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## *Moving Mountains: Mars Hill* Acts 17:16-23

We are still climbing Bible mountains together. Here is a picture we recognize. What is it? The Parthenon. It sits on the top of the Acropolis, the most important of seven hills in the ancient city of Athens. But for Christians there is another important hill nearby. In fact, if you turn left 90 degrees, this is what you will see. *[picture]* Do you know what it is? The Hill of the god, Ares. "The Areopagus." Mars Hill.

This morning we turn to Acts 17. Paul is on his second missionary journey. After preaching the gospel throughout Turkey and northern Greece, he arrives in Athens. His friends will soon join him but, for now, he is alone. To leave Paul alone in Athens was like leaving a kid to wander around a candy store by himself. Athens was the intellectual, cultural, philosophical and religious capitol of the world. Listen to part of what happened. *[Read Acts 17:16-23]*

I'll never forget reading this story for the first time while standing on Mars Hill. The Parthenon, still magnificent 2000 years later, towered above us. The Agora—the ancient city center—stretched out below. As I read this passage, it was easy to imagine Paul sharing the Good News of Jesus with philosophical giants of his time.

On this communion Sunday, we don't have the time to dig into this passage as it deserves. With the Year of Good News coming, we will return to this story, I promise. But this morning, I want to focus on one verse—verse 16: **"While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols."**

Our family had dinner Friday night with a young man who just returned from his first trip overseas. It was fun to hear him describe the first time he laid eyes on Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Rome, London. Any of you remember how that felt? You walk around with your jaw wide open... a dazed look on your face... your head on a swivel. A walking advertisement that says, "Here I am, pickpockets. Come and pillage me!"

Paul was waiting for his friends to join him in one of the great cities of the world, so naturally, he decided to see the sights... the buildings, the statues, the paintings, the debates being carried on by the finest philosophers in the world. For an intellectual giant like Paul—who had graduated from universities in Tarsus and Jerusalem—there was so much to take in.

But of all that he saw, what most caught his attention? **The idols.** Verse 16 says that the city was “full of idols.” Actually, Dr. Luke (the author of Acts) uses a word that has never been found anywhere else in all of Greek literature. *Kateidolos*. You see the word the word “idol” in there, right? The other word, “*kata*,” means “under.” Literally, Luke’s made up word means “under-idols.” Athens was “swimming in idols.” (Stott commentary-277)

Everywhere you turned in Athens, there was another temple housing another idol built to honor another of the countless gods of the Greek Pantheon. The Parthenon was built to honor Athena. The Areopagus honored Ares. Other shrines, statues and altars honored Apollo, Jupiter, Venus, Mercury, Bacchus, Neptune, ...every god of the pantheon was represented many times over. And they were gorgeous. Gold, silver, ivory, marble... crafted by the finest of artists. One historian of that time wrote, “There were more gods in Athens than in all the rest of the country...[in fact]...it was easier to find a god there than a man.”

So, what was Paul’s reaction as he “swam” through this “sea” of idols? He was probably impressed by their beauty. But those aren’t the words that describe his feelings. What does our text say? He was “greatly distressed.” That is a weak translation of this word. The word is “*paroxyno*.” From it we get our word “paroxysm” which means a “violent, convulsive spasm.” An epileptic seizure is a paroxysm. As Paul wandered through this city swimming in idols, he had a visceral response of disgust. It is the **same word** used to describe God’s anger toward his people in the Old Testament when they worshiped Baal and Asherah on Mt. Carmel. When we read in the Bible that God was “**provoked**” at his people... it’s this word. It made God sick. This idolatry made Paul sick.

I remember having this feeling once. I traveled to India to speak to a group of evangelists. While we were there we visited one of the largest Hindu temple complexes in the area. Some of our Christian hosts wouldn’t accompany us inside. They considered it a place of spiritual oppression. But I wanted to see it with my own eyes. So I prayed that Holy Spirit would protect me, and I went in. It was fascinating, beautiful... and dark and revolting. Idols to cows and snakes. Grain sacrifices left for rats... while outside, beautiful, hungry children begged for food. I still remember an almost physical feeling of revulsion that I had and a sense of spiritual relief when I finally walked out of those buildings. It was very disturbing.

But here is what disturbs me today. I am revolted by the idolatry that I experience in a foreign country, but I feel like I am numb to our own idolatry. We don’t have idols to cows or snakes or rats—although if the PETA folks get their way, we might. But does that mean we don’t have any idols in this country? What false gods do Americans worship?

**An idol is any thing or person that occupies that place that God ought to hold in our lives.** Idolatry is the worship of anything other than the one true God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Jesus. So what are our idols? Our temples?

Surely our shopping malls are modern day temples to the god Materialism, aren't they? Isn't Materialism the Apollo—the supreme god—of our American pantheon? And isn't the advertising industry that convinces us that what we have isn't good enough—that we must have more and better, that we **deserve more and better**—isn't that idolatry?

Our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit. We ought to take good care of them. But do you know anyone who is so obsessed with their looks that they will spend countless hours in gyms and spas and countless thousands of dollars on plastic surgeons to keep their appearance perfect. Isn't that idolatry?

Sports and recreation are a wonderful part of life. But does it strike anyone else as obscene that we spend one billion dollars on a football stadium that includes pole dancing equipment in some of the luxury suites? Aren't those stadiums modern temples built for adoring worshipers to scream their praises for their tribal gods down on the field? Why is it that the man who wouldn't be caught dead singing a hymn or shouting "hallelujah" in church will scream himself hoarse at the game? Doesn't that sound like idolatry?

Work is a good and honorable creation of God. But do you know anyone whose work, whose business, whose deals have become so important to them that everything else—God, spouse, kids, friends—are forgotten or neglected? Isn't that idolatry?

On this Memorial Day when we honor the ultimate sacrifice of men and women who gave their lives for our freedom, it is easy and right to love our country. But do you know someone who loves the flag more than the cross... who is more proud of being an American than a Christian? Isn't that idolatry?

Every one of us wants to raise healthy, productive children. But when our sixth graders **have to** play on select teams to have a shot at the big time, when our kids **have to** pull straight A's from the perfect school to get into the perfect college... when we are so obsessed with what our children **will become** that we can't allow them to **simply be**... isn't that idolatry?

We have the Oprah-idol, the tolerance-idol, the denomination-idol, the diversity-idol, the alcohol-idol, the porn-idol, the sex-idol. We even have a popular TV show that invites thousands of kids to become the next American Idol!

We are no different than Athens. This great country of ours— this great city of ours—is swimming in idols and temples built to worship them. We have thousands of gods competing for the worship that belongs only to Jesus. And if you don't think that is true, here is a test. If one of the examples I just listed made you mad... if you felt like, suddenly, "Pastor is meddling where he doesn't belong" ...you might want to pay attention to that. I might have been profaning one of your idols.

Here's another way to think about it. Idols are the things we worship. And what does it mean to worship? Worship includes **praise, sacrifice, service and preoccupation**. Praise means that we speak of how wonderful our object of worship is. Sacrifice means we demonstrate our worship by how much we spend on it; how much we are willing to give up to support it. Service means how much of my time I am willing to devote to my object of worship. And preoccupation means how much of my thought life is devoted to my object of worship.

So think over the past week. Who or what did you spend the most time talking to and about, spent most of your money on, took up most of your time and occupied most of your thought life? **Those might be things you really worship.** They might be your idols. And if you claim to be a worshiper of Jesus, thinking back over the same week, how much did you say to Him or about how wonderful He is; how much of your money did you give to support His work; how much time did you devote to praying or studying or serving or worshipping Him? How often was He on your mind? If you were accused of being a worshiper of Jesus, would anyone find any evidence to convict you?

I met recently with a broken man. He has had great financial success; everything he touched has turned to gold. Along the way he stopped listening to his wife... stopped listening to his friends, he was so sure of his own wisdom and ability. But now he has lost his job. Now he realizes it was a house of cards. One deal leveraged on top of another deal on top of another deal. Now, everything is falling in on top of him. He might lose it all. And suddenly, his eyes have been opened to the risks that he's been taking and to the very real possibility that most important things in his life—his faith, his marriage and his family—are in jeopardy. He wept before me and then spoke these powerful and wise words: "I realize I have become my own god."

I told him, "Today, salvation has come to your household. God has crushed you so that he could save you. God loves you so much that he is willing to destroy everything that you think you have created so that you can rediscover what is most important in this life: your relationships with Jesus and His church, with your wife, with your children and with friends who will love you for who you are, not for what they can get out of you."

"I realize I have become my own god." What a powerful confession! The ultimate idolatry. The original sin from the Garden of Eden. I wonder how many of us need to make that same confession this morning? I wonder how many of us are revolted by the idolatry in us and around us or even **see** the idols any more?

There is only one God worthy of our worship; only one God worthy of our praise, our sacrifice, our service and our preoccupation. Only one God who can heal and transform and save and give life. Only one God who is real... all of the rest are liars. Posers. Phonies. All the rest are false idols who will lead to death. The one true God

is Jesus Christ. You may claim that he is your God but the way you spend your words, your money, your time and your thoughts will tell the real story.

But when we see the folly of it all... when we can come to the point of admitting, "I have become my own god." ...**that** is when the Savior can save. As we come to His table this morning, what idolatry do you need to confess and abandon?

## **SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

- **Read the passage out loud.**

- **Reflect & Apply Individually:** Each person take 5-7 minutes to circle words or phrases that jumped out at them; jot down your reflections; check the notes in your Study Bible for insight or help. Grapple with what the Spirit is saying to you, your group, the church—write down some applications.

- **Reflect & Apply Together:** Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.

- **Pray together:** Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for and lay one concern before the Lord.

- **Dig deeper**

1. What was the cultural and philosophical setting of Athens when Paul arrived? Why was there an altar to an "Unknown God?" In what way does our culture worship that same God?

2. Have you ever heard anyone say, "I'm spiritual but not religious"? What do they mean by that? Both "spiritual" and "religious" can mean something important about faith. What? How would you respond to such a person?