To The Unknown God
Text: Read all of Acts 17:13-34

Background: This takes place on what is often referred to as the Second Missionary Journey of the apostle Paul. Athens was and still is a prominent city of Europe. It was the seat of Greek philosophy, which to this day is the foundation of Western Philosophy...and remembered for notables like Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Two schools of philosophy are mentioned here...Epicurean and Stoic. The Epicureans philosophy could be summarized in the old saying...eat, drink and be merry...while the Stoics would be...Grin and bear it.

The city was filled with idolatry...and I mean given over to it. Loaded...so much so that Paul could not keep quiet about it. At first he began by speaking about it in the synagogue with Jews and Gentiles who went there to worship, probably on each Sabbath Day...and in the market everyday with whoever would listen. It was likely here that he happened to converse with some of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers...which eventually lead to him going to this place called the Areopagus or Mars Hill.

Their elitist mentality is obvious when they refer to him as a babbler...Greek for seed-picker...poor lowly folks that pick the seeds left after harvest...a scrap collector...in this case, one who has some little scraps of information. -- Others refer to his talk as proclaiming two new deities...or gods...Jesus and the resurrection. They see this as two more to add their list of mythological gods or elevated heroes. Now, we can see how Jesus might be seen as a god, but the resurrection? A god? Yes. They had female goddesses to all kinds of such...the goddess of pity,
Are you one of the few who believe this message of God and want to join with us in our fellowship of faith as we move towards the judgment day? We would love to have your name added to that glorious number...Damaris, Dionysius and YOU! We now stand to sing a song of encouragement.

So up to the Areopagus they go, where he is given opportunity to elaborate on this new teaching of his...Luke says the Athenians are big on hearing new things...but the way he words it is interesting...he makes a broad sweeping statement...ALL the Athenians...spend their time in NOTHING else but to tell or hear something new. I often get on my kids for making such broad sweeping generalities. Ha! But, one thing is for sure...these Athenian folks need to get a life. Ha!

Ok, let’s begin today taking a close look at this most marvelous, inspiring speech beginning in verse 22....and we will continue, God willing, next Sunday. -- One little observation before we get started...you will notice an absence of appeals to Scriptures...if people do not even know God why would appealing to a book of His carry any weight much? But, Paul reasons with them and here is what he says...

22...So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious.

Paul masterfully begins by commending them for their religiosity. Rather than beginning with a blistering denunciation of their idolatry or making mocking fun of the altar he had seen to an unknown god...credit is given for at least believing in gods...being religious. He uses it favorably for his future...
remarks and for them being hopefully open to whatever it is he has to say next. Paul said elsewhere that to the weak, he became as weak. This is a good example of that. --And this is our first lesson...We must learn to do the same.

We too, need to commend people who have any semblance of religion at all. Rather than first coming across negative because they are off track on something...begin by praising...it is a good tactic of evangelism...praise where you can...look for something you can agree on...spin even an erroneous statement into a truthful vein if possible. This approach will be far more likely to win someone than being confrontational right off.

Another good reason to commend even idolatry...or today commending those who may be Buddhist, Muslim, or Jehovah’s Witness, or Mormon or Catholic or Protestant or whatever religiously, is that atheism has very little that can be said for it.

To be atheistic is foolish....by that I mean it denies good common sense. These Athenians were no dummies...one thing they were not short on was good sense....these were not a bunch of backward, uncivilized superstitious barbarians...these were highly educated, sophisticated, philosophical, thinking folks...maybe some the most in all of human history.

So you really have to praise the Athenians for at least having enough sense to believe in a power higher than man’s, even if they were ignorant of the true, living God.

**Conclusion:** 32-34...*Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, We will hear you again about this. So Paul went out from their midst. But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.*

The whole idea of a resurrection unto judgment and the subsequent need for me to reform my life NOW, is ridiculous to many...and as a way of deflecting its impact, they will make fun of it. I sure hope that is not YOU today. I beseech you with the tender mercies of God...do not receive the truth in vain and walk away making fun of it. I beg you. -- Then there were some who procrastinated. They said we will hear more in the future. Did they? Only God knows...but I do know how risky it is to put off until tomorrow what you have have need of doing today. If you need to repent and believe the gospel of Jesus...do it today. Please I beg you...others here are hoping for you...but it is up to you. -- And last, there seems there were a few people who were favorably impressed with God’s word being proclaimed through the mouth of Paul. Why Luke mentions two by name, I do not know for sure...but it is interesting that Dionysius is called the Areopagite...he would have most likely been a chief person of those gathered on Mar’s Hill, the Areopagus. How neat is that? -- As for Damaris...nothing but speculation can be made as to more background about her or why Luke would name her...it may be that Theophilus, to whom the book is addressed, being a Greek name, may have been familiar with her. Anyway, it is a name I have seldom if ever heard as a girl’s name...but it would be a good one...maybe someone will use it soon.
31...because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.

But, God is not only a God of repentance, but a God of judgment! A God of Accountability...giving an answer for yourself...determining eternal outcomes...separating good and evil. -- Paul had already spoken of the resurrection...as it is mentioned earlier in the chapter, so he is just returning to the idea. As I said before, this appears to have been a huge part of Paul’s preaching...preaching Jesus as the Christ and Savior and His resurrection...yes, but more so I think it is the resurrection of us all. And it is not just a neat little discussion of will we return to life after our death, but it is a heavy discussion about a resurrection to judgment. That is the impact of the resurrection...we do not get off scott-free with living as we good well please...and then going the way of all the earth...with no consequences beyond the grave...No! But all of us must meet our Maker...this is inescapable.

In God’s mind it is a determined day of judgment...and a determined man to do the judging. Though not mentioned by name, Jesus is who Paul is thinking of when he says that God has determined to judge all mankind by Him whom He raised from the dead. The resurrection of Jesus gives the positive assurance that we will all be raised too and it will be by HIM (Jesus) and what He has decided is righteousness, that all men everywhere will be judged. Mohammed judges no man...Moses judges no man...Buddha judges no man. Jesus of Nazareth is the one and only judge of all.

Temples, statues, altars...were everywhere. I read somewhere that it was estimated as 2000-3000! The Athenians seemed to want to be sure to cover every base...would not want to inadvertently offend a god by ignorant oversight...so they made an altar for any god they may have missed....any god unknown to us. Now as much as this sounds humorous, let me say something most serious...I love the zeal to want to go all the way religiously...this passion for religion is admirable. It may have even reminded Paul of his own past...when he in good conscience so vehemently opposed Christians thinking that was God’s will. He is said to have breathed persecution against Christians...but he was ignorantly wrong...He once said I thought I must do many things contrary the the way of Jesus of Nazareth and you know where that all ended up. So the Athenians are not being silly with their unknown god altar...but take this religious thing seriously...they aren’t a bunch of pew warmers...and here is our second lesson...we need such zeal for the true religion, if we stand a chance.

But, it goes to show that people can be ignorantly, mistakenly, religiously, zealously, worshiping...and it is no different today. It is possible that people today not truly know God. For example, John says in I John...if a man does not walk in love he does not KNOW God - I John 4:8. It is not good enough to worship a god...or even in ignorance to worship the one true God. -- It is interesting how Paul words this...that the god they worship ignorantly, he now was going to enlighten them about...wonderful way of talking with folks. Now, let’s examine closely this speech.
The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man,

First notice...God is singular...THE God who made the world....The OT taught the Jews..."Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one."

Ephesian 4:4 says there is one God who is above all and through all and in all.

And God made the "world"...the word is cosmos in the Greek...connotes the idea of orderliness. Just as a cosmetologist arranges your hair, so the cosmos or world is an orderly universe. God is the God of orderly creation...This is where we have to begin...God created it all. If we are wrong on this 1st point we'll be wrong on everything which follows that.

Like an algebra equation...if the first number is wrong, everything following it will be...don’t even bother continuing the rest of the problem. This flew in the face of these 2 groups of philosophers. The Epicureans believed that matter was eternal and had no creator. The Stoics were Pantheists and believed God was in everything...rocks, trees, the river, etc. WRONG! 2000 years has not changed much...Creationism is still unpopular today...maybe due to ignorance, but probably because people don’t want to be accountable to God. Evolution today is taught as a fact, when it’s not even a good theory. Scientific theory is supposed to be based on observable facts in controlled conditions. But, atheism and evolution are faith systems...don’t let anyone ever tell you different. And don’t feel small because you believe in God and aren’t scientific. Atheistic evolutionists believe too and what they believe is UNbelievable. One really has to try hard to be atheistic. He has to BELIEVE so many things that defy logic...it borders on the ridiculous. Listen to this...

The KJV says "God winked at...” may leave the connotation that God winked at idolatry being a big deal....that is not at all the idea...it is that in times passed he looked past it in exacting a strict judgment all the time for people’s idolatrous ignorance. In reading the OT you may sometimes get the impression that God was constantly raining fire and brimstone on people, consuming people with fire from heaven, opening up the earth and swallowing people alive all the time...but that is not at all the case. Sure, He did that on occasion and showed an example of eternal fiery punishment, but ALL THE TIME? Probably not even 1% of the time. If He did, there would be 99% of the earth’s population gone!

But, now Paul says, there is no excuse for not knowing this fact of the true God and no leniency granted. The unknown God is unknown no longer and they must change their thinking along these lines or else...or else what? That is coming in just a moment. But, if they continue to worship otherwise, then they will be willfully ignorant in worshiping and this is as true today as then.

But, notice he says that God desires men to repent...No! He COMMANDS them to repent. He commands many men to repent? NO! He commands ALL men everywhere to repent. Every soul on the earth is amenable to the law of God...every soul of any race, of any nation is required to repent and turn toward the true God. God is a God of repentance. What a damning doctrine of men it is that makes God a God of simply saying the sinner’s prayer or a God of accepting Jesus as your personal savior....that’s all.

THAT’S ALL? In the very first talk about the nature of the true God Paul says God is a God who demands REPENTANCE! -- Believe? No! Repent and believe the gospel...Jesus says in Mark 1:15.
Part 3

29... Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.

As we concluded our discussion last time, both God, human reason and even Greek poets recognize that we human beings are made in the image of God...we are His offspring...we have been created by Him. With that heavy weight of evidence, it only makes good common sense that God's nature is in any way physical...an image that we can artistically represent with a statue. Before I delve into this thought, allow me a brief aside, notice how Paul appeals to man's mental capabilities in drawing inferences to reach the truth. Arriving at the truth God expects man to do some thinking on his own. When you hear someone downplay the role of implications in God’s Word leading us to the truth, then tell them they are wrong. Flat out wrong. Paul here uses deductive reasoning to reach a conclusion...IF we are God’s offspring (and we are) and children resemble their parents (and they do), then it is absurd to think that God is stick or stone or gold. YOU are not stick or stone or gold...then neither can be God.

God has always wanted not only no other gods before Him, but also no graven images to depict HIM. No man has ever seen him, so how presumptuous to make a picture of Him...a statue of Him. How sinful! We who truly worship God in truth worship Him in spirit.

30...The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent

The atheistic evolutionist has to BELIEVE...

1. That God Does Not Exist - This is obvious...but let me stress that the atheist has to believe this...The atheist would have to be God to absolutely KNOW that there is no God. He would have to be everywhere and know everything, for where he is not may be where God is or what he does not know, may be God!

2. That Matter Is Either Eternal Or Created Itself - Since to the atheist God is not a possibility, that leaves only matter and it must be either eternal or self created. Since science has proven our universe had a beginning, even estimating the age of the earth, the notion that matter is eternal is not a viable one even to scientists. The other option of self creation borders on the absurd...See what I mean...this stuff is UNbelievable.

3. That Life Is Spontaneously Generated - This has never been replicated in a laboratory or anywhere for that matter, but has to be believed by the atheist. Life somehow just began. Wow! That takes a lot of faith. A giant leap of blind faith.

4. That Order And Design Are Results Of Non-Intelligent Accidents - Since faith is required, then which is more reasonable to believe...that a mind is behind all the wonders of this universe or it is all totally an accident? -- There is a story which dates back to the time when the statesman Benjamin Franklin was Ambassador of the United States to France. While living in Paris, Franklin was a member of an elite, literary, social and scientific club. At certain meetings of this intellectual group, atheistic sentiments were expressed, leaving the impression that only the superstitious and uninformed
still believed in God as the creator of the universe. At the next meeting of the group, Benjamin Franklin brought a beautifully designed and executed model of the sun and our entire solar system. The earth and the other planets were in their proper relationship to the sun and to each other and of appropriate sizes. It was a masterpiece. Upon seeing it, one of the sophisticated members of the club asked, "Who made it?" Dryly, without the trace of a smile, Franklin responded, "No one. It just happened." (some attribute this story to Sir Isaac Newton.)

5. That Non-morality Evolved To Morality - Why should a person do good? From whence came our sense of right and wrong? I have a good explanation...one that requires faith, but one that is reasonable...GOD!

Do not for a moment think less of yourself because you are a believer...as if modern scientific man is not...all mankind are believers...we walk by faith in so many things....the subject of origins is just one of them.. Atheist BELIEVE...we Christians believe. It is a matter of who has the more believable evidence.

The next thing Paul says in this verse is that God is the LORD of heaven and earth. And notice the little word IS. Not He WAS, but He IS the Lord of heaven and earth. God is depicted as involved with His creation...all of nature. God controls the universe...He is the master of the universe. He is interested in the affairs of man and involved. This is the true God.

And then lastly, since this is true, do not make the mistake of thinking God is a god that can be made to reside in humanly built houses or temples. Even in the OT temple, Solomon says that he understood that...listen to II

You see what I mean when I say that what Paul is saying is that God is as near as our heart...it is not a proximity or physical distance, but a proximity of spirit. Why is God not very far from anyone? Because it is in HIM that we live and move and have our being. That is just how close He is...we are living in Him...moving IN HIM...and have our very existence IN HIM! Now that is close! Seeking God begins with opening up to that reality...now do you see why I said last Sunday that atheism has nothing much at all that can be commended...it is nonsensical...makes no sense...and how we cannot go any further in discussing things of the soul if we deny God? -- But, that is just how near He is to all...so near that actually we are IN Him.

Finally, Paul appeals for support to his argument and claim, one of the Greek philosophers...maybe a man named Aratus who was from Cilicia (where Paul was from) and/or another, Cleanthes, a Stoic who said about the same. BTW, it is ok to quote human sources when preaching. It can be overdone I know, but to disapprove of it entirely is to disapprove of Paul and God. Anyway, some non-Jewish folks knew enough to claim human beings the offspring of God. And so we are. Made in His image it says in Genesis. We all, including atheists are the offspring of God. All human beings are said by James to be made in the similitude of God. And therefore we must honor all men, Peter says. We must treat all men as our brother in a human sense.

But, Paul’s main point is that graven images or statues of God just won’t do...but we will save that for next time, as we continue this analysis of this most marvelous speech. May God bless the preaching of His word.
chastised by the same God in hopes of the same outcome...people turn to God. And this is maybe where this nation is headed next. But, that God only knows. Either way, God is actively at work in the lives of individuals and nations.

But, the apostle goes on to say that this true God that is unknown to the Athenians is a God that wants people to grope after Him to find Him. The journey of finding God is part of the needed experience. God will be found by faith, not sight. God will be found by feeling your way toward Him for awhile...and sometimes that can be groping in the dark...God wants it to be this way...hopes for it to be this way and I then conclude it HAS to be this way. The ONE who made you knows you better than you know yourself...and HE says that you need to seek in order to find...knock and it will be opened...ask...and you shall receive...draw near to Him and then He will draw near to you...humble yourself...and then He will exalt you in due time. But, we have to put our best foot forward...make a move...the proverbial ball is in our court.

It isn’t this way because God is so distant...so far removed...so hard to find...NO! He is quite near to all...just as close as we opening our heart and understanding the will of the Lord. When we do that we are not far from the kingdom...we are kneeling at the cross of Jesus... and boldly approaching God’s throne of grace and mercy.

28...for "In him we live and move and have our being; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we are indeed his offspring."

 Chronicles 2:6...Who is able to build him a house, since heaven, even highest heaven, cannot contain him? Who am I to build a house for him, except as a place to make offerings before him?

Today, it should be no different...if we claim to know the true God, then we should know that God is not restricted to a church building...or some cathedral...or sanctuary...the Lord’s house is the people. True worship or the true God will then have to be on a spiritual plane...and everywhere.

**Part 2**

25...nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.

The one, true, living God is not served by hands as the idol priests had to do...providing upkeep and maintenance. It rather is just the opposite...we derive our sustenance and we need our maintenance provided by Him. Our life, breath and everything comes from Him...and that is current and present, not past tense. -- God does not NEED anything from us...remember that. Absolutely NOTHING is needed from us for Him to be who He is...GOD! He is God with or without us...He is no less God because I do not believe in Him or I do not obey Him. God WANTS certain things from us, but He does not NEED anything. -- On the other hand, we need EVERYTHING from Him...and I mean absolutely everything! We do not exist except it be for Him...we are not animated except by Him...we do not take another breath, except it be for Him...He truly holds our breath in His hands. --- Now with that kind of faith and understanding I am going to be so humble...so
When describing God we must see His universality...He is not just the God of the Jews, or the God of Christians...or the God of America...or the God of a certain race or ethnic group of people...He is the God of ALL. Every human being is a descendent of Adam. We can wonder all we want about there being another Genesis creation elsewhere, but the truth is all people have come from one man. Now that may be hard to explain...how did we get all the colors of man...how did we get all the different languages...check that...that one is actually easy to explain...but the God that formed Adam out of the dust is the very same God that formed you in your mother’s womb. THE ONE AND THE SAME GOD! -- But, Paul goes on to say that the nations of the earth...even their duration of dominance and existence and the extent to which their imperial rule goes...HE (GOD) has determined and controls. Nebuchadnezzar learned that the hard way..on his all fours like a wild beast grazing in the field...the supreme God of the universe rules over the affairs of men...gives to whomsoever He pleases and that sometimes includes ruthless, wicked and base men. The forefathers of America believed this experiment in a nation of the people, by the people and for the people was first ordained of God...listen to these famous lines of our Declaration of Independence...

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation. We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

But, this does not apply only to us..but to all nations today...and all nation of history...both the good and the evil...both the democratic and the despotic. This goes to show the active involvement of the Great Creator in the ups and downs of nations...whether Christian or not. This is true Providence...both blessings and curses.

27... that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us,

The ultimate aim in God keeping a hand in the affairs of men and nations is to influence people in their seeking Him. Perhaps it was God’s blessing the formation of this nation...providing a place of religious freedom from European dominance that aided many in seeking the Lord and finding Him. As we look back it sure seems as if God had a hand in what eventually came to be known as the restoration movement through the creation of a seedbed for such in the formation of this country. Many folks sought after the Lord and came to know the Lord through the atmosphere of religious tolerance in this new place called America. -- But, nations can fall and nations can be...