

Mission: Resolution 1

PHBF 10.03.10

TEXT: Acts 17:22-31

SCR. READING: Acts 17:16-31

Words for kids:

SERIES: The Story of PHBF: Who We Are and What We're About

Need to have someone say the SOS verses from the last 4 weeks:

Colossians 1:15-18 ¹⁵ *He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.* ¹⁶ *For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.* ¹⁷ *And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.* ¹⁸ *And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.*

Finish this sentence with me: "...and they all lived happily ever after." It's the classic closing statement for a story. Its technical name is the "denouement" – the part of the story where the problems get solved, the complexities untangle, and the questions find answers.

The Scriptures teach that the wages of sin is death—not death as "end," but death as alienation, separation. Sin creates four forms of alienation, and you can picture them as four concentric circles:

- Spiritual – alienation from God (judgment, vanity, guilt)
- Psychological – alienation from self (anxieties, obsessions, underachievement, depression)
- Social – alienation from others (family strife, isolation, racism, sexism)
- Physical – alienation from the material world (disease, disaster)

That's the bad news. The good news is that the gift of God is life—reconciliation in all of these areas. The goal of God's redemptive work is to rescue his creation from all the effects of sin upon it and to recover the world it was always meant to be... and beyond. The gospel restores all that sin ruined—spiritually, psychologically, socially, and physically. Each one of these areas of reconciliation gives rise to specific core values for our church. I think you'll find that these resolutions—these next 4-5 sermons—are where your story most obviously begins to merge with God's. This is where we find our identity, our purpose, our goal.

Today we're looking at the core value of mission—reconciliation to God. Why "mission" instead of "missions"? "Missions" is too narrow. It connotes something done only in foreign countries and only by certain people. But "mission" refers to the project God has given everyone. A related term is "missional," which means doing mission right where you are, adopting the posture of a missionary without leaving home. One of our goals as a church is for every one of our members to be "on mission," i.e., being intentional and deliberate about reaching others.

For our inspiration and instruction, we're going to look at the example of the most missional follower of Jesus in the Bible: the Apostle Paul. Since the moment of his conversion, he's been a relentless witness, telling everyone he meets about the rescue plan of God enacted through His Son, Jesus.

In Acts 17, we find him in Athens. Four aspects of Paul's witness: gospel affirmation, gospel confrontation, gospel personalization, and gospel culmination. These first two need to be taken together...

GOSPEL AFFIRMATION (vv 22-23)

Notice Paul's first move: he affirms something good from their culture. They are religious. In fact, they are so conscientious and circumspect, they even have their religious ignorance covered with an altar to the "unknown god." And Paul affirms all of that. Even more interesting is that, when he wants to back up his statements with evidence, he quotes from their own poets rather than from the Old Testament.

- "In him we live..." is from a hymn to Zeus written by Epimenides of Crete around 600 BC
- "We are indeed his offspring" is from the poem *Phainomena* by the poet Aratus written around 300 BC

Paul is doing wholesale worldview evangelism. This isn't 4 Spiritual Laws or a gospel tract. He's engaging their whole story. With people who don't know what "God, sin, Jesus, salvation" means, you need to slow down and lay all the necessary groundwork.

So Paul works at the level of their whole story. He affirms where their story and the gospel story merge, and he confronts them where their worldview tells a different story from the gospel story.

Why does he affirm their culture? Is he just using a wise technique of persuasion: softening them up with praise before he lets them have it? No, it's a natural function of the gospel. This isn't "Pauline affirmation"; it's "gospel affirmation."

Human culture in itself is not the enemy. ("Culture" refers to the behaviors, beliefs, and artifacts characteristic of a particular social, ethnic, or age group.) Every culture is developed by people who are created in the image of God; thus, every culture is going to have some values and cultural artifacts which reflect dimensions of the gospel story.

What is worthy of affirmation in our culture? The interest in creativity, a love for diversity, a longing for peace, a commitment to social justice, a distain for hypocrisy, a longing for wholeness in family life... (more in a moment)

GOSPEL CONFRONTATION (vv 24-25)

Paul moves on to confront parts of their story that don't harmonize with the gospel story. Specifically, their view of God is too small, He's too dependent, too much like them. "No," Paul says, "God is the Creator of all, Lord of all, above all, independent of all, the Sustainer of all."

The gospel never fits perfectly into any culture. Yes, it affirms some things, but it always confronts others. We must have both, because each of these protects us from the two key dangers that render our gospel ineffective: irrelevance and syncretism.

If we never affirm, we'll be irrelevant; we'll sound shrill and critical and self-righteous. But if we never confront, we'll be syncretistic, compromising the gospel and losing it in the process. Irrelevance leaves us always preaching to the choir, answering questions no one is asking, dying because we aren't connected to the culture where the lost people are. Syncretism leaves us too much like the culture to make a

difference, dying because we are no longer connected to the source of life and truth.

ILL: *The Mask of Zorro*: affirm – heroism, defending the weak; confront – "The only sin would be to deny what you feel in your heart."

ILL: The Jeffries' ministry in India

Mark it down: if we are more afraid of one danger than the other, we will tend to drift into the other without ever noticing. But we need to find the middle path where we avoid both. The most effective form of Christianity will be that form that relates most closely to the culture while retaining biblical truth.

Let me offer some quick examples:

- The gospel affirms the longing in every human heart to get around true greatness; but it confronts the idea that greatness is found within. The gospel says, "It's not all about you. It's about God."
- The gospel affirms the pursuit of meaning in life and the desire to make a difference. But it confronts the notion that personal power and fame will do it. The gospel says, "Forget your pitiful attempts at empire building, and come live for a cause that even hell can't stop and even eternity won't erase."
- The gospel confirms that haunting sense that we are not what we should be; but it denies that we can fix the problem ourselves or just ignore it until it goes away. The gospel says, "Those whispers you hear inside are correct; you are guilty."
- The gospel affirms our longing for mercy, but it confronts the arrogant sense that God owes it to us. The gospel says, "Full forgiveness, a clean conscience, and peace with your King can be yours... for free. Repent, fly to Him in faith, and learn what real love is."
- The gospel affirms our culture's longing for justice, for Someone to get it right. It explains how the laws of the universe have not been violated by this stunning offer of forgiveness, but instead God's justice was satisfied in the death of His Son so that His mercy can flow to His blood-bought children. The gospel says, "God's wrath against you was fully spent, not withheld, but on His Son instead of upon you."

How do we learn to think this way?

- We must understand the biblical story thoroughly. If we ourselves think of Christianity primarily as our moral standards or our church involvement, that's how we're going to represent it to others. Two problems with that: 1) that's not a compelling story that anyone is going to take seriously, and 2) that's not the story God is writing! He's not merely making us moral (and unhappy about it!). We must understand that salvation isn't just grace vs. works. That's true, but it's not a story. It says nothing about how Jesus is Lord of all of life or how that salvation is God's way of fixing everything broken in His world. Plus, it's too individualistic to cover the whole scope of the biblical story of creation, fall, redemption, new creation.
- We must understand the culture thoroughly. We have to know what questions the people around us are asking, lest we become irrelevant by offering something no one is looking for. Paul understood the Athenians' view of reality and their interest in spirituality, he was familiar with the poetry and songs of their popular culture, and he affirmed what connected with the gospel story.

GOSPEL PERSONALIZATION (vv 26-28)

Here we see the ultimate basis for mission, namely, the loving, missionary heart of God Himself. We love because He first loved us. We seek because He first sought us. How far was He willing to go? He'd rather die, as Max Lucado says, than live without us.

Notice what Paul does with these truths. He makes them deeply personal. "Yes," he says, "God is supreme and transcendent. But He's also personal. He's accessible. He wants to be found. In fact," Paul goes on, "God arranged the circumstances of your lives in just such a way that you would be drawn to Him, you'd seek Him, perhaps even find Him."

The two prior aspects of gospel presentation deal with the gospel's non-negotiables—the essential, objective truths of the gospel story. But now Paul begins to contextualize the message for these people. He shows

how the problems of their own lives will be solved only through the gospel.

How often did people come to Jesus first because He touched a felt need in their lives? He addressed their material hurt and only then spoke to their deeper, spiritual needs.

Felt needs are typically in the outer circles of alienation: physical, social, psychological needs. Once these concerns are addressed, people often open up about deeper needs or they simply become aware of them, now that the more painfully obvious need has been met.

I'm not suggesting that we soften the gospel or repackage it to sound like the latest technique to achieve the American Dream. Gospel Personalization has to be kept alongside Gospel Confrontation, lest we mislead our hearers into thinking Jesus came to give them health, wealth, and happiness.

This reminds us again of the need to know and tell the whole gospel story. People have to perceive clearly what it is that you're giving them. Remember, postmodern people feel very comfortable infusing your words with their own meaning. For example, if you tell them, "Christ is the truth," they might very well take that to mean, "Jesus will work for me to get what I want." And when it stops working out for them, they'll bail.

So we must do gospel personalization, both in the needs we address and in the way we present the whole story.

GOSPEL CULMINATION (vv 29-31)

Paul is careful to present the final chapters of the gospel story. He gives these listeners a quick preview of where human history is going. In short, he says, "The unknown god is unknown no more. You are accountable for what you now know, so repent. Judgment Day is coming."

Notice that he doesn't just warn them about the coming judgment. He offers proof—the resurrection of Jesus proves, according to Paul, that He is Lord of all and worthy to judge the world.

A crucial foundation for mission is that He is Lord of ALL the earth. It sounds a note of urgency. It gives us courage in the face of opposition. And it inspires us to keep going even when the task looks too daunting. Like Abraham gazing out over the Promised Land, we can look out over this valley and *know* God has given it to us. How? Because Jesus says, “All authority is given to me,” and what's His is ours who are in Christ. Little, insignificant us? Absolutely. After all, Jesus said it's the meek who inherit the earth.

Listen, friends. God's mission WILL be successful. We will gather to Himself a community of worshipers from every tribe, nation, language, and people. The success of our mission is not in question.

Additional Applications

For our church:

- We have determined to give \$1 out of every \$5 to reaching others with the gospel. This IS the mission of the church.
- This is one reason we want to have a strong connection to the city. Cities have strategic influence—the cultural elites, students and young professionals, the poor, immigrants, thinkers are all in the city. As the city goes, so goes the culture.

For individuals:

- How do you perceive yourself? Do you approach each day as someone on mission with God to bring people into reconciliation with Him? This afternoon and/or this week, examine your heart and priorities to see where mission fits.
- Paul's evangelism strategy was pretty straightforward. He saw, he felt, he spoke. Let's pray for eyes to see, a heart to feel, and the courage to speak.
- A word about authenticity: “Healing Begins” – the Jonah Factor, the Jacob Story – you know you've met God when you limp

In His death, Jesus has conquered sin; in His resurrection, He has inaugurated the new and final era of rescue and recovery. The banquet table is set, but it's not quite time to dig in. More people have to be

gathered to the table so they, too, may taste the renewing power of the Coming Age. And so, located where we are in this in-between time, we wait; but we don't wait passively. We are on mission, deliberately and relentlessly involved in spreading the message of Jesus' rescue and renewal so that all may believe and come in.

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