

I. Introduction

Good morning! Walls are often built because of fear. When we fear something or someone, we often build a wall to keep ourselves safe from them. Walls often represent fear. But bridges speak of hope. When we want to connect things, cross over barriers, or move forward into something new, we build bridges. This morning I want to challenge us all to be bridge builders.

One important step toward being a bridge builder is to get rid of the fear that makes us want to build walls. As long as we are afraid, we will want more walls. But when we are released from fear, then we are free to tear down the walls and build bridges instead. How can we be set free from fear? Jesus showed us how. We are set free from fear when we are filled with love. If we are full of love, there is no room left for fear in our hearts.

1 John 4:18-19 express the idea with these words. **“There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. We love because he first loved us.”** This is a joyous and hope-filled word. It is not easy to choose the way of love, but it is a great blessing. When we know and accept how much God loves us, then we are released from the bondage of fear and set free to walk the path of love.

How do we know God loves us? There are many ways, but the most perfect demonstration of the love of God is the cross. **Romans 5:8, “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”** When we know that God loves us so much that He came in the person of Jesus Christ to be with the people of His creation and to give His life in payment for our sins, then we begin to understand the way of love. And, when we know that Jesus rose from the grave on the third day, then we are set free from the fear of death because we have confidence that the One who loves us is alive and that He will give us resurrection life as well.



Let's open our hearts wide to God so that He can fill our hearts with His perfect love. When we are focused on Jesus and filled with His love, then we will have the courage to tear down the walls and to begin to build bridges of love - bridges that we can cross over to share the Good News of Jesus with others.



In today's passage in Acts, we will see how Paul built bridges to share the gospel with the people of Athens. First, let's remember where we are in the story of Paul's second missionary journey. Paul had been preaching in Berea, but when the same people who had stirred up trouble in Thessalonica came to Berea and began to stir up trouble there as well, the believers decided Paul should move on. **Acts 17:14-15, “The brothers immediately sent Paul to the coast, but Silas and Timothy stayed at Berea. The men who escorted Paul brought him to Athens and then left with instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible.”** So, at the beginning of today's passage, Paul is in Athens waiting for Silas and Timothy to come and join him.

The Greeks worshipped many gods and Athens was filled with statues of Greek gods. But to the people of Athens, the most important of these gods was the Greek goddess Athena and the city is named after her. The main temple of Athena is the Parthenon, the ruins of which still stand today on the Acropolis overlooking the city of Athens. This huge temple was built more than four hundred years before the time of Jesus, and when Paul was in Athens it would have dominated the city.



Let's read Acts 17:16-34.

II. Scripture Reading (Acts 17:16-34, NIV)

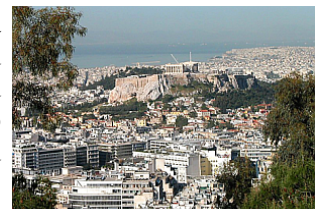
16 While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. 17 So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. 18 A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babblers trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. 19 Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? 20 You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean." 21 (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

22 Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. 23 For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you. 24 "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. 25 And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. 26 From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. 27 God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.

28 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.' 29 "Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone--an image made by 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 him from the dead." 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." 33 At that, Paul left the Council. 34 A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

III. Teaching

In this photo of modern Athens, we can see that the Parthenon is still a dominant presence over the city of Athens. In Paul's day, the streets below would have been busy with commerce and travelers, as well as worshippers going to and from the Parthenon and many other temples. The idols in Athens were so numerous that the Roman author Petronius once quipped that it was easier to find a god than a man in Athens.

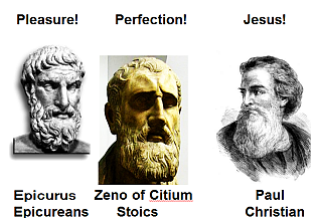


To Paul, a devout Jew and an apostle of our Lord Jesus, the idol worship of Athens must have been extremely distressing. In his distress, Paul must have felt that he had to begin preaching immediately without waiting for Silas and Timothy to arrive. Paul preached in the synagogue and in the marketplace. Perhaps you can imagine the Roman forum of Athens filled with vendors selling their goods with Paul moving among the crowds telling whoever would listen about Jesus.



Before long, Paul's preaching began to draw attention. **Acts 17:18, "A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babblers trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection."**

Athens was the home of Plato and a center of learning, especially for those interested in philosophy. All of the ancient Greek philosophies had been taught there, but in the time of Paul the two main groups were the Epicureans and the Stoics. The Epicureans followed the philosophy of Epicurus who taught that there is no afterlife and that seeking pleasure in modest living is the highest good.



The Stoics followed the teachings of Zeno of Citium whose philosophy emphasized escaping destructive desires by seeking moral and intellectual perfection. If Epicurus and Zeno had been asked to summarize their teachings in a single word, the one might have answered, “*Pleasure!*” and the other might have replied, “*Perfection!*”

There are many differences, but in some ways the philosophies of the Epicureans and the Stoics resembled the ideas of modern humanists and Buddhists. But Paul’s answer to all human philosophies is the same. Paul’s answer is, “*Jesus!*” The Christian faith is not based on mere human wisdom or philosophy; it is based on a person, the person of Jesus Christ.

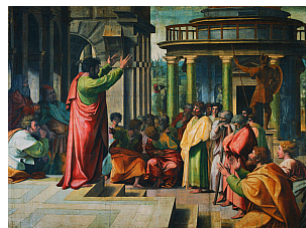
The philosophers took Paul to a meeting of the Areopagus. The Aeropagus is a hill named after the Greek god Ares, whom the Romans called Mars. The King James Bible follows the Roman usage and says, “Mars Hill,” instead of Aeropagus. This photo shows the Areopagus as seen from the Acropolis. There was a council of elders that met at the Aeropagus that was called by the same name. When Paul was taken to this place to speak, he was being given a chance to share his teaching, but he was also being placed under a kind of judgment. The Council of the Aeropagus had some authority over what could be taught in the city and they could have forbidden Paul from teaching.



In making his defense, Paul chose wisely when he connected his teaching about Jesus to something that was familiar to them. **Acts 17:22-23, “Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: ‘Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.’”** The Greeks were very superstitious and they feared that any god they ignored would punish them. But they weren’t sure that they knew the names of all of the gods, so just to be safe, they also worshipped, the, “unknown god.”

Paul chose their worship of the unknown god as a place to build a bridge to their culture and world view. They might not be interested in foreign gods, but they were interested in learning about their own unknown god. Paul went on to quote from two Greek poets that were well known and admired, thus making his bridge into their culture wider and stronger. And then Paul gave a powerful message that summarized the key teachings of the Christian faith.

Raphael painted the scene like this. In Acts 17, we have only a few sentences from Paul’s message. I am sure the original message was much longer, but Luke recorded only an outline. Nonetheless, the points Paul taught were a clear rejection of the teachings of human philosophies. Paul’s message included the following key ideas:



1. The One True God created all things, including mankind
2. God is present everywhere, so He is always near
3. God does not live in man-made temples and does not need anything
4. God gives life to all and so He is our Father
5. God is sovereign over all nations and people
6. God calls us to repent from sin and seek Him
7. God raised Jesus from the dead and has appointed Jesus as Judge of all
8. Jesus will come again on a certain day and judge the world

Because Paul won only a few converts that day, there are some voices who say Paul’s approach was a mistake. But I would agree with the large majority of Bible scholars who say this message is an excellent model for preaching to those who know nothing about the God of the Bible.

I think it is vitally important for us to look for points of connection and common beliefs between our faith and the thinking of the people we are trying to reach. Paul’s message corrects the errors of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophies, but first Paul looks for common ground. Paul recognizes that there is some truth in the things the philosophers believe and he uses those points of light as a bridge to his listeners.

Paul first uses the altar to the unknown god as a bridge to their minds.



Paul's reasoning is clear; in worshipping an unknown god, they were admitting their need to learn more about God. Then Paul uses quotes from two of their famous poets to connect to their hearts. **Acts 17:18, "For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'"** Doubtless, there were hundreds of errors in the things these Greek poets wrote. But Paul focuses on two quotes that he could agree with.

Paul built a bridge to their culture and world view; then he laid a foundation of teaching about the Creator God before telling them about Jesus and the resurrection. How did the people respond to Paul's message? (Acts 17:32), **"Some of them sneered."** Some said, **"We want to hear you again on this subject."** And some believed. It would be wonderful if everyone believed. But usually when we tell people about Jesus, we will have a similar experience. Some people will sneer. Some will want to hear more. But, if we have built good bridges to connect to minds and hearts, by the grace of God some may believe.

A few years later, Paul looked back over his ministry and wrote, in **1 Corinthians 9:22b, "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some."** When we consider these words, we realize that Paul was willing to go to great lengths to share the gospel effectively. Paul was willing to do whatever was necessary to build bridges to the people he was trying to reach for Jesus. Paul was even willing to lay down his own self and culture to become the bridge so that people might cross over to know Jesus.

IV. Conclusion

What about us? Are we ready to be bridge builders? How can we build bridges for the gospel to the hearts and minds of our families and friends? How can we build bridges to share Jesus with the people of this great land of Japan?

This painting by Utagawa Hiroshige shows a man on horseback crossing a bridge on the Kisokaido. In the Tokugawa era, the Kisokaido, also called the Nakasendo, was one of the five roads designated for the shogun to travel on. It was a road through the inland mountains between Edo and Kyoto.



Look at the painting closely. Does it seem lonely? Do you think that the horse and the people both seem heavy-laden? I would like to tell the people in this painting that Jesus has promised to be with us always and that in **Matthew 11:28**, Jesus invited us to come to Him saying, **"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."** And, I would like to tell the artist that Jesus is the greatest bridge of all. Jesus is the bridge between man and God. And the cross of Jesus is the bridge that crosses over from death to eternal life.

In closing, once again I would like to encourage all of us to learn to be bridge builders. Tear down the walls and build bridges to the people around you. Bridges of the gospel, built in the Name of Jesus.

Let's pray.

V. Prayer