

## **I. Putting I Corinthians 9:19-22 Into Practice**

### **A. The Setting: Athens**

We see the Apostle Paul putting this into practice in Acts 17. After a difficult time and facing a great deal of opposition, the Apostle Paul walks into the city of Athens. For centuries the city of Athens had been the center of civilization in the western world. Athens was the city of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Athens was the birthplace for democracy and for Western philosophy. It was the crossroads for ideas, religions, and philosophies. Acts 17:16 states, “While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.” This passage describes the Greek marketplace of Athens. Built hundreds of years before, it had become the religious center of the city. Hundreds of idols, altars, and places of worship were jammed into the marketplace. In fact, there were so many religious items that the Romans had to build another marketplace just to carry out normal marketplace activities.

### **B. Paul’s Response to the Idols**

As Paul walks into this religious center, notice how he responds to the overwhelming number of idols in this place. He was distressed. His heart was broken. Was he offended? Maybe, but the passage clearly represents Paul as being disturbed by what he saw.

So what was his response? He immediately began to engage. First he went to the synagogue where the Jews and God-fearing Greeks would gather. Then, he went to the marketplace and spoke to whoever would listen to him. He must have been so effective in communicating that he was invited to the Areopagus, which many people believe was Mars Hill. There were gathered the intellectual elite of Athens plus many other citizens who had come to hear the new ideas from Paul.

## **II. Lessons From Paul’s Response**

There is a lot to be learned from Paul’s statement here.

First, he was starting where they were.

Second, he sought to understand the culture. He noted that he carefully studied their objects of worship. This must have been difficult for him. Many of the idols

were vile and violent, some even downright pornographic. Paul's broken heart drove him to try to understand why people would worship these idols. He no doubt was seeking a connection with them so that he might be able to build a bridge to Jesus Christ for them.

Third, he was positive about the truth he found. If nothing else, the Athenians were quite religious. They worshiped a lot! Paul's concern was that they know the truth so that they could worship the true God.

Fourth, he quoted from their writers. As the passage goes on, we find Paul quoting not from the Bible, but from their own sources. He quoted from their own philosophers and poets. He knew what was popular with them and used it to communicate basic truths. In a similar way, I have had many opportunities to talk to young people about Jesus Christ by bringing up issues that are raised in today's popular music or movies. Since everything has a worldview at its foundation; it is rather easy to bring up specific issues related to life in the world from the popular culture realm.

Finally, Paul was very clear about presenting the gospel. He didn't water it down. Listen to how he describes the biblical worldview and ends with a powerful call for people to respond to God's call and Christ's work on the cross:

*Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.*

*The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And He is not served by human hands, as if He needed anything, because He Himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man He made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and He determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek Him and perhaps reach out for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us. "For in Him we live and move and have our being." As some of your own poets have said, "We are His offspring."*

*Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone — an image made by man's design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now He commands all people everywhere to repent. For He has set a day when He will judge the world with justice by the man He has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising Him from the dead" (Acts 17:22b-31).*

### III. The People's Response to Paul's Message

*When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, We want to hear you again on this subject. At that, Paul left the Council. A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others (Acts 17:32-34).*

Note the three-fold response: some rejected and ridiculed the message; some came to Christ; some wanted to hear more. This is not an unusual response to the explanation of the gospel. But Paul's persistence and wisdom in "enslaving himself to them" as he communicated the truth gave him more open doors and an increasing interest among the people.

So this is our challenge. We are called to engage the culture with the heart and the mind of Jesus Christ. When we look at the world around us, our hearts should break. As a result we should have a passion to think deeply and broadly so that we might be able to communicate clearly the hope that is found in the person and message of Christ.

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