

Acts Overview: Staying the Course

Acts 17-18

- In Paul's day there was no tougher cities in the Greek world to keep one's faith pure than the three cities God had him to go evangelize in chapters 17-18 of the book of Acts. Not by coincidence these three cities also were some of the most prominent cities in the known world, and they represent everything God said was the true enemy of the Christian as described in **1 John 2:15-17**:
 1. The Flesh
 2. The World
 3. The Devil
- We'll begin in the order by which they're found in Acts, starting in chapter 17 – Athens. Paul had just experienced great evangelistic success in both Thessalonica and Berea, two cities about as far apart as Washington DC and Baltimore. However, that success brought extreme persecution, so much so that in each city Paul had to be smuggled out in order to preserve his life. **Acts 9:16** tells us Paul always knew he would suffer intense persecution because God told him that at the beginning of his ministry. The only uncertainty was when and what kind. With that type of prophecy hanging over you you'd think it would be easy to quit and tell God, "It's too much; I'm only human," not Paul.
- In **Acts 17:15-16**, after being chased- threatened, you'd think Paul would keep a low profile, since all he was suppose to do was wait until his two companions Silas and Timothy arrived. But something happened; the implication is Paul had never been to Athens before, so like any tourist in a famous place he looked around waiting to be impressed. Instead his spirit was provoked. The word means to sharpen. An intense pain began to grow inside him as the more he saw the more he was grieved. What did he see that caused this? Verse 16 - the whole city was given over to idols.
- Idolatry is putting anything before God, or placing and worshipping anything other than God. Athens had done so and more; as the intellectual capital of the world it prided itself for being the home to famous philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. At the core of its philosophies was the production of idols. The city had a god for everything and an image for every god was plastered all over the city. This broke Paul's heart because he knew idolatry wasn't harmless but rather harmful.
- So where does Athens fall in our 3-fold enemies order? Because philosophies produce ideas and ideals, which lead to perspective, and ultimately forms the way of thinking. As **Proverbs 23:7** says, "As a man thinks so he is." This can be none other than the devil's domain. The battle first begins in our minds. That's why **Romans 12:1-2** commands us to have our minds transformed because it has been conditioned to think there's something other than God we need to submit to, and that comes directly from Satan himself.
- Whenever you see idols and philosophies that oppose scripture you should know that the source is the devil, masquerading as intellect. **1 Timothy 6:20** warns us about knowledge which leads to questioning and opposing God.
- The next city on the list is Corinth (**Acts 18:1**). Where Athens was known for its culture, Corinth was known for debauchery. It was the Las Vegas of its day, where sexual immorality and vice was celebrated not denigrated. There was a saying for anyone involved in sexual misconduct - to

do so was to be *Corinthianized*. This was the backdrop for the rebuke Paul gave in **1 Corinthians 5:1**, where a man was having sexual relations with his stepmother; it was fine for Corinthian standards but not Christianity.

- So where does Corinth stand on our list? It has to be the flesh. Where else could such devastating personal decisions be justified and enjoyed but in the lust of the flesh? Last on our gruesome threesome list is found in **Acts 18:19**; the city of Ephesus. It was a place for trade and commerce, being called the landing place. Accepting of all cultures, beliefs, and practices, Ephesus was a popular place to go for anyone looking to make his/her fortune. Thus this city is representative of the world with all of its promises and allure glossing over the pain and disappointments.
- Well there you have it 3 cities, 3 temptations, representing a 3-fold enemy:
 1. **Athens** (Devil) - all its philosophies- idols
 2. **Corinth** (Flesh) - sexual immorality and carnal vices
 3. **Ephesus** (World) - promises of success, money, and allurements
- After identifying all this we now need to know what Paul did to protect himself from veering off course and entering into dangerous and destructive paths. Go back to **Acts 17:17**. Instead of becoming a sight-seer he remembered he was a soul winner, and this allowed him to practice **Psalm 97:10** - You who love the Lord, hates evil. Also **Psalm 119:104** - through Your word I get understanding, therefore I hate every false way. And **Psalm 119:128** - everything in Your Word about all things I believe is right, therefore I hate every false way. When we engage the enemy with this perspective, no matter what the temptation, we'll come out victorious.
- What about Corinth? **Acts 18:2-3** - when dealing with the flesh you never go it alone; you find people of like-mind, who won't just make you comfortable but will hold you accountable to biblical standards ...Ephesus or the world? You can't run away from it; you can't join it, so what do you do? **Acts 18:19** - you reason from the scriptures. When confronted by the world we're not called to outthink it or out entertain it. We simply need to know what we believe and why we believe it, which is why Paul would say later on in **Ephesians 4:14-15**, don't be carried away by man-made philosophies. They only trick people into thinking just like the world, and therefore forgetting who they are in Christ, and what their calling is on earth. Paul reasoned from the scriptures and it protected him from worldly thinking.