

PAUL’S MESSAGE ON MAR’S HILL – ACTS 17
OR
THE MESSAGE AND THE MESSENGER
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When Paul came to Mar’s Hill in Athens during his second missionary journey, he was completely by himself. Timothy and Silas, his associates in ministry had been left in Berea, while he was sent away by the brethren due to the dangerous and escalating conditions there (Acts 17:13). The unbelieving Jews who had stirred up the crowds in Thessalonica were intent on doing the same in Berea and consequently the apostle had to flee the area for his own safety.

Arriving in Athens, the apostle discovered a culture steeped in pagan idolatry. Surrounding him were the abundant evidences of man’s dark and fallen nature. The scene deeply provoked his spirit as he witnessed firsthand the grip that sin has over the hearts and minds of people, whom God had created in His own image. Not one for standing idle, the former Pharisee made a beeline for the local synagogue reasoning with the Jews and devout Gentiles and daily with those in the marketplace who would meet with him. Others, like the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers adversely encountered him, ridiculing and questioning his new and unique message of Jesus and the resurrection (v. 18). Not backing away and always ready to give an answer, Paul certainly relished the opportunity to clarify his message to these religious curiosity seekers (v. 20), who brought him to Mars Hill, the central meeting place in town. What followed was a concise, yet effective presentation of the Gospel in all its simplicity, demonstrating that is the power of God unto salvation—a message for everyone regardless of their cultural background or personal persuasions. It clearly shows that the Gospel can stand on its own and does not require any props or apologies to ramp up to its audience, no matter how diverse that audience may be. It is also a display case of the qualities and attitudes that are behind any successful Gospel ministry. What were some of the qualities and attitudes that Paul exhibited in this proclamation of the truth, qualities that we need to likewise embrace in our diverse, but depraved culture?

First, Paul demonstrated the quality of *boldness*. Without spiritual back up, Paul might have been tempted to waffle at the opportunity speak to the crowd assembled on Mars Hill. But standing in their midst, surrounded by an adverse and potentially dangerous audience he boldly proclaimed the truth of the Gospel. The scripture reminds us, “*the righteous are as bold as a lion*” (Prov. 28.1) and certainly Paul was that as he single-handedly preached the Word to them—“a stranger in a stranger land” with a “strange” message to a really strange audience. Paul was bold in the Lord and we need to be bold in the Lord, too.

Paul also exhibited *respect*. Even though he knew that he had to speak the truth in love, he also knew that he needed to “adorn the doctrine of God” (Titus 2: 10) and emulate the Savior who brought a message that was both “*grace and truth*” (John 1: 17). He knew that many, if not all of them were lost in the darkness of sin and were fundamentally opposed to the Gospel of Christ, but still there was no attitude of condescension in his opening remarks. Rather, he acknowledged what they were—not superstitious but religious and devoted to their cause. He commended them for their intensity (albeit misdirected intensity) and by so doing gained a listening ear, at least initially. We also need to be respectful in our presentation of the truth.

Paul was also *direct* in his message. He was frank about the core issue – ignorance of God and His way of salvation. “*Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, Him declare I unto you*” (v. 23). The altar dedicated

and inscribed with the words “to the unknown God” only heralded their misconception of the true God. Paul did not “beat around the bush” or sidestep the issue, but was direct in his words, dealing with the real matter at hand. “*The night is far spent, the day is at hand*” Paul reminded the believers in Rome (Rom. 13:12) and the time is short for us as well. “*Let the redeemed of the Lord, say so!*” (Ps. 107:2).

Paul was also *logical* in his presentation. He was orderly in his argument. The major tenets of his message were: 1) they were religious, but ignorant (vv. 22-23); 2) the God Whom they do not know controls them and not the other way around (vv. 24-27); 3) we are the offspring of a personal God, and therefore should not worship Him with fanciful images and carvings (vv. 28-29); 4) their ignorance in the past God overlooked, but now calls people to repent based on Christ’s resurrection from the dead (vv. 29-31). At first, there was resistance to the message, but that resistance was countered by Paul’s powerful refutation, which was clear, orderly and logical in its development. Our messages should be the same. “*The Preacher ...set [s] in order many proverbs*” (Ecc. 12:9).

As is often the case, whenever the Gospel is preached there is a varied response to the message. In this case, here there was ridicule and indifference (v. 32) but also belief unto the truth (v.34). The fact that there were not more “decisions” for the Lord was not because Paul did not effectively present the truth--it was because wherever the Gospel seed is sown there will always be hard ground that prevents it from taking root as well as indecisive hearts that have not yet been willing to release their grip from the pull of the world.

Paul’s message at Mar’s Hill was brief, but it was long enough to show us some of the essential qualities of the simple Gospel message that we also need to exhibit regularly in our preaching of the Word. May we be bold and respectful, direct and logical as we too bring the Gospel message with us, wherever we go.