

Repent, A Day of Justice Has Been Set  
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A phrase we're gonna be looking at today—"Repent, because a day of justice has been set." When I read words like this, if I hear words like this, the loveable teddy bear is not a mental image that comes to my mind. Instead, what comes to my mind is Gary the Pit preacher, ok? I went to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. And in the middle of campus there was a place, we called it the Pit; it was this big, brick courtyard. You had the two libraries on either side, student union, cafeteria, bookstore. And so there was this common area that all kinds of just students always goin' through called the Pit. And this man named Gary would come out, and every single week he would start yellin' and screamin', rantin' and ravin', spittin' and snortin'; I mean, it was hellfire and brimstone. Every single person who walked past was condemned to hell and to burn through all of eternity because of fun things like women wearing pants instead of, you know, dresses, or those of us, you know, guys...sure, we were wearing pants instead of dresses, which was a good thing in his mind, but we were going to a very liberal institution which was plenty evidence that we were condemned to hell. So the image of Gary the Pit preacher is what comes to my mind when I read something like "Repent, because a day of justice (or judgment) has been set."

That's not exactly what we see with Paul in Athens, and that's what we're gonna be lookin' at here today, is in Acts chapter 17, verses 16 through 34. See, this is Paul's basic message to the Athenians, is they need to repent because a day of justice has been set. But we should look at, ok, what does he mean by this? Well, first of all, his message "Repent"—it's the idea that they need to turn away from idols and turn to the creator God, the God who exists, the God who made all of heaven and earth. And they need to do this because a day of justice, a day where our hearts, our actions, our relationship to that God, will be rightly and fairly judged. And we know that this day has been set. It has been set and we know this because Jesus Christ, who told us that this day had been set and who said, 'I am revealing God to you', He was risen from the dead. And so if He was risen from the dead then probably He knows what He's talkin' about.

That's the thought process, and that's basically the idea behind Paul's message here. It's kind of the core statement that you could boil it down to. Now, again, Paul is not sitting here ranting and raving. In fact, what he does is he approaches things from a very logical and reasonable perspective. He starts from common ground; he doesn't pull out the Bible and start beatin' people over the head with it. Instead, he begins reasoning with people. In verse 17 it talks about 'So he reasoned...' He looked around, he saw these idols, it troubled him, and so he reasoned with people in the synagogue and in the marketplace every day. And instead of sitting here and quoting all kinds of scripture to them, he looks around and he studies their religion, he studies their thought processes, their philosophy; and he's able to say, in verse 23, 'As I was passing through, examining the objects of your worship, I saw this.' And he begins, as a beginning place, common ground that they understand, a common reference point. And in verse 28 he says, "...even some of your own poets have said..." Instead of quoting scripture to them he goes to their own poets, their thinkers, their philosophers; and he uses these people, these thoughts that are there, to build a base that he can logically discuss the Creator God with them. And that's how he approaches this phrase, "Repent, because a day of justice has been set." This is how he builds this common ground to basically give this message.

My hope here in the next few minutes is basically to accomplish two things that you will...when you leave here you will have one of two things, or both of them, accomplished. One is this question—is this message still something that we need to hear today, in Wasilla, Alaska, in 2009? Repent, because a day of justice has been set...yes, I would say it is. And hopefully when we're done we'll see that we aren't so very different from the Athenians that Paul was speaking to. And the second thing is this—I hope that after today, whether you are a follower of Christ or whether you are not, you can have an understanding and an idea and an image that you know what? We can talk about things like repentance, and the simple fact that there is a day of judgment...we can do it without spittin' and snortin', hellfire and brimstone, Gary the Pit preacher up here and yellin' and shoutin' down every single one of us. It's something that we can talk about logically, we can talk about reasonably. And so that's what we're gonna do. And we're gonna...I'll follow Paul's thought process and some of what he talks about through here.

And where he starts is he looks around, he sees, he says as he begins to speak to some of these philosophers, he says

*I see that you are extremely religious in every respect; you're very spiritual people. For as I was passing through and observing the objects of your worship, I even found an altar on which it was inscribed 'TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.'*

You see, Athenians had this understanding that all religions, they're pretty much true. 'You worship your god, that's fine, it's good for you. That's true from your perspective; it works for your life. I worship this god over here; it works for my life, that's just fine. Other people will worship other gods. We just need to all respect each other's gods, each other's religions, and we want to make sure that we're politically correct. We don't wanna leave any god out. We wouldn't want to offend them. We wouldn't want to offend some person who worships some other religion that maybe we don't have an altar to, so we're gonna put up an altar to an unknown god.' They were very pluralistic; everything goes. If it works for you, that's good. I don't know...does that sound like our culture today? To me...I've run into it multiple times.

I run into it in this basic thought process. I've had multiple people on different occasions talk to me and tell me in different ways basically that truth is relative; absolutism...saying that there is absolute truth...it's extremely arrogant. And a lot of times people will illustrate this point by using this analogy, and this is one analogy. It's in...it's this idea, a story...perhaps some of you have heard it or some variation. There's these six blind men, and they're walking along. They stumble into an elephant. And they stumble into this elephant. The first man, he runs into the side of the elephant, and he feels it...it's a wall! Next man grabs a hold of the tail, thinks it's a rope. The third wraps his arms around the leg, thinks it's a tree trunk. Fourth...he feels the ear and insists that this is a fan. There's another that grabs the tusk, thinks it's a spear. And finally the last wraps his arms around the trunk and is flyin' all over the place and thinks he's fightin' a snake. And what the idea is, is everybody...we're all kind of blind people. We don't really see the big picture, and so what we experience is true from our perspective. And the thought process is that Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam...all these other religions, they all just kind of experience God, and if this works for you, that's fine. If that works for this person, then that's fine, too, because really, it's all just relative. We all just kind of see it from our perspective.

There's a couple of problems with this thought process, ok? And I'm gonna point out just two glaring problems, why this is not exactly a position I would hold. First of all, the idea that all truth is relative, including religion—it's a self-contradictory position. I mean, think about this. What you are saying is 'I absolutely know that no one can absolutely know anything, including absolutely knowing anything about God. Everybody's gotta be absolutely right. It's true from your perspective, but it's not absolutely true, and we can't absolutely know.' It's like if I were to stand up here and say, 'I literally always, always, always tell a lie. I have never, ever, ever told the truth, ever.' That statement cannot be true! It's self-contradictory. If it was, then I've just undermined it, because I've just told the truth; I haven't always lied. In the same way, you can't say there is no absolute truth because in order to do that you're stating an absolute truth. Absolute truth...it does exist. And the question that I would have to ask is this—if that's true, if there's no absolute truth, then how can you absolutely know that what the Bible says about God is relative? You can't. It's not a position...you have to logically and reasonably conclude that it is possible that the Bible is absolutely true. It's possible.

We may not like it, but there's another problem, and it's this problem—relativism is actually a very arrogant position. I don't think that most people who espouse this...they are actually...their heart is they want to be very humble and teachable and open-minded. But it's actually a very close-minded and arrogant position because in effect the underlying position is that 'I know, with my own wisdom, that I know truth. And I have enough wisdom and understanding, and I personally see the whole big picture, which is why that I can tell you that your truth from your perspective, it's just true from your perspective. And that person's truth, it's only true from their perspective. They don't see the whole big picture, even though I do.' I mean, let's put it this way. The analogy of the elephant only works if you can see the whole elephant. That's the only reason you know that different people are actually feeling the same...or different parts of the same thing. And so a person that wants to argue relativism, they are claiming that they can see the whole elephant, so to speak. They can see the sum total of God and reality and everything else. And the question I would have to ask is 'How can you see the big picture of reality, religion, and God, if nobody else can?' You're claiming a perspective of God which I don't think that's what people intend to do.

But here's how this is distinguished from Christianity. And this is what's different; this is why Christianity is extremely humble. It actually recognizes the fact that we can only know God and reality if He reveals Himself and reality to us. You see, we look at it, and I say I am not any...I don't believe this simply because I'm any smarter or wiser or better than anybody else. It's simply because of the fact that God has revealed it. That's it. I don't claim to be able to see the whole elephant. I'm a blind man who walks up to this elephant and I grab the ear and I say, 'Oh, I think it's a fan.' And then all of a sudden the elephant moves around and he puts his tusk in my hands. And then he moves around and puts his trunk here. And I feel his side, and he starts makin' elephant noises. And the elephant reveals himself to me as a blind man. In the same way, God has revealed Himself to us. It's not that we're any smarter; it's not that we're any better; it's not that we're any wiser; it's just that God has revealed Himself to us. That's what John 1:18 says, is that Jesus Christ is the revelation of God. It's God coming down in the flesh and saying, 'Listen, I know you don't fully understand Me, and I am way beyond your comprehension. So here, look at My life, see My sinless life; see how I interact with people. Look at my power. Witness this, and go ahead and kill Me, and watch what I can do. I can come back to life. I control even death and life itself.' That's why Christianity is actually very humble. We don't claim to be so much smarter...it's just that God has revealed Himself and helped us to understand the big picture of who He is.

The problem is that a lot of times, though, we turn away from the Creator God who *is* to serve a variety of idols. And the question that would come up is, well, we don't really continue to serve idols today. I mean, as Paul looked around what he saw was idols of, you know, carvings and everything else set up. In Acts 17: 24, 25, and 29, basically the thought process and what he outlines after he said, 'Yes, there is this Creator God. He is there whether we like it or not, and He exists,' is he said, 'This God, the God who made the universe and everything in it, since He, Himself, gives everyone life and breath and all things, because He made me, why in the world...what makes me think that the divine nature...that God is something that I can shape into something that I want with my own human art and imagination? Why do I think that if God is the reason I exist that I have any power to control Him, to make Him be what I want Him to be? It doesn't make sense. I mean, if He's all-powerful, He just is...even if I don't want Him to be who he is.

Here's the thing...an idol is basically, it's just anything other than the Creator that I look to for worth, identity, confidence. It's stuff that makes me feel valuable. It's something...this is where I place my core of my being. This is what gives me value in life. If it's anything other than God the Creator, it's an idol. I'm turning my heart away from where it belongs and turning it somewhere else of my own making. Or another way to look at it, another way that idols come about, is it's just a man-made idea to personalize God, to shape Him into my own understanding, my own image, so that I can make His character reflect my own values and desires. That's what idols were; it's just the Greeks went ahead and carved it into a picture that they could look at that would remind them of what they wanted God to be.

Well, there's two ways that I...as I look, and I'm sayin' in my own life, and as I look in the lives of people around me, there's two ways that I commonly see myself and others make idols. First, we create functional saviors. What I mean by this is we come up with these things, and sometimes I do it intentionally; and sometimes it just slips up on me. It's something that I look to, and really it's like a functional savior to me. It's something that I'm turning my heart away from God and I'm allowing my heart to chase after something else. I'm allowing my heart to find worth and value, confidence, importance, acceptance, in something else. And so, in effect, what I'm doing is functionally I am looking to something else other than God for my own importance, for my own worth, for my own value, for my acceptance. And second, we shape God's character to reflect our own. That's somethin' that I do. I like to pick and choose. I don't wanna hear so much about this part; I wanna hear more about that part. That part over there...it makes me uncomfortable, so let's not talk quite as much about that. Let's instead focus on this aspect.

Well, we'll look at these just real briefly. There's a couple common functional saviors that I run into, that I've struggled with, and this is something that both Christians and non-Christians struggle with. There's a continual process where our heart starts turning away from God and starts chasing after other things that we think will just give us that satisfaction that we want, that we long for. One is money; and the way that this comes out a lot of times is we think it'll give us security. And so we just save, and we get so concerned and wrapped up and consumed with the security of our future resting in our retirement portfolio and our savings accounts. Now, there's nothing wrong with saving. The question is are we looking to it to give us security for the future? There's a difference between being wise and placing your trust in money.

Another way is we look to money for acceptance. We just spend; we look for it to make ourselves feel better about ourselves. Maybe we aren't happy, or somethin' else, so we just have to get some retail therapy. 'I tell you what, I'm gonna be happy if I can just go out, and let me just spend some money here, buy somethin', I don't know; let me walk through the mall or Sportsman's Warehouse, or somethin' like that; and if I can just find somethin' there; I know there's somethin' there, but I don't know it yet, but I need it. And if I can go get it, it will make me happy. That'll give my life the meaning and the satisfaction I've been waitin' for.' And so I go for it.

Our bodies...we get so wrapped up in how we look, and so we spend hours and hours and hours at the gym, or makin' sure we're wearin' the right clothes. We're concerned about sex, we're concerned about food and diet, and we make sure that no unclean thing will ever touch my lips, because 'I'm going completely organic; I'm gonna be a vegan, not gonna let any...you know, anything nasty ever touch my lips. Twinkie is the filthiest thing ever. And so, I'm just not gonna go there, because this body is a temple.' I mean, we look to it and it's almost as though, if I just...if I look good, if my body is all that I want it to be, then everything is ok.

Or relationships...if I look at my spouse or my kids, or if there's a boyfriend or a girlfriend that something that I say, 'If this person just loves me, if they just accept me, then my life will be ok. If I can just have this person, or if they will change and will be the way that I know that they can be, then everything will be ok. It'll all work out, and my life will be worthwhile; it'll make everything ok.'

Possessions...we judge ourselves based on our house, our car, different toys...whatever it is.

All of these things are just functional saviors. They're things that we look at and say 'This will give me worth.' And what we're doing, in effect, is we're making idols because our heart is turning away from the Creator God and turning toward something else.

Another thing that we do, a second way that we try to make idols, is we try to make God into our own image. We try and shape His character to reflect our personal desires, and values, and wants, and wishes. And so we say things like 'God is love.' And typically, when I hear that from people, most of the time they're saying that because they want to justify something that they're doing. And they wanna say, 'Well, God loves me, so He just wants me to be happy. And so He won't care if I walk out on my family, or whatever. He won't care if I compromise in this way, because really, He loves me and He just wants me to be happier.' Or 'Hey, I'm good enough. At least I don't do what that person over there is doing. God won't care. I follow the rules, I make sure I'm at church enough, or maybe I make sure that I pray, or whatever.' And so we say, 'Oh, well, God won't care about this, He'll only care about this.' In effect, what we're doing is we're trying to tell the elephant, 'Nope, you're a fan. Nope, uh uh, I feel this part of you; I like this part over here. I don't like the trunk, you know, smacking me all over the place, so we're just gonna ignore that and I'm gonna come over here and hold onto the tail. I really like the rope part.' When we do that we're makin' idols. We're not accepting God as He is.

So what does He want from us and for us? Well, it's the basic thought process and message that Paul was communicating to the Athenians. One, we need to repent. We need to turn away from our idols, from the things that turn our hearts away from the Creator God, and we need to turn back to Him. And that's where, in verse 30, Paul says, 'Listen, God is willing to overlook; He has overlooked the times of ignorance. He's willing to overlook the times that you have turned your back on Him and turned to another. He is willing to overlook those things and forgive them. He is now commanding all people everywhere to repent; turn away from whatever it is that you think will give you value and worth and acceptance, and turn to the Creator God.' He says that we need to do this because a day of justice has been set; and in verse 31 he says, 'Listen,

*God has set a day on which He is going to judge the world in righteousness by the Man (and he's talking about Jesus here) He has appointed.*

We have all kinds of questions a lot of times about, ok, well what will this day of judgment and justice...what will it look like? I'm lookin' forward to that day, because that is the day where all of the ways that I have been wronged are going to be made right. All the things that people have done to me, or all the ways...the injustice that I have suffered—it's going to be made better. 'Course, I conveniently forget or push aside the fact that also means that all the ways that I have wronged people or I have wronged God will be fairly, and accurately, and rightly judged. So we ask questions—well, what's it look like? Paul doesn't really get into it. All he says is, 'You know what? We don't really need to worry about it. All we need to know is the God of the universe, the God who created it all, He set this day and He's gonna judge, and He's gonna judge fairly. All we need to know is this day of justice is coming. And we know it's coming because of Jesus' resurrection. He's provided proof of this to everyone by raising Him, Jesus, from the dead.'

Think about this for just a second. The apostles, Jesus' followers—it is one of the most historically verifiable facts that Jesus Christ died on the cross. It is also one of the most historically verified facts that the apostles went to their deaths insisting that they literally saw Him alive after the crucifixion. Now think about this for a second. Someone will die for something that they think is true...yeah, they will. But they won't die for something that they know is a hoax. It would be very hard to argue that the apostles and the first century followers of Christ knew that this was a hoax and they were just trying to somehow use it for their benefit. At the very least, they were mistaken. The interesting thing is that these people went to their deaths insisting that they had seen Jesus alive after they had seen Him killed.

And Paul's thought process is this—listen, there is this day of justice coming and Jesus, He came down, and we can't see God. We're a bunch of blind people groping around, trying to figure out what an elephant is. And God comes down and He reveals Himself to us in Jesus Christ. Jesus comes and He says, 'Listen, I am God, I am the Father. This is how you interact with Me. You repent, you come to Me. I will forgive you of your sins. I have to power to do that. And people are gonna kill Me, and I will die a death in your place; but guess what? I am gonna come back alive.' Now the disciples, they thought this was all crazy. They didn't fully understand it until all of a sudden, a few days after He was killed, they saw Him alive again. And then all of a sudden they say 'Wait a second. All that stuff He was sayin', it all makes sense now. And this guy really must be God.'

And so what happens is these disciples, these apostles, these first century Christians, they went to their deaths because they were being told, 'Listen, if you will just stop with this idea that somehow you saw Jesus after He was killed, that you saw Him alive again, just renounce that and we're good. You can walk away.' And they say, 'No way. You can strip away my money, you can strip away my home; you can take my relationships, my family, the things that...you can tear my body apart and torture me to death and I'm not gonna deny that. Why? Because I saw Him alive. And if He can come back alive, then guess what? You don't have any power over me. You can kill me, but you can't bring me back to life. He can.'

And Paul is calling these Athenians to go ahead and acknowledge that fact in the same way that he would to us today. His basic message would be to repent because a day of justice has been set. And we can trust in this because of Jesus' resurrection.

So the question is what do I do with this? Well, it's two things. One, maybe you're sittin' here today and you look at your life and you say, 'Yeah, I can see where if there's this Creator God, I try and make Him into my own image, or I turn my heart towards other things. I'm placin' my confidence and my acceptance, my sense of self-worth, and everything else, in some other thing of my choosing that is not the God of the universe.' What we do there is just say, 'Hey, you need to turn away from that, get your heart right with God. Repent, ask forgiveness.' And He says, 'You know what? I'm willing to overlook that. I'm willing to forgive it. I'm willing to set it aside.'

A second thing is if we sit here and we look at our lives, and we say, 'You know, I'm examining my heart; and really, the best I know how, where I'm at, my heart...with what God is showing me, I am running as hard as I can after God. I'm willing to get rid of any idols in my life, or I'm willing to turn my heart back to God in areas of my life where I see that I need to do that. But I don't see anything.' The simple thing that we would do there is that this is a message that still applies to us here in Wasilla, Alaska in 2009. But it's a message that we don't have to do a Gary the Pit preacher routine. We don't have to head down here to Carrs, start spittin' and snortin', yellin' and screamin', hellfire and brimstone because a day of justice and judgment is coming. We can talk about it logically, reasonably; it doesn't have to be anything threatening and huge, and something...it's a serious topic, but it's something we can talk about logically. So we shouldn't be afraid to talk about it, even though what may end up happening is same thing that happens with Paul at the tail end where some mock him for it because 'the idea of resurrection is just a little bit ludicrous, that somebody would come back alive. I've never seen anybody do it, so of course it's crazy.'

But still, yet, Jesus Christ, the God of the universe, revealed Himself to us, and I place my trust in that.

Let's stand.

Christianity is an extremely logical position. The reason I hold it is not because I just have this blind faith. The reason that I hold to it is because I have gone through times where I have questioned and I have wondered; I have had to wrestle with why I believe what I believe. And what I have come to as the conclusion that it is more reasonable and more logical, even with the things that I haven't got my mind wrapped around yet, than any other worldview or understanding or big picture of reality and God out there. It is the most reasonable, which makes sense if we're talking about the God of the universe and ultimate truth.

And if you have any questions about that, please feel free...send me an email, come up, talk to me. If you have any questions, somebody that you're talkin' to, 'how do I answer this question', I would love to talk with you and help you see some of maybe how we can wrestle through that together. But let's pray.

*Lord God,*

*Thank You so very much for the fact that You did come, You did reveal Yourself to us in Jesus Christ. Lord, You used Your Son to reveal Yourself to us and we can know You because of that.*

*God, I do ask that You would help us to be drawn to You, that You would draw ourselves to You, that we would know You better, that we would turn away from those other things that we think will fill the emptiness inside, and that we'll turn to You, the Creator God of the universe. Lord, help us to run hard after You and never to look back. And help us to share the message of truth and grace and repentance and all these things with people around us.*

*We pray this in the name of Your Son who came to die for us and reveal You to us. Amen.*