify you - because I have this perspective on my life now that - You didn't put me here on earth for me - You put me here to glorify You and to serve and love people in the world around me. Oh what God can do with a church full of people like that like He did in the book of Acts - because it wasn't just Peter and Luke and Paul and Lydia - it wasn't just them that were making it happen - it was the 3000 who kept their day jobs and their vocations and they brought Christ out into the world where they were the rest of the week - not just when they gathered for worship. 24/7 they were Christians and they saw themselves that way. Oh what God could do with us today. When you look and see how these few were used to build a church upon this earth where over 2 billion people claim to be Christian.

Samuel Chadwick said, "We cannot all be evangelists, but we all can be soul winners." We may not preach but we can talk!

A preacher visited the editor of a newspaper one day and said, "I have come to talk to you about your soul and about Christ." The editor didn't say a word. He walked to a nearby window and then turned toward the minister with tears in his eyes. The preacher thought, "Oh, I have offended him." Then the editor said, "With the exception of my mother, when I was a little boy, no one has ever talked to me about Christ. I THOUGHT NO ONE CARED!" What about you? Do you care for others hearing the Good News?

Communication is always a two way street but it begins and ends in Christ. For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. **God will see His mission through!** If we develop a heart - every single one of us to realize that we are on a mission from God - and it is not just about figuring out Christianity for ourselves - it is about sharing Christ with the world around us. Its about being the church in a world that is often hostile to Christianity. But not being afraid of a social price we are going to have to pay because of it. We're living for an audience of One and we're not going to let our co-workers or our neighbors or our relatives become our Lord. We're going to let Jesus be Lord - Amen? And we're going to let Him tell us what our mission is - not the culture around us. And we're going to let Him be God of this church.

I wonder what CBC is going to look like a generation or two generations from now? I won't be here, but hopefully this church will be filled. And hopefully it won't be kids coming back a generation from now and getting their hearts broken seeing an empty church. Because somewhere along the way - the church lost its mission - it forgot what it was to be the church. Christianity is about growing deeper and rooted in God's Word so God can work through us and so we can serve. And what this church looks like in a generation has everything to do with what is in our hearts now. Are we going to share this gift - or are we going to be selfish and just keep it to ourselves? Faith isn't something to keep to yourself - it

is something to keep, but not to yourself - it is something to share - it is something to give out - it is something to spread around - and without concern for the price we are going to pay.

We're on a mission from God! The mission seems impossible - but since it is from God and anointed by God Who says my power is made perfect in your weakness - it is most certainly possible. Let us let Him use us.

Would you pray with me:

PRAYER: