

“HE COMMANDS ALL PEOPLE EVERYWHERE TO REPENT”

Acts 17:16–34

Key Verse: 17:30

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

What do you think of the word “repent”? It sounds outdated. Some even claim it’s “psychological terrorism.” The word “repent” can make us feel guilty or ashamed. We may say a quick “Sorry!” or try to do something to make up for it. But is that what “repent” means? In this passage Paul proclaims Jesus and the resurrection. He shares who God is, who human beings are, what God has done, and in light of it, he challenges people to repent. It shows us how to share the gospel today, and how to respond to it ourselves. Let’s learn how and why we all need to repent. May God speak to us through his word.

Paul just fled from Macedonia and was dropped off by himself. He’s waiting for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible (15). Where is he? He’s in Athens (use a map & photo). We don’t know if going there was his idea or theirs. But of all the places he’s been to, this is by far the most famous. Athens is the birthplace of Western democracy, philosophy and literature. By Paul’s time, its glory days are long gone; it’s only a shell of what it used to be. But in the Roman world, Athenians are still so elitist, many of their grand, centuries-old buildings are still standing, and their schools still draw people from all over.

It says here that the city is “full of idols.” By some accounts, there were 30,000 of them. Literally, they’re like a forest. So there was a saying, “It’s easier to find a god in Athens than a man.” (photo) A few giant idols, over 30 feet tall, up on high places in the city, could be seen all the way from its port. (photo) These idols are stunning works of art, made of gold, silver and stone. But as he walks around Athens, Paul is not impressed; his spirit is provoked. Why? It’s because the devil is using these idols to deceive, distract, confuse, and tempt people. In Athens there are some majestic temples, and so many smaller ones, all with their own idols. At these temples, human beings are being led astray to worship idols.

What does Paul do? He’s not sight-seeing. Look at verse 17. Paul is doing what he always does. First he goes to the synagogue to speak with Jews and devout Greeks. Then he goes to the marketplace every day to speak with people who happen to be there. He’s “reasoning” with them, asking questions, and discussing answers. He’s even “conversing,” debating, with Epicurean and Stoic philosophers (18a). By faith Paul is diligently trying to engage them all. What’s the response? Some say, “What is this babbler trying to say?” “Babbler” is

literally a bird trying to pick up seeds here and there. They're insinuating that, as the old saying goes, Paul knows a little about everything, and a lot of nothing! Others say, "He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities." Why? It says, "...because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection" (18b). The word "preaching" is literally "evangelizing." Paul is announcing good news, glad tidings to everyone he meets. In Athens, as elsewhere, he's telling them about Jesus and the resurrection. But to the Athenians, "Jesus" and "Resurrection" sound like two foreign gods. To them, what Paul is doing might be illegal. But Christianity is not a dangerous foreign religion; it's about the Lord of all, the Risen Jesus, our Savior. He's for all people, even the most arrogant, intellectual, and idolatrous.

However Paul got here, God is the one who led him to minister in Athens. It's showing us that God loves all human beings. God is calling even these people back to himself, to have a real relationship with him, through Jesus. In Jesus, God can heal their souls. Later Paul writes that the good news of Jesus is "the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Rom.1:16). Jesus who died and rose again is alive, and he still has power to save and heal anyone.

Read verses 19–20. (photo) In Athens, the Areopagus is both a location on a hill and a judicial body. The word literally means "Hill of Ares" (also known as "Mars Hill"). Members of the Areopagus are aristocrats. They began gathering at this place over 700 years ago, to try cases of murder. Now Paul is brought before this council, probably because he's been talking about the worst murder: the crucifixion of Jesus. It's a great moment in history: the Gentile world is about to hear the good news. Since they've never heard it before, to them it sounds like a "new teaching" and "strange things." When they say, "We wish to know... what these things mean," it sounds promising. But read verse 21. This audience will be hard to crack. They've already heard it all—every kind of religion and philosophy from around the world. They've gotten to the point where they'd just like to hear something new. They only want to be intellectually stimulated, entertained.

What happens? Read verse 22. Paul begins respectfully and tries to say something positive. Read verse 23. Among all those idols they've even added an altar "to the unknown god." (Photo) They're trying to cover all their bases. Paul says this with a broken heart. For people engrossed in idols, the real God remains "unknown." But the real God wants all people to come to know him.

Who is the real God? He's the God who made the world and everything in it; he's Lord of heaven and earth who doesn't live in man-made temples (24). He is not served by human hands and doesn't need anything from us; we desperately need him, even to live and breathe; he gives us everything, even if we don't know or recognize him (25). And who are human beings? God made the first human being, and every nation on earth to descend from that first person;

God determines when nations begin and end, and our national boundaries—not powerful men or warfare, but God (26). This truth can heal us of our arrogance. So what does God want from us? He wants us to seek him, and perhaps feel our way toward him and find him; he’s actually not far from each one of us (27). (slide) Paul quotes a well-respected ancient Greek prophet, who wrote, “In him we *live* and *move* and *have our being*” (28a).¹ (slide) Paul quotes another Greek poet, who wrote about looking at the night sky and saying, “We are indeed [God’s] *offspring*” (28b).² Paul is using all he’s ever learned, even quotations from ancient Greeks, “...that by all means [he] might save some” (1 Cor.9:22b)

Read verse 29. God’s offspring are alive, living and moving, because God is alive. The real God is not a lifeless object like gold, silver or stone. Idols seem impressive and beautiful, fashioned by the art and imagination of man. They may seem worth preserving. But they’re not alive, don’t move, don’t point to anything real, and should never be worshipped. Paul’s point here is that, as God’s offspring, each human is far more valuable than any material object. Each living human being is God’s masterpiece. And on top of that, God our Creator is so much greater than we are. God wants us not to cling to materialistic idols, but to live based on his creation order. First, we should use all material things for God’s glory and for serving people. Second, we should respect and treasure all human beings, even the ones who may seem less than us. And third, we should worship the only real, immortal, invisible God, who made us all.

Read verse 30. God is so gracious, he’s willing to overlook our ignorance. There’s just one condition: whoever we are, we need to repent. Athen prides itself on being the most intellectual place in the world. To talk about the latest ideas, everybody comes there. But it’s the place full of the most idols. It’s ridiculous. Paul wrote elsewhere, “Claiming to be wise, they became fools...” (Rom.1:22). These supposedly great thinkers don’t even know themselves.

Paul tells them that God “commands” all people everywhere to repent. The people of Athens are no exception. People who think they’re intellectual don’t like to be commanded. Still, Paul tells them repentance is God’s command. Why does Paul say this so strongly? He’s telling them it’s not a matter of rational debate; it’s a matter of life or death. And it’s urgent. Yes, God is gracious to us now. He’s giving us a chance. But not forever. Read verse 31. God is going to send his Son Jesus back to this world as Judge. We don’t choose that day—God does. No matter how clever we think we are, no one will be able to avoid God’s day of judgment. Through the resurrection of Jesus, God “has given assurance to all” of that day. Because of Jesus’ resurrection, we can be sure the Almighty God

¹ Epimenides of Crete (ca. 600 BC), *Hymn to Zeus*.

² Aratus (ca. 300 BC), *Phaenomena*.

will one day judge the world for all its wickedness. In light of that day's sure coming, we need to repent.

Read verse 30 again. What does it mean to repent? Literally it's "to change one's way of life as the result of a complete change of thought and attitude with regards to sin and righteousness."³ Wow that's a lot! Basically it starts with changing our way of thinking and our hearts. This is so hard to do—it requires a major struggle. In our sinful nature we all naturally grow up with godless thinking—thinking and acting as if God were not there. We rely on ourselves to get through each day. We live for ourselves. We have our own ideas about being right and don't see sin as God does. We absorb everything the culture around us tells us to seek and rely on. We end up chasing a good paying job, depending on it, and won't risk anything to lose it. We grab onto people we think will give us security, stability or happiness. We accumulate possessions to give us significance and meaning. We seek pleasures like food, drink, and entertainment. If we seem to be doing well, we feel good. If we don't, we feel useless and are devastated by people's opinions. We never seem good enough, so we're always seeking to magnify ourselves. We even try to make Jesus fit our objectives. We try to use him to make us feel better about ourselves, or help us achieve more. But we don't want him to change our way of thinking or way of life. We don't realize that only in him can we find real significance and security. To change our way of thinking means to realize I'm not righteous, and never will be on my own. It means to change my self-righteous attitude and self-centered thoughts. It means a change of heart. It's a painful process, like peeling back layers of an onion, and crying while we do. Instead of loving sin, we start to hate it. Instead of ignoring God, we begin learning to respect and love him, and to care for people.

Repenting also means changing my lifestyle. It means turning away from the world, turning to God, and performing "deeds in keeping with repentance" (26:20)—deeds with the weight, the gravity, of serious repentance. It means making God the center of my life, my first priority, and learning to treat people in ways that please God, not myself. Living in this way requires forming new life habits. Repenting is always radical. It's a new journey, a starting over, building a new life foundation. We stop acting like a victim, stop looking for excuses and ways to blame others. We're willing to do the hard work of going deeper. I ask God to have mercy on me and change my heart, all my wrong attitudes, desires and goals. At the end of one of his most famous psalms, David exclaimed: "Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!" (Psalm 139:23–24). Our hearts and our behavior can really grieve God. We all need

³ Louw, Johannes P., and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), s.v. "metanoia."

God's help to see ourselves as he does and repent. Repenting is not just at the start of Christian life; it's a life-long struggle of learning how to love God and love others like our Lord Jesus did. We should never give up repenting, no matter how often it seems we fail or go backwards.

In light of this passage, God especially wants us to repent of our idols. We may not have statues, but we all harbor various idols in our hearts. We need God's help to see them and root them out. Idols are anything or anyone we prioritize over God himself. They may be things that can be really good: our loved ones, our possessions, culture, appearance, education, even our ministry. But they become destructive when they take the place of God. How can we find our idols? We can start by asking ourselves, What are my deepest desires and fears? How am I trying to resolve these? Is it through money, or buying and having things? Is it through success or achievements? Is it through relationships or human love? Is it through having power or control? All such things become our idols. They will never satisfy our souls. Only Jesus can (Tim Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*). We need to learn to live purely for Jesus each day, to do things for his sake alone, and to always keep him on the throne of our hearts.

The response to Paul's resurrection message is mixed (32). Verse 33 says, "So Paul went out from their midst." He senses their attitude and pulls away from the mockers. It seems negative. But read verse 34. It's not big numbers, but it's amazing how people even in Athens repent and join Paul in believing in Jesus. It's especially striking that a man named Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, and a woman named Damaris, join him. When Paul speaks out of love for people and faith in Jesus, relying on the Holy Spirit, God works even in Athens!

Thank God for his amazing grace and patience to send Jesus to restore a right relationship with sinners like us. Thank God for the Apostle Paul's inspiring example in sharing the gospel of Jesus with the people of Athens. Read verse 30 again. So what does it mean to repent? It means to ask God to help us change our godless inner person and lifestyle. It means to ask God to help us see and root out any idols from our hearts, to live by the Spirit and grow as Jesus' witnesses in our time. In light of the good news of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, may God wake us up spiritually and help us accept his command to truly repent.