

77 sermon Podcast.MP3

If you need a reminder or refresher of where we are at, we were in week 12, so only 3 weeks to go after this of our 15 week series looking at the book of Acts. And the reason that we've embarked on this series is because we're asking 1 central question, what does it look like to be the church in post Christian culture, in a non Christian culture? Because I think and statistically we know that the United States of America is firmly moving in a post Christian direction. And so if we wanna be the church that God is calling us to be, we need to look at the first church because they were the ones who originally inhabited that same sort of culture. And so I wanna invite you to just join me, you can follow along in your Bibles or listen as I read to us now Acts chapter 17. So Paul waited in Athens and while he was there his spirit was stirred up as he saw the whole city simply full of idols. He he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the God fearers and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were disputing with him. What can this word scatterer be on about? Some were saying. He seemed to be proclaiming foreign divinities, declared others, since he was preaching Jesus and anastasis. Anastasis means resurrection. So they took him up to the Areopagus. We we are we able to know, they said, what this new teaching really is that you're talking about? You're you're putting very strange ideas into our minds and we'd like to find out what it all means. All the Athenians and the foreigners who live there spend their time simply and solely in telling and hearing the latest novelty. Now here we go. So Paul stood up in the midst of the Areopagus. Men of Athens, he said, I I see that you are in every way an extremely religious people. For as I was going along and looking at your objects of worship, I saw an altar with the inscription to an unknown God. Well I'm here to tell you about what it is that you are worshiping in ignorance. The god who made the world and everything in it, the 1 who is lord of heaven and earth doesn't live in temples made by human hands, nor does he need to be looked after by human hands as though he lacked something since he himself gives life and breath and all things to everyone. He made from 1 stock every race of humans to live on the whole face of the earth, allotting them their

properly ordained times and the boundaries for their dwellings. The aim was that they would search for God and perhaps reach out for Him and find Him. Indeed, he's not actually far from each 1 of us for in him we live and move and exist as some as also some of your own poets have put it, for we are his offspring. Well then, if we really are God's offspring, we ought not to suppose that the divinity is like gold or silver or stone formed by human skill and ingenuity. That was just ignorance. But the time for it has passed and god has drawn a veil over it. Now instead, he commands all people everywhere to repent because he has established a day on which he intends to call the world to account with full and proper justice by a man whom he has appointed. God has given all people his pledge of this by raising this man from the dead. And when they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them ridiculed Paul, but others said, we will give you another hearing about this. So Paul went out from their presence, but some people joined him and believed, including Dionysius, a member of the court of the Areopagus, and a woman named Demaryus, and others with him.

Alright, you guys. It is officially, it's summertime. It's summertime in Augusta which means 1 of 2 things. It is either gonna be a 150 degrees outside or it's gonna rain so dangerously heavy that you do not wanna go outside. And what that means in practice is that in the dire house, we are in a season of watching a lot of movies. We're watching a lot of movies and you guys I need you to know that most of the time my children get to dictate the movies that we watch. And so on my phone, on our iPads, on our televisions, we have direct go to Disney plus. Any of y'all big Disney plus people? Anybody? Okay. Well, my girls generally get to pick the movies we watch. Although, last night, you guys, I got them to watch for the first time the 19 nineties classic movie, Heavyweights. Has anyone seen that movie? Oh, good lord. Go watch it and you will thank me next week. Okay? Now I I got them to watch Heavyweights, but most of the time, they get to pick. And so we've gotten a good, run recently of High School Musical. We've gotten a good run of the Descendants. Anybody as pumped as I am about Descendants 4 coming out soon? Anybody no? Okay. But the 1 I really love, the show that I'm actually really interested in most of all is 1 that Miriam's really gotten into and it it's called Percy Jackson and the Olympians. Is anybody familiar with Percy Jackson and the Olympians? Okay. It was a book first

and now Disney has made it into a show. There was a full length motion picture about it. And Percy Jackson is a demigod. So his mother is a human and his father is a Greek god and the whole series revolves around Percy navigating son of a god. And and y'all in this series, it is fascinating to watch because you get to see Dionysius, you get to see Eros, you get to see Zeus and the pantheon of all the gods and it is really absolutely fascinating. And we can watch this show. Right? We can watch this show. If I were to tell again you know what? I'm actually y'all. I'm telling you right now because I'm gonna talk about this in the 11 o'clock service. And it it 11 o'clock is on television and I'm going to get hate mail from people about letting my kids watch this show because they would say the gods are terrible and we shouldn't expose our kids to that. Right? And that's a fringe group of people. But for the majority of us, we can watch a show like Percy Jackson and the Olympians because we can smile and take it with a grain of salt because we don't believe in the gods. We don't believe in the idols. If I could put it another way, here's what I would say that modern people do not believe, at least we don't think that we believe in idols. We don't think that we believe in the gods. And so we can watch a show like Percy Jackson and have a smile on our face and say it's okay because we as modern Western people know better than to believe in the gods. And because most of us inhabit that kind of mindset, when we get to this story in Acts chapter 17, looking at Paul addressing the Athenians in the city of Athens, we tend to wanna write this story off. Because Paul walks into the city and it says that he looks around and all he sees are temples to the false gods and idols and he is deeply deeply disturbed by that. And and as modern western people, we read this story and we go, well, they didn't know any better. They were simplistic people and we as educated, enlightened humans know better than to believe in the gods. And what I want you to understand this morning is that all of us who have been taught through our educational system to think that way ought to pause and we ought to reflect. Because what I wanna suggest to you is that while we might not worship Zeus or Dionysius, what I want us to understand is that the gods are more alive today and more present among us than they have ever been. And if you doubt that, I wanna remind you of a man named David Foster Wallace. David Foster Wallace was 1 of the great authors, of the 2000 era. He he wrote fiction novels. He wrote nonfiction

essays. He was a fascinating guy. But my favorite thing that he wrote, David Foster Wallace, was he wrote a speech. A speech that was given in particular to people in their early twenties. And in this speech, he talks about how these kids ought to go out into the world and live a good and meaningful compelling for our conversation today. Because, again, David Foster Wallace, who is an atheist, is talking to these people in their twenties. Most of them are not religious at all, graduating from a liberal arts university in upstate New York. And he says to them in the midst of this speech that in the day to day trenches of everyday life, there is no such thing as atheism. The reality is that we all worship. And the only thing we get to choose is what we will worship. And he says that's a pretty good reason for us to choose Jesus or he says Mohammed or the 4 noble truths of the Buddhist path because David Foster Wallace says, if you choose anything else it will eat you alive. He he says that if you worship money and if you worship success, you'll never have enough. You'll never feel like you have enough. He says it's true and it is. If you worship, he says beauty and sexual allure and power. He says, as time and age begins to wear on you, you're always going to feel ugly And you're going to die a 1, 000 deaths before you're finally planted in the ground. If you worship power and influence, you're always going to be looking over your shoulder because you're afraid and you're insecure. And if you worship your intellect which so many of us do, he says you're constantly going to be on edge, worried that you're found out as a fraud. And David Foster Wallace, this is really important, goes on to say that the most powerful thing about the gods that we worship in our day and age is that largely we are unconscious of them. That it is in fact our default setting. That it is hard grained in our hearts to hold up something as ultimate, to worship something above all else. And so as we enter into this discussion of Acts chapter 17 and what it looks like for us to be the church, here's the thing we need to understand that the question is not, if you worship but the question really is, what do you worship? The question is not if you worship but the question is, what do you worship? Because we are all ingrained with a sense that something is bigger, something is more vital, something is more beautiful than us. And so we are hardwired to worship. And let me tell you something guys, in that respect we are more like the church and more like Paul in Acts chapter 17 than we could ever imagine. Because he

walked into a city that was filled with a variety of idols. Give your life to this thing and you will be happy. Give your sacrifice to this god and you will be fulfilled. And listen to me, it is the exact same situation that we are living in in 2024 in the United States of America. We might not call it Zeus or Poseidon, but we call it beauty and influence. We might not call it Dionysius or Hades, but we call it by a variety of other names. And so we need to pay deep attention to what Paul is doing in this chapter if we wanna know how to talk to a non Christian audience about the beauty and the truth of the gospel. But first, I need to set the stage. Right? We're gonna nerd out for just a few minutes. I hope you all are okay with that. I do that from time to time because it is really important for us to understand culturally what is happening. So Paul is in Athens. It says he looks around and he sees all of these idols and he is deeply disturbed. So he goes about his normal pattern y'all. He goes to the synagogue and he preaches and proclaims Jesus there. He has conversation with other people. But then the other thing he does is he goes into the town square. He goes into the city and he talks about Jesus. And in particular, you guys, while he's there, he talks to the Epicureans and he talks to the Stoics. We're gonna come back to that in just a minute. And the story says that he proclaimed Jesus and he proclaimed anastasis which is the Greek word for resurrection. And and and those in Athens would have heard the word anastasis and thought in fact that Jesus was talking about 2 separate or that Paul was talking about 2 separate gods. Jesus and another god, Anastasis. And they are deeply disturbed by what Paul is doing. So y'all, this is really we're not gonna stay here too long, but this is where things get interesting. Because the story says that the stoics and the Epicureans say that Paul is proclaiming foreign divinities. Proclaiming foreign divinities. And that might not seem like much to us but what happens next is he is brought into the Areopagus which is the city center and he is asked, explain what you are talking about. And most of us when we read this passage, we think, okay, Paul's gonna get into a religious debate. Paul's gonna explain the gospel and there are no real consequences. But let's hinge on this word for just a minute. This phrase, proclaiming foreign divinities. Y'all that is a dynamite phrase when it's put in its proper context because what is happening is that Paul is actually being brought into what is in essence a courtroom and he's being put on trial. If you go back

and you read Greek philosophy which I know all of us love to do so much. Right? What you will see is that Socrates Socrates was killed by the city of Athens. Do you know why? Because he was proclaiming foreign divinity. He was upsetting the status quo. And so when Paul comes into the city of Athens and they say, you are proclaiming strange divinities, foreign divinities and we need to hear a little bit more from you. Y'all listen. The states could not be higher. And Paul goes in to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. And what I love about this story, when we put it in its proper context is that we understand this fact. That the gospel is always a threat to the status quo. If we actually live out and proclaim the way of Jesus, it will put us at odds with the culture that is around us. If we live with the values and the virtues of the kingdom of God that Jesus teaches us about, we will be perceived as a threat to the way things have always been done. And the quicker we can come to terms with that in a post Christian world, the better off we will be. And so Paul is brought into the Areopagus because, as I said just a moment ago, he's been talking to the stoics and he's been talking to the Epicureans. Now we gotta make sense of who these people are. Because while we hear the word stoic and Epicurean, we might not think oh, goodness gracious. That's just Greek philosophical nonsense. But let me tell you something. The stoics and the Epicureans, they they they were popularizers of philosophy movements that were ultimately the air that everyone breathed. So think for a second. You take democracy for granted even though in the majority of the world democracy is a foreign concept. You you take religious liberty for granted even though in the majority of the world that is not a thing that people get to experience. And people have taught about those things so that they are ingrained in our consciousness. And in that exact same way the Epicureans and the Stoics were the popularizers of the way people thought. And so the Epicureans, real quick because this is actually gonna matter for us, the Epicureans, here's basically what they believed. That there were gods, but the gods were really far away from us. And so the best way that you can live your life is to seek the maximum amount of pleasure. Now for the Epicureans, they believe that that pleasure was found through a quiet somber, sober existence. But the gods are far away, they don't have anything to do with us and the best way to live your life is to ultimately seek what? Pleasure. If we can translate that

into our day and age, into 2024 in your networks, in your television channels, in your podcast, they are the YOLO generation. Right? You only live once and so do whatever you want. Do what makes you feel good because the gods don't really care about what we are doing. And so there are the Epicureans and then there are the Stoics. And the Stoics believed that the gods permeated everything. There were gods. There were lots of gods. And if you wanted to see them, all you needed to do is look around because the gods were present in absolutely everything. And the goal of your life is to tap into that divine source and harness it for your own power. Right? If I could take that and we could translate it into 2024, the stoics are Brene Brown. The stoics are the people, the hippies. Right? They're the Hey, man. God's everywhere. God's everything. It's all good. And the end result is the same, go and live a life filled with virtue, but the gods are in everyone and in everything. And so Paul steps into that arena with those 2 entirely different concepts of what God's relationship is to humanity. And what he does you guys is absolutely remarkable. I read to you the entire thing, however long it was, because it really matters if we wanna understand how to communicate with people in a post Christian world. If you read through Acts chapter 17, what you find is that Paul, time and time again, uses language that the Epicureans used. Paul quotes the poets that the stoics would have believed in. See, what I love about what Paul does in Acts chapter 17 is that he seeks common ground. As he goes about telling the love and the beauty of the gospel, he does not start by using religious language which they would never have heard of before. But what Paul does and is so remarkable is he quotes their poets, and he uses their mental frameworks, and he makes sense of the world in a way that they could understand. See y'all that is what is so remarkable about what Paul is doing here. Paul speaks to the Athenians in a way they can understand. And as we move into a post Christian world, y'all I know this is insider baseball right now. This is insider baseball because I'm talking to you as Christian church people. But what we need to understand is that increasingly it will be the case that the people we are talking to about the gospel, even if they grew up in church, will not have a religious framework. And so if we want to be a thriving and beautiful witness for the gospel, We will do what Paul did and we will speak a language that people can understand. I will never forget you guys. I was I

was doing an event in a bar 1 night in my last church where I would just go stand on the platform and talk. And and it'd be there for, like, an hour and a half and the room would be filled with people and they would just bring up their questions and put them on the platform and and I would answer them and it was so much fun. And then when the night was over, it's like 11:30 at night, I'm finally eating a salad and the bartender, Iris comes up to me. And Iris comes up to me and she goes, well I've been listening to you do these events for months now. And I used to be a Catholic, but now I'm nothing at all. And she says, can I ask you a genuine question? I said, what is it? And she says, Will, I don't believe in hell. Does that mean I'm going to go there when I die? Y'all think about how awesome that is that I enter into a bar and I don't come at them with my religious baggage and the things that they would have written off ipso facto from the time I walked in the door, but I met them where they were. And Iris comes to me and she says, I don't believe in hell, but am I gonna go there when I die? And I said, Iris, I'm not God, man, but I do know Jesus loves you. And I do know that the power of the resurrection can transform your life right here and right now. Y'all, it will be so important for us as a church to understand, we should not and cannot take it for granted that people speak the language that we have been indoctrinated with since the time we were children. And it will be so essential and important for us as Christians to meet people where they are. To read the books that they are reading. If I have 1 more person who says to me, Will, why are you reading Neil deGrasse Tyson? Why are you reading Noah Yuval Harari? Why are you reading all of these atheists? Why? Because I wanna know what everyone is thinking so that I can tell them the beauty of the gospel. See Paul seeks a common understanding and he meets people where they are. And y'all I am committed that our church is going to be that sort of place and I am certainly going to be that sort of human being. And Paul lays that framework and he lays that foundation, and then what he does next is so incredibly important. Right? And I wanna hit on these next few things pretty quickly because I know we don't have that much time left. But if we seek common ground and if we seek a common understanding, not using all of our background and baggage, but meeting people where they are, then we are in a position to turn and go. To turn and go and speak the radical nature of the gospel. And if you look at what Paul does, this is so

important because he says that god has raised a man from the dead. And that man is going to come and judge the earth and so you need to repent. Y'all, what I love about this next section is that Paul lays common ground and Paul speaks a language they understand. But what he does and what will be so essential for us is that we keep Jesus at the center. Yes. I know you are religious in every way. And yes. That is a good thing. But the time has come for me to tell you about Jesus, Paul says. Jesus is at the center of every conversation that we will have about faith. That is central and it is so incredibly important. I love what Paul does here. He says, there's a man who has been raised from the dead. And because that man has been raised from the dead, the veil has been lifted and the world is fundamentally a different standing behind pulpits and banging on them and telling you to repent? Banging on them, telling you to turn or burn. And what I want us to understand is that that language of repent, of repentance, it is not something to be afraid of. But when Paul says, repent. What he is saying to the Athenians is turn literally. Turn and go in a different direction. Live your life in a different way because Jesus has shown us something better. Repent, turn, and live into the fullness of who God has called you to be because the day is gonna come when Jesus will return and he will judge the world. Now I did not grow up in church but if you were anything like me, you were taught absolutely and unequivocally to fear the judgment of God. How many of y'all went to judgment house when you were kids? Anybody? Oh, you guys. I'm not I don't have time to go into it. But look, I was taught that God was an angry, vengeful, wrath full deity much like Zeus in the in the Percy Jackson books, who was waiting and willing to strike me down. And words like judgment were heavy in those conversations. But if we understand what Paul is saying, and if we understand the heart behind what he is doing, we will know that judgment listen, this is so important. As we communicate with the gospel to a non Christian world, god's judgment is not something to be feared. God's judgment is not something to be feared. Contrary to what we have been taught, God's judgment is actually a good thing. Because what Paul is saying is that 1 day are you ready? God is going to restore all things. Athenians, he says, the world is broken and the world isn't the way that you or I want it to be. But because God has raised Jesus from the dead, you have an opportunity to turn and live in his way. Because the day is gonna

come when Jesus will return and get ready. He is going to make the world right. He's going to restore and renew and redeem all things. The day is going to come, Paul is saying, When the wolf will lie down with the lamb and weapons of war will be beat into instruments of peace. And you have an opportunity to live into that way right here and right now. Y'all, in a post Christian context, and in a post Christian world, there are people that are yearning for the world to be made right. And there are people right now who are putting their hopes in politicians, who are putting their hopes in monetary gain for the world to be made what it should. And please understand that what Paul is saying is there's only 1 who's gonna make the world right and His name is Jesus. And you can live in his way right here and right now. Do you know why? Because he has resurrected from the dead. And that's the thing that I wanna hit on this. 1 last thing very quickly. That as we talk to our non Christian and unchristian friends and neighbors. And if you don't have any non unchristian friends or neighbors, you need to take a deep look in the mirror. Because when we communicate the gospel, we will listen to what Paul does. And what does he talk about over and over? He talks about Jesus and he talks about resurrection. He talks about resurrection. Listen to me y'all. Resurrection, this is maybe the most important thing I'm gonna say, that resurrection will be central to any conversation that we have about the gospel. In a post Christian world, resurrection is going to be absolutely essential to any conversation we have about the gospel because so many of us were brought up with the framework that Jesus died for your sin. Okay? Right? And that's true, But we leave it there. And when Jesus only dies for your sin, then your life isn't transformed in this moment. But if Christ died for our sins, and if on the 3rd day He was resurrected from the dead, then Paul says the same power of God that brought this man back to life is the same power that is at work in you and through you. And resurrection is the key to the gospel moving forward because what it says loudly and boldly is that your life can be transformed in the present moment. That you do not serve an angry and vengeful god but you serve 1 who defeated death. And you serve 1 who transforms existence and resurrection says that this life matters. And resurrection says this life can be what god intended it for you. And so as Paul talks to the Athenians and as we talk to non Christian friends and neighbors, we will live into the heart of the

resurrection. And so ultimately, y'all, I'm gonna wrap it up. We I got 2 questions. I got 2 questions. Alright? Everything we've gone through, and that was like a fire hose worth of stuff I just threw at you, and I could go for another hour. I hope I don't know if y'all love this, but I have so much fun doing this sort of thing. And ultimately, 2 questions. 1 is for us as a church, and the other is for you as an individual. Radically different questions, but both equally important. And the first thing that I want us to settle on and ask is this, are we willing, like Paul, to meet people where they are for the sake of the gospel? In your high school, in your workplace, are you willing to leave behind the religious baggage that you carry so that you might meet people where they are with the good news of Jesus? Y'all, I know. Augusta is about 10 years behind national curves. Right? But unchristian people are moving here and non Christian friends are living right beside you. And those numbers are only gonna amplify and grow over the coming years. And there are tons of churches y'all. Listen, there are tons of churches where people can go and have all their preconceived biases, and have all their political opinions validated and confirmed, but I'm committed to meeting people where they are. I'm committed to being for the sake of the gospel and that means speaking a language that people understand. That means meeting folks where they are. That's the question for us as a church and I mean it. It's the question will the that will define our future. And if we aren't willing to do it, in 50 years this place will be empty and the doors will be closed. It's fact. It's a radical fact. And so that's 1 question we need to wrestle with, but the second 1 is more personal. Right? The second 1 is more personal. And as I mentioned in the beginning, right, Percy Jackson, the gods aren't real. Stop and think again. Because David Foster Wallace says, we all worship something. And the question is not what? The question is not if, but the question is what? Do you worship money? Do you worship power? Do you worship your beauty? Do you worship your children? The question that you need to wrestle with, the question that Paul is calling us to answer is nothing more than this, what are the gods in your life? What are the things that you think are the most important? What are the things that you cannot imagine your life without? And ultimately, what Paul is calling on us to do on this day is to be honest about it. To be honest enough to say my life isn't where it needs to be. To be honest enough to turn and go in a different direction so that we

might live and live well. We all worship something and if we can learn anything from Paul, it's that we can call people to the gospel. We can call people to life. And my greatest prayer for our church is that that is exactly what we will do. And so with those 2 questions lingering in the ether in your heart and in your mind, I wanna invite you to join me and let's pray 1 more time. God, man, this story this story, Lord, it is so big and and it is so transforming and powerful. And God, right now, while we could lean in the direction of who we will be as a church and God, I pray we will be people who radically seek out the other. God, right now I wanna lean onto that final question. Because God, some of us are here in this space and and our lives are full of idols. And if we are willing to be honest with ourselves, we do worship things other than you. And so lord, on this day call us to account. Lord, on this day, open our eyes so that we might see. Lord, help us to know that your judgment isn't something to be feared but it's to be welcomed. Lord, help us to see that through you and your grace, we can live into the fullness of who you have called us to be. God, what do we worship? And on this day, if the answer is anything other than Jesus, may we turn to Him. May we live through Him. God, we are grateful for this time we share together. Now be with us as we celebrate and worship you 1 more time. This is our prayer and we ask it in Jesus name. Amen. Amen.