

Bi134 Acts

Lesson Bi134-33 Paul Preaches in Athens

Do you live in a place where people of different cultures and backgrounds reside? If so, have you tried to reach out to someone from a culture other than your own? God expects us to share Christ with all people. However, to effectively do that, we must know how to adapt our approach to the culture we are trying to reach. In today's lesson, we learn how Paul did this very thing. He adapted his preaching to reach out to two very different cultures.

Leaving Berea, Paul journeyed to Athens, the capital city of Greece and the cultural center of the Roman Empire. There, he observed the city's magnificent temples and famous works of art. However, rather than being impressed with their great beauty, he was distressed by the pagan worship they represented.

As was his custom each Sabbath day, Paul went to the synagogue to discuss the Scriptures with the Jews and God-fearing Greeks. On other days, he went into the marketplace, known as the Agora, and reasoned with the Greek scholars there.

One day, a group of philosophers began a discussion with Paul. He used the opportunity to tell them how Jesus had died for their sins and rose on the third day. When they heard this, they began to mock him. "This babbler seems to be advocating some foreign gods," they said. "Does he really expect us to believe his wild story?" They then took him to Mars Hill, the place where the chief magistrates of the city met. There they interrogated him, "You have been teaching some strange ideas in the city. Tell us, what do you mean by these things?"

This was the opening Paul had been looking for. So he rose to his feet and addressed the assembly. "People of Athens," he began, "I notice that you are a very religious people. As I was walking around your city, I saw many shrines to your gods. One in particular had this inscription on it: 'TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.' I have come to tell you who that God is! He is the one who created the world and everything in it. Being the Lord of all heaven and earth, he does not live in man-made temples like the ones we see here. He needs no human to take care of him, for he is the one who gives life and breath to every living thing."

Paul turned, motioned with his hand, and continued, "From one man, God made every nation in the whole earth, and he sovereignly decides where they should live and when and how they should rise and fall. He does this so that people will seek him, and hopefully find him. However, in truth, he is not far from any one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being. Even your own poets have declared, 'We are God's offspring.' Therefore, since we have all been created by God, we should not think of him as being some humanly carved idol, no matter how skillfully it may have been fashioned."

Paul then began to drive his message home. "There was a time," he declared, "when God may have overlooked man's ignorance, but that time has passed. He now commands all people everywhere to repent and turn from their sins to him. For he has set a day when he will judge the

entire earth by the man he has appointed. He has proven that this man is worthy by raising him from the dead (Acts 17:16-31).

When the magistrates heard Paul talking about Christ's resurrection, they mocked him. Some, however, wanted to hear more, and a few followed him and became believers.

Paul's sermon in Athens is the second time in Acts that Luke gives a detailed summary of the apostle's message. The first time was in Pisidian Antioch and is recorded in Acts 13:14-41. As you may remember, we discussed that sermon in Lesson 25. (You may want to review/re-listen to that lesson at this time.) By comparing these two sermons of Paul, we can learn some valuable lessons about preaching the gospel. We especially learn how we can adapt our messages to different audiences in different cultural contexts. Let's now look at three of those lessons.

First, we learn that we must be ready to preach the gospel any time an opportunity presents itself—even in different cultural contexts. When Paul was invited to preach in the synagogue in Antioch, he was ready. Later, when he was invited to preach on Mars Hill in Athens, he was again ready. Paul later reminded Timothy, his son in the faith, of this. He wrote him that he should be prepared to preach the word of God "in season and out of season" (2Tim 4:2). In other words, he should be prepared to preach the gospel in any circumstance. How can we be ready to preach the gospel in any circumstance? Like Paul, we must remain full of the Holy Spirit and committed to our God-given mission.

We learn a second lesson from comparing Paul's two sermons in Acts. Like Paul, we want to effectively communicate Christ in varying cultural contexts. Therefore, we must know how to adapt our method and our message to fit our given audience. Paul's approach to preaching in Antioch was much different from his approach in Athens. In Antioch, he entered the Jewish synagogue and sat down to teach them. In Athens, he went to Mars Hill, stood to his feet, and addressed his audience. In each case, Paul was adapting his style of delivery to local cultural expectations.

Also, in his sermon in Antioch, Paul had much to say about the history of Israel. He talked about Moses and about how Jesus had descended from King David. He further noted how Jesus' coming was a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. These things were important to Jews. However, in Athens Paul proceeded differently. There, he did not discuss Israel's past, for his audience knew nothing about Jewish history. He rather talked about Greek culture and religion. He called attention to the Athenian's worship, and referred to their monument to the 'Unknown God.' He even quoted one of their pagan poets. He did these things to identify with the culture of Athens.

In our preaching today, we too should know our audience. We should be aware of their customs. And, we should look for stories from their cultures that can illustrate biblical truth. In this way, we can help them to better understand the message of Christ. The better we understand a people's culture, the better we will be able to communicate the message of Christ to them.

We can learn a third lesson from comparing Paul's two sermons: While we should adapt our sermons to the culture of the audience, we should never compromise the message of gospel.

In both Antioch and Athens Paul proclaimed Christ. He boldly declared that Jesus died on the cross and rose on the third day. He further called on the people to repent of their sins and put their faith in Christ alone for salvation. Paul knew that Jesus was the only way for people to be reconciled to God. He would later write that “there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus” (1Tim 2:5). Like Paul, we must never compromise the message of the gospel.

This lesson is **important** because in it we learn how we can adapt our preaching and teaching to best communicate with the particular audience we are addressing.

The **main truth** we learn from this that while we must be aware of the culture of our audience, and we must adapt our sermon to their needs, we must never compromise the message of the gospel.

Let’s **review** some important truths we have learned from this lesson.

1. Name the two places in Acts where Luke gives us a detailed summary of Paul’s sermon.
 - A. [PAUSE] If you answered that those two places are the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch and Mars Hill in Athens, you answered correctly.
2. How did Paul adapt his preaching style in each place?
 - A. [PAUSE] If you answered that, in the synagogue in Antioch Paul sat down to teach them; however, on Mars Hill in Athens he stood up to address them, you are right.
3. How did Paul adjust the content of his message in Antioch and Athens?
 - A. [PAUSE] If you answered, “In Antioch he talked about Jewish history; however, in Athens he spoke of Greek culture,” you answered correctly.
4. What never changed in Paul’s preaching?
 - A. [PAUSE] If you answered that Paul always told the people about Jesus’ death and resurrection and he always called them to repentance and faith, you are right.

Your **assignment** is to listen to this lesson several more times until you can accurately tell the story of Paul’s ministry in Athens to others. You should also be able to discuss the importance of adapting our message to various audiences and cultures. Then, teach these lessons to others. Are there people of a culture different than yours that live near you? Pray about how you could reach out to them. Ask God to give you a special insight into their culture to use in introducing the gospel to them.