

Everyone is a Worshipper

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[0 : 00] Well, last week I referred to the results of the 2022 Scottish census on religion and people's! associations with church and how for the first time over 50% of Scots said that they have no religion.

! Now this group of people who regard themselves as having no religion are often categorised as nuns. Not n-u-n-s but n-o-n-e-s. Nuns. Nuns. No religion. And yet having no religion doesn't mean having no beliefs and it doesn't even mean having no religious beliefs. An author called Tara Isabella Burton brings this out in a book and the book she wrote is called *Strange Rites New Religions for a godless world*. And in it she refers to nuns, those who say they have no religion, as the remixed. The remixed. And listen to what she says. She says the remixed hunger for the same things human beings have always longed for. A sense of meaning in the world and personal purpose within that meaning.

A community to share that experience with and rituals to bring the power of that experience into achievable everyday life. But they're doing it differently. Today's remixed reject authority, institution, creed and moral universalism. They value intuition, personal feeling and experiences.

They demand to rewrite their own scripts about how the universe and human beings operate. Shaped by the twin forces of a creative, communicative internet and consumer capitalism, today's remixed don't want to receive doctrine to a sent automatically to a creed. They want to choose and more often than not purchase the spiritual path that feels more authentic, more meaningful to them. They prioritize intuitional spirituality over institutional religion and they want when available institutional options. When they fail to suit their needs, they want the freedom to mix and match to create their own daily rituals and practices and belief systems. Long quotation, but essentially what she's saying is that they're remixed. Those who regard themselves as having no religion are basically religious. Just not in an institutional religious sense, but certainly in this kind of intuitional sense, because they're looking for meaning and for purpose and for community and rituals. And now she's not saying anything new here, even if she's expressing it in a different way, because the reality is that everyone is religious.

[2 : 51] Everyone is a worshiper. We all worship in some way. We all look to something to give our lives meaning and purpose. Which means the question then is, well, who or what do we worship? Because we all worship something or someone. And this is what's clear in our Bible reading from Acts chapter 17, 17, where we see how in Athens, it was a very religious place and it was full of worshippers.

It's just that the people in Athens were deluded into worshipping idols instead of worshipping the one true God. And so Paul exposes their counterfeit gods so that he can tell them about the true God. And he confronts them on their ignorance of worshipping these false gods and he urges them to turn to the true and living God. And so Paul essentially proclaims that God is the creator upon whom our lives depend and to whom we are accountable.

And so it's like us to look at three things as we look at this passage this afternoon. First of all, the delusion of counterfeit gods. Second, the reality of the true God.

And then third, the urgency of responding. So the delusion of counterfeit gods, the reality of the true God and the urgency of responding. First, the delusion of counterfeit gods.

[4 : 28] We see this in verse 16 to 23. As Paul goes into Athens, he is struck by the idolatry. Verse 16 says, while Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.

Now, Athens was the intellectual capital of the ancient world. The city of Socrates and Plato and Aristotle and Epicurus. And so it's the place where all the philosophical debate took place.

Athens was also the cultural capital of the ancient world. So it was a city famed for its magnificent art and architecture. And yet Paul can see past the brilliance. He can see past the beauty. And what he sees is a city full of idols. Apparently, they said of Athens, there was easier to find a god than to find a man. Because the idols were everywhere. So the Parthenon temple of the goddess Athena overshadowed the city. They had Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty. [5 : 33] They had Ares, the god of war. They had Artemis, the god of fertility and wealth. As well as many other Greek gods. Apollo, Diana, Hermes, Zeus, to name a few.

And so Paul's reaction to all of this is deep distress. And so the word that describes his distress in verse 16 is where we get our word paroxysm from. Which means an uncontrollable, intense outburst. And that is the strength of Paul's feeling as he looks at the sight of all the idolatry in Athens. And so what does he do? Verse 17. So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. So he went to the synagogue as usual. We've seen that in Acts. That's always the first place he goes to. But then he also went to the marketplace. Now, the marketplace wasn't where you did your shopping. [6 : 35] The marketplace was also the marketplace of ideas. The center of public life in Athens. The place where all the big questions about life were discussed and debated.

And so Paul goes there into the marketplace, into this public square, to promote the message of Jesus Christ. Because the message of Jesus was new for the people in Athens. They were clueless when it came to Jesus. Verse 18. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, what is this babblers trying to say? Others remarked, he seems to be advocating foreign gods. They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. So the Epicureans, the Stoics, were two schools of philosophy at the time. The Epicureans were the hedonists of their day. So their motto would have been, eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die. Whereas the Stoics believed that everyone's fate was fixed. [7 : 42] So their motto was more like, que sera, sera, whatever will be, will be. And yet these philosophers, despite their intelligence, were completely ignorant when it came to Jesus. They didn't have a clue what Paul was talking about. Jesus and the resurrection was completely off their radar. Just like it is for many people today. Any mention of Jesus and people go into a meego state. You know, meego, my eyes glaze over. That's what was going on. Paul's speaking to the same kind of biblically illiterate culture that we find today. And yet Paul is able to engage with the people around him. Verse 19, Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus where they said to him, May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears and we would like to know what they mean. All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing. But talking about and listening to the latest ideas. [8 : 50] So the Areopagus was the place for serious debate. It was also known as Mars Hill. But the Areopagus was also the name of a council with the authority over civil and religious affairs. And so essentially they were the intelligentsia of the day. Made up of the best philosophers. And acting like the thought police in Athens. And so they want to hear what Paul has to say. And it's like Paul goes into a University of Oxford debating hall to talk about Jesus. And yet what Paul does here, his method, is a great model for how we can speak to people who know nothing about Christianity. Because Paul starts with where they're at in their particular culture. And he connects with them by referring to their false gods. And the reason he connects with them on the false gods is so that he can then confront them with the true and living God. [9 : 58] Connecting and then confronting. So look at how he connects. Verse 22 to 23. Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said, People 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. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship.

And this is what I am going to proclaim to you. What does Paul mean when he says that they are very religious? Well, it's interesting because the original word he uses could either be taken positively or negatively.

Meaning, positively, they are devout. Religious, devout. Or negatively, meaning they are superstitious. And I suspect Paul here is being deliberately ambiguous.

Because he wants to capture both senses of the word. He wants to leave his listeners intrigued to what he actually means. And who he is actually talking about.

[11 : 07] And so it's a clever way for Paul to get a hearing. To connect with his listeners by grabbing their attention, calling them religious. So that he can then confront them with the truth.

It's like he's telling them, you are religious, folks. No doubt about that. Because you've got this desire within you to worship.

That's what you're doing. But it's a misplaced desire. Because you're worshipping idols instead of worshipping the living God.

And that's why he mentions this altar built to an unknown God. He's highlighting their ignorance.

Can you see how stupid this is?

You're worshipping an unknown God. And he wants to show this so that he can then introduce them to the God who can be known. The God they can know and worship.

[12 : 02] Because he should be the ultimate object of our worship. But before we look into Paul's argument, let's not assume that today we are not as ignorant when it comes to worshipping idols.

Because I guess there's something in us that thinks, well, I just can't believe those Athenians could be so stupid. Imagine worshipping idols. We'd never be so gullible today.

We're too advanced to do that kind of thing. And yet idols aren't limited to ancient or to primitive societies. Our world is just as full of idols today.

Now on the surface, they may be very different. But the source is the same. Listen to what Tim Keller says in his book, Counterfeit Gods.

He says, So can you see how we can so easily be deluded by idol worship today?

[14 : 13] Whether it be the expensive sacrifice of bowing down to a singer in the great temple of Murrayfield. Or whether it be the equally expensive pilgrimage to offer your worship to a football team at various shrines all over Munich.

Hopefully I've offended everybody by saying those things. But can you see just how many idols there are around us? Can you see?

Our culture is just full of it. And we can be deluded by all the idols because they're everywhere. And so we can just be as ignorant as those in Athens if we fail to see what the objects of our worship are.

Because remember, everyone is a worshiper. The difference is who or what we worship. Because any person or anything that dominates our lives, that takes up too much of our thinking, too much of our time and our energy and our money.

Any of those things can become an idol. If they replace God as first place in our lives. So that's the delusion of counterfeit gods, first of all.

[15 : 30] Secondly, there's the reality of the true God. Verse 24 to 29. So in contrast to the ignorance highlighted in this altar to an unknown God, Paul then wants to proclaim the reality of the true God.

Because he is the creator who comes close to the people he has made. So he's both powerful and yet he's also personal.

Whereas the counterfeit gods are neither. So let's see how the true God is creator, controller, and close. So first, God is creator.

Verse 24 and 25. 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 human hands. And he is not served by human hands as if he needed anything.

Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. So Paul goes way back to the beginning, to the creation, to declare God made everything.

[16 : 34] And so he's separate from his creation and he is Lord over it. So it's like the universe is a museum that displays God's handiwork.

That's why God doesn't live in temples built by human hands. Instead, we're the ones who live in the world that God has built for us. And so that's why God is superior to all idols.

God's not dependent on you or me or us. We are dependent on him for life and breath and everything. So we need God.

God doesn't need us. It's not like God is somehow waiting for Sunday to come so Christchurch Glasgow can gather and he can get a pick-me-up from our worship.

He doesn't need us. He's the creator. Secondly, God is controller. Verse 26. From one man he made all the nations that they should inhabit the whole earth.

[17 : 36] And he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. So God not only created everything. Paul's saying God controls everything.

He's in charge. So the entire human race descended from one man, Adam, whom God created. And then God controls all of human history.

He governs all people. He sets the times and the places where people should live. So we are living at this point in history in this place because God determined it.

And then next, God is close. 27 and 28. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us.

For in him we live and move and have our being. So God is not only the creator and the controller. God is also close. Paul says he is not far from any one of us.

[18 : 41] And so Paul is describing God as transcendent, as creator, but also as imminent, as close. He is the powerful God and the personal God.

And so he wants his creatures to know him. People like you and me, God made us so that we might know him. And he's ordered the world and he's ordered history for this grand purpose.

Even the fact that we are sitting here today is because God wants us to know him. And so God is not playing hide and seek as if he's making it hard for us to find him.

No, God has come to us, wanting us to seek him, to reach out for him and to find him. And so the reality of the true God could not be more different than the delusion of the counterfeit gods, the idols.

Because the one true and living God has revealed himself to us. That's why we can't possibly get him wrong. Verse 29, 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 human design and skill.

[20 : 03] So we can't get God's identity wrong. God can't be fashioned into an idol, whether stone or gold or silver, or even an idol made up in our imaginations.

Because that's not what he's like. Mere creatures like us don't have the ability to determine what our creator is like.

And yet that is what the human race has always tried to do. We have committed idolatry by making up gods or a God that suits us, that we think or imagine he should be.

I wonder if you've heard of the Stepford Wives. It's a satirical novel, *The Stepford Wives*, which was then made into a film in the 1970s.

And more recently, it's been made into another film starring Nicole Kidman, *The Stepford Wives*.

And it's a story of husbands, the husbands of Stepford, Connecticut, New York, turning their wives into robots, where the Stepford Wives are beautiful, they are compliant, and they dedicate their lives solely to homemaking.

[21 : 23] They do exactly what their husbands say. They never argue back. They never contradict them or challenge them. They never complain. They are programmed to say, yes, dear, yes, dear, yes, dear.

But the problem is, and the point that's made in the book and in the film, is that there's no real relationship between the husbands and these robotic wives.

Their marriages can't be marriages that are ever intimate or personal because their wives just aren't real. They're counterfeit wives. And you see, the problem with the human race is that we like the idea of having a kind of Stepford God, one that we create instead of one who created us, one we can control instead of one who controls us, one who makes us feel good about ourselves, one who affirms everything we do, one who affirms everything we feel, one who never contradicts us on our thinking or our living or our behavior, who's there to give us what we want, who is just a convenient extra to our lives.

And yet we can't have a relationship with a counterfeit God, can we? Because it's a God of our own making. It's an idol that isn't the true and living God.

And that's why we can't be so ignorant as the people of Athens to diminish God into something other than who he has revealed himself to be.

[23 : 04] He is the creator, he is the controller, and he is close. And that's why the true God cannot tolerate idolatry forever.

And that takes us to our third point. First, the delusion of counterfeit gods. Second, the reality of the true God. And then third, the urgency of responding.

Verse 30 to 34. Well, why is there an urgency in responding? Verse 30 says, In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.

So Paul began by highlighting human ignorance when it comes to God. And now he says to his listeners, You're culpable for it.

Not just them, but every single one of us. If God has revealed himself as our creator and we ignore him, then we're guilty.

[24 : 03] We can't get away with ignoring him forever. And here's what Paul says. He said, God commands all people everywhere to repent. Repent means to turn away from the worship of counterfeit gods and to worship the one true and living God.

Or to turn away from our sin and to trust in Jesus Christ. And so we must repent because we are all moving as a human race towards judgment.

Verse 31. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice, with a man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.

So God has set this judgment day that is coming in his calendar. And God will ensure that justice is done.

And you know what? We really want justice to be done. We cannot bear to think of people getting away with the evil acts that they have committed.

[25 : 10] It just would not be right. And so it's actually a relief to know that one day there will be a judgment and all wrongdoing will be punished.

And yet, if God is going to judge the world with justice, perfect, total, utter justice, then none of us will escape it.

Which is a problem because we'll be judged for how we have responded to the God who made us. Because we are accountable to him. And so we can't possibly live life in God's world with the breath he's given us and refuse to worship him.

Remember, he is not far from any one of us. And so if we have ignored him and rejected his command to repent, well, he can overlook such ignorance forever.

And that's why God has appointed Jesus as judge. How do we know the judgment day is coming? Paul says we know it's coming. God has given us proof that it's coming.

[26 : 21] How? By raising Jesus from the dead. So the resurrection of Jesus proves the judgment will come. Because it is the next stage of God's plan and his purpose for this world.

So you can read the Bible in stages. Creation, fall or rebellion. Redemption when Jesus came. And then the new creation.

And the new creation will come after Jesus returns. So that's the next stage of God's work in this world. When Jesus comes, he comes to judge.

And that's why we're urged, commanded to repent before it's too late. Because if we don't, the judgment will bring condemnation instead of salvation for us.

And so God could not make it any clearer for the human race, could he? And that's why God's not asking us to change, to turn over a new leaf if we feel like it, if we think it would help our lives go better.

[27 : 29] No, he is commanding us to repent. It's urgent. Like the urgency of a fireman telling you to get out of the house before it burns.

A fireman is not messing about. Get yourself out of there before you die. That's the urgency that Paul's speaking of here. And so how did his message about Jesus and the resurrection and the judgment go down?

Well, it was met with a mixed response. In verse 32 to 34, 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. Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. So three responses that you note there. There's contempt. Some sneered. There's curiosity. Some wanted to hear more. And there's conversion. Some became followers and believed. And these continue to be people's responses to Jesus today.

[28 : 33] Some mock with contempt. Some are curious and want to explore further. And some repent and believe and are converted. And so the question is, as you read these words, what is your response to the message of Jesus Christ?

How have you responded to the message of Jesus Christ? Because our creator, upon whom our lives depend and to whom we are accountable, commands you and me and all people to repent and worship him.

Because everyone is a worshiper. So if we aren't worshiping, we'll be worshiping something else, a false god. And so the crucial question is, do you worship the true God?

Because if anything is more important or more fundamental to God in your life, then it's a counterfeit God. And here's the thing.

Counterfeit gods or idols always let you down. We may worship them, even sacrifice to them, but they never fully satisfy us.

[29 : 52] If your job or your career or success is the idol that you worship and you live your life for, and then you lose your job, what happens?

Your idols let you down. You're crushed. You're devastated. You see, your idols promise so much and yet they fail to deliver. But Jesus Christ is the only Lord who will never, ever let you down. He alone can satisfy you and forgive you. Because Jesus willingly sacrificed himself on the cross to pay the price for all our sin.

And then God raised him from the dead and one day he'll be back to judge. And so God wants us to seek him, to reach out for him, and to find him in Jesus.

Because if we don't meet Jesus as our savior now, we'll meet him as our judge then. That's why Jesus not only satisfies our deepest longings, but he meets our greatest needs.

[31 : 04] And so if we do believe, we still must beware of the idols in our hearts and not let our affections be drawn to them for our joy or place our trust in them for our security.

We still need to repent by continually turning away from them so that we can rest and rejoice in all that Jesus has done for us.

And so we need to apply this to our hearts if we follow Jesus, but we also need to apply it to our practice. Well, how? Well, like Paul in verse 17, we've got to go out into the marketplace, into the world around us.

Because it's only when we feel that distress at all the idols we see, only then will we find ways of connecting with people so that we can confront them with the saving news of Jesus.

Let's pray.