

Acts 17:22-34

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Date: 18 October 2020

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[0 : 0 0] Do turn with me to Act 17. I've got a week's holiday next week. And so I'm Arthur, he's! going to preach for you in the morning and then George Parsons at night. But we're in! the third sermon in Act 17. And if you were here last Sunday, if you can remember way back seven days, we saw that it was important that we have our thinking straight about God.

And that's where you have to begin. It is the gospel of God that we preach. It's good news, Christianity primarily concerning God. God is the subject of every statement in this sermon in Acts 17. But almost as important is for us to have a proper understanding of man, men and women, human beings. What is man? What is woman?

Why do you matter? What is it about you, about human beings that is different? And there are three things about human beings that all begin with D, alright? That we're going to see. The first thing is I want you to see the dignity of human beings. I'm going to lapse, I think, quite a lot into speaking about man. I don't mean to be sexist in that at all.

It's just a lot easier when you're talking than using the word human beings. Don't be offended about it. If you're offended about it, feel free to come and see me socially distanced this week, alright? But I'm going to kind of lapse into that. So the dignity of human beings.

And there's three things from verse 26. First of all, he tells us that man, human beings, have been made by God. Look at verse 26. He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth. So the first thing we see about the dignity of man is he was made by God.

[2 : 0 5] He tells us, secondly, that man has been made like God, that we are offspring made in his image. And then he says we've been made for God. And those three things tell us wonderfully about the dignity of who you are. That you are a creature. You've been made by God. And that's where your true dignity lies. In the fact that you've been made by God. You've not evolved from some kind of primeval sludge.

You've not evolved from the animal kingdom. You've been made by God. And the Genesis account is really interesting here. Genesis 1 and 2 are interesting because there are some that say, well, actually, when you read Genesis 1 and when you read Genesis 2, and they are contradictory accounts of creation, you've probably heard that. Well, of course, when you look at Genesis 1 and 2, it's very clear that they're not contradictory. So come with me to the start of the Bible. They're not contradictory.

They are complementary. And so in Genesis 1, the stress is on human beings' affinity, human beings' likeness with the rest of creation. And that shouldn't embarrass you. In the accounts of creation, Genesis 1 stresses the affinity and the likeness that you have to the rest of creation. And there are similarities between human beings and apes. There are similarities between human beings and animals. That's not surprising. Why is it not surprising? Because we've been made by the same creator. In fact, we were made on the same day of creation. Human beings and animals have been made to live in the same environment, to breathe the same oxygen. We were made out of the same dust. And of course, that there are similarities. That shouldn't surprise us at all in the slightest. And Genesis 1 stresses there is an affinity between humans and the rest of creation. But even in Genesis 1, there's something very special in the way that man is made. So look at verses chapter 1 and verse 24. And that tells us how the animals were made. How God made the animals. And how he made animals and man on the same day.

And he made the beasts of the field, in verse 24, can you see it? According to their kinds. The end of verse 24, according to their kinds. Verse 25, he made the beasts of the earth according to their kinds. 25, according to their kind. He made everything that creeps on the ground according to their kind.

[4 : 40] And then look at verse 26. Verse 26, God says, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And it's almost as if, according to their kind, according to their kind, according to their kind, and God, on the threshold of making man, he pauses.

There's a formula, isn't there? But the formula changes. And man is made on the same day as the animals, but he's not made in the same way as the animals. And when God makes animals, he says, Let the earth bring forth the cattle and the creeping things. But when God wants to make man, he doesn't say anything to anything, bring it forth. He doesn't say, Let the land bring forth.

No, he makes man directly. Man, human beings are a special act of creation. And before God makes human beings, it's as if God takes counsel. It's as almost as if he pauses, and within the Godhead, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, they agree, let us make man.

It's a different formula. Let us make man in our own image and our own likeness. There's something very special about the creation of humanity. Because God is involved in it immediately.

And directly. And that comes out in chapter 2, verse 7, where you've got a zoom lens of what happened. When God created human beings, then the Lord God, chapter 2, verse 7, formed the man of dust of the ground, and he breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.

[6 : 18] The distinctive thing about human beings is not that they became a living soul. I think sometimes we can teach it like that, but man isn't different because he's got a soul.

Although that's true, that isn't what the passage says. What it's saying is, the verse is saying that human beings became animate. They became living beings. We share that with all the animals, don't we? Of course.

But the distinctive thing about you is not that you're a living soul, or that you're a living being. The distinctive thing about human beings is the way that you became a living being. How did man become a living being?

Well, God kissed him. Do you see that there? God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. And he became a living being.

How did man come into existence? Well, with a kiss from God. Is there anything that could emphasize the specialness of the creation of man more than that?

[7 : 28] Here's the answer. To what people believe today about man. He is special. Human beings are made by God. Acts 17, verse 26.

He's made from one man, from one blood, literally. Every nation of men and women to dwell on the face of the earth. Here's the answer to racism. There are not different races.

There is only one race. And that is the human race. He made, according to the apostle, of one blood, one man, all the nations of the earth.

We're told, we're not different races. We're not black races or white races, Aryan races. There is one race with one common ancestor. Adam. And because that is true, we are all of equal worth.

Because God is made of one blood. One stock. All the nations of the earth. And we need to understand that. We live, don't we, in a divided society more so than any time that I can remember.

[8 : 37] A divided nation. And we need to hear this. As much as those who were in first century Athens needed to hear it. Because the people that listened to this sermon, the Athenians, they divided the world up into all sorts of people.

They divided the world up into Greeks and barbarians. They were really class conscious. The Athenians thought that they were cut above all the other Greeks. There is something special about being from Athens.

They'd love to have been a fly on the wall when Paul preached this sermon. God has made of one man all the nations of the earth. They were so proud of being Greek. And as far as they were concerned, the whole world could be summed up.

Well, in this division of barbarian and Greek. The Jews were the same, of course. The Jews were the special people of God, they thought.

And everyone else, everyone else was what? Well, Gentile dogs. It's a total misunderstanding of their role in history. Because when God chose Adam, Abraham, and he made those promises to Abraham and his descendants, it was not to make them into a master race.

[9 : 56] It was to make them into a servant people that would spread across the world the glory of God. So here is the dignity of man. You see, the fact that you have been made in a very special way by God, in a very direct way.

That he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth. And every single human being in this world has worth because God made him or her.

Second thing, not only did God make man, but we've been made, not only have we been made by God, but Paul tells us we've been made like God. So can you see that in verse 28?

Go back to Acts 17. In verse 28, it says, Do you see what he's saying?

He's saying you've got it completely the wrong way around. You can't make God in your likeness.

He's made you in his likeness. That's what he's saying. We are God's offspring. That is, God has made us in his image, in his likeness, and that's what makes us so different from the animals.

[11:18] Emil Brunner, who's a funny theologian, put it like this. He says, The animal possesses understanding, no doubt, but not reason. It is no doubt the beginnings of civilization, but no culture.

It probably has curiosity and knows many things, but it has no science. It probably plays, but it has no art. It knows herds, but not fellowship.

It probably fears punishment, but has no conscience. It probably realizes the superiority of man, but it knows nothing of the Lord or the world. It's not that you're a moral, rational creature.

We've been made in the image and likeness of God, and that's where our worth lies. We have no intrinsic worth of our own.

We're just an amalgam, aren't we? We have carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen, calcium, sulfur, iron, phosphorus. We are the dust of the earth. That's what the dust of the earth is.

[12:34] We have no intrinsic value as human beings. Our value comes from the fact that we bear the image of the one who made us. So let's say you have a picture of a loved one.

You have a picture of your husband or your wife or your parents. And you've printed it out, and you have it on paper.

But that paper has no intrinsic value, does it? It's just a bit of paper. That's all it is. But it has value to you.

Why does it have value to you? Because it bears the image of the one that you love. So you love that photograph. And we need to understand that really clearly. We live in a time, don't we, when there's massive confusion about self-esteem and self-worth.

And we're told, listen, your problem is your self-image. And your problem is you've got a lack of self-esteem.

[13:39] And that's why we have so many of our problems, we're told. But that isn't the biblical perspective at all. Because humans are valuable only in as much as they bear the image of their maker.

And we know, don't we, very clearly from looking around this world, that that image has been tarnished and defaced and broken.

There's a famous quote in English literature. I don't give you great English literature often, but I read it in a book, so I thought I'd give it to you. Robert South, who you know, I'm sure, puts it like this. All those arts, rarities, and inventions, which vulgar minds gaze at, the ingenious pursue and all admire, are but the relics of an intellect defaced with sin and time.

And Aristotle was but the rubbish of an Adam, and Athens but the rudiments of paradise. Man bears the image and likeness of God, but that image is tarnished and broken.

Man is a ruin. Women are a ruin. They are a magnificent ruin. And that's the tragedy of the human race.

[14:55] It isn't that we haven't arrived yet. That's not the tragedy. That we're still trying to get our act together. No, the tragedy is we have fallen from what we were created to be. So when you drive through the countryside, and sometimes you see a ruin or an abbey or something, and you get out of the car and you go and look at the abbey, and it's awe-inspiring.

And you wander around the ruins of an abbey, and you wonder, what must this have been like in its heyday? But according to the Bible, that's exactly with human beings.

We are ruins, magnificent ruins. I think it's hard for you and I to conceive what Adam and Eve would have been like when they were created. And yet, and yet, and yet, man has a dignity, women have a dignity in their sin and in their fallenness.

There's a dignity about a human being. And the tragedy is we are not what we were meant to be.

That image in which we've been created has been marred and shattered.

It's scarcely recognizable. But it's not eradicated. It's still there. But you can scarcely see it. And there are times, aren't there, when you can scarcely distinguish human beings from animals.

[16:23] And we need to remind ourselves that not only have we been made by God, but we've been made like God. And thirdly, Paul tells us that we've been made for God. Look at verse 26. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined a lot of periods and boundaries of their dwelling place.

That they should seek God and perhaps feel their way towards him and find him. Yet he's actually not far from each one of us. And that's the reason for your existence. That you would find God. One writer has described life as a country where there are no signposts because there's nowhere to go. Paul says, human beings, you have somewhere to go.

You've a reason for living. You've a reason for being cured. That God has made you in order that you might seek after and you might find God. And so you have a purpose and a meaning to life. You've been made by God. You've been made like God. You've been made for God. That's man's dignity. So secondly, let's see man's destiny.

[17:37] What's man's destiny? Verse 31. Because he's fixed the day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he's appointed. And of this he's given assurance by raising him from the dead.

And there's nothing uncertain about where we're heading as humans. There's a great deal of uncertainty today, isn't there? But there really is no uncertainty about where we're heading. There's nothing uncertain about your destiny. You might feel there's great uncertainty about tomorrow. But there's nothing uncertain about your destiny. It's not a random affair. It's not left a chance. Paul tells us that God has fixed the day.

When he's going to judge the world in righteousness. And you and I are going to be judged. And that is the human destiny.

Men and women, boys and girls, made in the image and likeness of God will be judged. And that is good news. Why is it good news? It's good news because it tells you that everything is meaningful and everything is significant.

[18:38] We live in an age, don't we, which is apathetic. People shrug their shoulders and say, well, is it worth it?

Nothing means anything. People don't care. Apathy. The apostle says, no, no. He says God is going to judge. And that means that everything, everything actually matters.

Everything you've ever thought or done or said is going to be brought into judgment. The very idea of judgment invests the whole of your life with significance.

That God is going to judge the world and he'll judge the world in righteousness. And we take this so much for granted, don't we? But for most people in the world, justice is a real luxury.

To have justice without having to bribe your way into it. To guarantee that justice will be fair. And we've got that to a degree. A fair system. But in so many of the parts of the world, this would be good news.

[19:43] Indeed, it was to the Athenians. Somebody has said that if the gods of ancient Greece were to be alive today, some of them would be in prison. They were an immoral bunch.

And so you entrust your destiny to these gods. And here comes Paul into the midst of that. And all that superstition. And all the different temples.

And all the different gods. And everything going on. And all the immorality to the different shrines. And Paul comes into the midst of it and says, God has appointed a day when he will judge the whole world in righteousness. And that is good news.

That your destiny, your destiny is tied up with a God who is going to be fair. And a God who you can rely on to do the right thing.

And so when people say to us, well, what is God going to do about this? What is God going to do about that? We say he'll do the right thing. He will judge the world in righteousness.

[20:45] He's fixed the day when all injustices will be put right. When all equalities will be ironed out. And that isn't some pious hope and some uncertainty.

It is certain that God has fixed the day when he will judge the world in righteousness. And so there will be no mistakes on that day.

And no unsolved mysteries. And all the files in Scotland Yard that are unsolved and undealt with will be in a moment sorted.

Because he's fixed the day and he will judge the world in righteousness. And he tells us, if you notice in verse 31, that he's not only fixed the day, but he's appointed the judge because he's fixed

the day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed. And there's mercy there, isn't there? There's mercy even in God's judgment because Jesus is not a vindictive judge, is he? The one whom God has appointed the judge of the human race is the one who so loved the world that he came into this world to die for sinners.

[21 : 58] And if you're afraid of getting a fair hearing on the day of judgment, you've got nothing to be afraid of because you'll get a fair hearing because the one whom God has appointed the judge is the woman who came and died because he loves human beings.

And he loves those whom he created. And he came to die for sinners that they might be reconciled to God. And it is the same Jesus who is going to judge the world at the end of time.

And that's a remarkable thing. Imagine I was to stand here and tell you that if you listen carefully to what I have to say this morning, and you listen very carefully to my words, that your eternal destiny depends on it.

And one day I'm going to come back at the end of the world, and I'm going to come back to judge you and your fate. It will be settled in obedience according to your obedience to my words.

And if I started talking like that, you'd probably call a psychiatrist or the police. But that is exactly how Jesus talked in the Sermon on the Mount. He says in Matthew 7, He doesn't say, Not everyone who says to God, does he?

[23 : 23] But he says, Everyone who says to me, Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven. Many will say to me on that day, Lord, have we not prophesied in your name, or cast out demons in your name, and done many wonders in your name, and then I will declare to them, I never knew you, depart from me.

Get away from me. You who practice lawlessness. Well, somebody who says that, is either a raving madman, or they're speaking the truth.

Somebody who makes those claims about themselves, is either a lunatic, a megalomaniac, or they're telling the truth. For someone to say, They are the arbiter of human history, and human destiny, and I'm coming back at the end of the world, and your fate depends on how you respond to me.

They're either mad, or speaking the truth. And so do you really believe, that Jesus is a madman this morning? The sanest teacher in the world, the teacher of the Sermon on the Mount.

He claims to be the one who will judge you, and the arbiter of human destiny. And so that means that you and I, will actually meet this man, Jesus, and you will speak to him, and he will speak to you, and every single human being, will meet with Jesus.

[24 : 53] He's the man whom God has appointed, to judge the world in righteousness. Does that terrify you? If you're a Christian, that doesn't terrify you, because the one who is coming to be your judge, has died to be your saviour.

And you know that, and the day of judgment holds no terrors, because the sin question has already been dealt with, at Calvary. And so you can say with the hymn writer, No condemnation, now I dread.

Jesus, and all in him, is mine. And not only, is Jesus coming to judge, but Paul is saying here, Jesus is a standard by which we're judged.

Do you notice what he says? He says that he's fixed a day, when he will judge the world in righteousness, by a man whom he has appointed. The judgment will be absolutely fair. And you and I, are going to be judged, not by a kind of alien standard.

We're going to be judged, by what it means to be fully alive. We're going to be judged, by what it means to be properly human. The standard will be man, human beings, as they're meant to be.

[26 : 07] The standard of judgment is Jesus. And all have sinned, and fallen short of the glory of God. But where do you see the glory of God? You see the glory of God, in the face of Jesus.

And that will be the standard of judgment. Because if I compare myself with you, or you compare yourself with me, we'll feel quite good. But on the day of judgment, the standard will be Jesus, and his love will show up my lovelessness, his unselfishness will show up my greed, his purity will show up my uncleanness, his integrity will show up my conceit, and we will be compared with him.

So here's our destiny. It's appointed unto you once to die, and after death, the judgment.

And you and I have an appointment to keep the other side of the grave. And according to Paul, God has given you due notice. He's given you due notice that this is happening by raising Jesus from the dead.

He's arguing, isn't he, from a past certainty to a future reality. And people didn't find it any easier to believe in judgment than they do now.

[27 : 27] They would have said, wouldn't they, when they heard Paul say, nobody believes this sort of thing. And Paul says, okay, let me prove it to you. Let me assure you that this is going to happen. Do you want to know why it's going to happen and why it's not just my opinion?

Why he says, I'm not here just to debate with you and toss around a few ideas. If you want assurance that this is your destiny, that this is where the human race is heading, if you want assurance of this in time and space, well, something happened.

A man died in Jerusalem. And on the third day, he came back from the dead and God raised him from the dead. And just as likely as that was, it happened.

And just as certainly as it happened, one day God is going to judge the world in righteousness by that same man. Made by God, made like God, made for God.

That is our dignity. There will be a day of judgment and that day is already fixed and that is our destiny. And thirdly, and really briefly, what is our duty? It's there in verse 30, isn't it?

[28 : 41] The times of ignorance got overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. 20 centuries after these words, people still study Greek literature, don't they?

And Roman literature. People go to university, certain types of universities, and they study the classics, which is not only Fools and Horses or 1970s comedy.

It's Greek literature, isn't it? Roman literature. And into the heyday of Greek literature and Roman literature comes along a little Jew who wasn't very impressive.

He was a small man, didn't look particularly attractive, it would seem. And he comes into the middle of Athens and he's surrounded by the towering intellectuals of his day and he refers to the golden age of literature and look what he says about it.

Verse 30. God overlooks such ignorance. God overlooks such ignorance that the world is so impressed by.

[29 : 49] In the old authorised version, the King James version, those of you familiar with it, you'll know that in this verse it's translated quite differently. It says, the times of ignorance, it says that God overlooked, but in the A.V.

it says God winks at it. You know, there are parents and the children are being silly and dad looks at mum and he winks at her.

And he means by that wink, don't worry, they'll grow out of it at some point. They'll grow out of it. You wink at it.

And the Greeks, they are so proud of their culture and learning and Greek mythology and their Greek civilisation and Paul says, there have been times of ignorance but not so from now on.

There's no longer any excuse for groping around in the dark. There is a word from God and a clear revelation and now God commands all men everywhere to repent.

[30 : 58] To turn around, to admit they were wrong and going in the wrong direction and to serve the living and true God and depart from idols and God commands that. God commands you and God commands you to enter into a dialogue with him.

He doesn't invite, he doesn't invite you to consider his claims. Just look how strong it is. He says he commands all people everywhere to repent, to submit to his claim.

And so do you see how he preaches the gospel? It's very interesting to go through the book of Acts and see how Paul and particularly Peter preached the gospel. We say to you, listen, it's over to you. You need to make a response. Don't rush to make the response. Come back next week. No, no, says Paul, it's not like that at all.

He says God has fixed the day and it's already fixed and it's not a case of respond when it's convenient to you. He says no, you've got to come into line with what God has done.

[32 : 10] Let me tell you what God has done. God has raised his son from the dead and fixed the day when he's going to judge the world in righteousness and what are you going to do about it? God commands all people everywhere to repent.

Pleasure loving Epicureans. Hard working, conscientious Stoics. Africans, Americans, Brits, Europeans, Asians.

Doesn't make any difference because all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. And God commands all people everywhere to repent.

What are you going to do about it? Let's pray. Let's pray.