

## **Be Desperate**

### **Acts 17:22-31**

*Bryn MacPhail / Oct. 24, 2010*

There were many religious people within the city of Athens in Paul's day. And having observed the idols that they had crafted for themselves, Paul became **provoked** in his spirit, which compelled him to speak to these people about Jesus Christ, risen from the dead.

The people of Athens who heard Paul were, in turn, stirred by his teaching and requested Paul's presence at their council meeting at a place known as Mars Hill (17:19).

As is often the case in Scripture, we do not have a verbatim account of the dialogue that took place that day, but we do have the highlight reel.

Contained within Paul's message are concepts that are vital and relevant to our own understanding of the nature of God, and how we relate to Him.

Paul begins his sermon by commending the people of Athens for their attentiveness to the supernatural. Paul says, "**I observe that you are very religious in all respects. For while I was passing through and examining your objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, 'TO AN UNKNOWN GOD'**" (17:22, 23).

Following this commendation, Paul makes a bold transition, "**what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you**" (17:23).

I do not regard Paul's statement here to be at all harsh. The people of Athens, by their own profession, had a very ambiguous view of God. The people of Athens were unable to identify God in any particular way.

Paul then proceeds to use their own confession as his entry point to talk about the "**Lord of heaven and earth**" (17:24), and to talk about Jesus Christ, risen from the dead (17:31).

You could say that Paul's method of evangelism was to *scratch where the people itched*. Paul began his message where the people were at. They believed in a god, but conceded that they were lacking information.

Every indication points to a similar dynamic prevailing today. Belief in God is the norm. Most statistical surveys have the percentage of atheists at less than 5%. I'm guessing that in The Bahamas that percentage would be even lower.

The vast majority of people in this world believe in God.

In The Bahamas, the vast majority of people believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and Saviour of the world.

Could it be said, however, that there is often confusion over how our belief in God is supposed to affect our behaviour? Could it be said of us, that we need some direction in terms of how to appropriately respond to who God is?

Here is what Paul tells us, **“The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; neither is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all life and breath and all things”** (17:24, 25).

Most Christians, and most congregations, get this first part. We readily confess, ‘I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.’ Nothing new here.

But this second part is a bit of a wake-up call for many professing Christians. Paul also says that **“(God is not) served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all life and breath and all things.”**

In most things, self-sufficiency is counted as a good thing. Independence is something we tend to strive for.

When a person comes from humble means and eventually becomes wealthy, we say that person is “self-made”.

Would you agree with the statement that says ‘Our culture celebrates the “do-it-yourself” mentality’? Businesses like *The Home Depot* rely on this tendency.

If I wanted to provide you with a personal example, I would point to the time I offered to install a new dishwasher in the last manse I lived in.

Now, for those who do not yet know me well—playing the role of handyman does not come easily to me. As a result, a simple task—like installing a dishwasher—takes me a lot of time and a lot of effort.

Allie offered to assist me, but I refused her help. Why would I do this? Why might any of us refuse an offer of help? I think the reason is because we like to be self-sufficient. It makes us feel good to do something on our own. Besides, if Allie helps me install the dishwasher, then she gets some of the credit.

I can tell you that my dishwasher installation did not go well.

It took me the better part of the day, and it began with me making the most basic mistake—I neglected to turn off the water when disconnecting the old dishwasher....Let's just say that Allie's assistance was eventually requested when she saw the number of bath towels that now needed to be laundered.

I admit that there are times when self-sufficiency is commendable. I admit that there are times when self-sufficiency should be pursued. But I also hear Paul saying that there is a place where self-sufficiency is not helpful.

Self-sufficiency does not help our relationship with the Lord.

Paul tells us that “**God is not served by human hands**” (17:25)—that's bad news to the self-sufficient. That's bad news for those of us who want to employ a self-sufficient approach to Christian living.

Within the local church you sometimes hear people talk about their desire to ‘serve God’. Similarly, there have been many occasions when others have described my vocation in terms of my commitment to ‘serving God’. Such notions, however, are out of step with the biblical witness. Paul reminds us: **God is not served by human hands, as though He needed anything.**

Someone objects, ‘But I just want to serve Jesus!’

But what does Jesus say? Jesus says, **“The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many”** (Mk. 10:45).

Have you thought about what that means for the local church? The Son of Man did not come to be served by the local congregation, but rather, Christ came to serve the Church and to give His life as a ransom for the Church (Acts 20:28).

In other words, *we’re not here to help Jesus*. But rather, we are here to receive help from Jesus.

We’re not here because we have it all together. But rather, we should be gathered here because we perceive ourselves to be lacking—we perceive ourselves to be in need.

And friends, I declare to you that the perceiving of our need of Christ brings tremendous blessing.

The Bible does not read, 'Blessed are the self-sufficient. Blessed are those who can pull themselves together.'

No, Jesus says, "**Blessed are the *poor in spirit*, for theirs is the kingdom of God . . . Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied**" (Mt. 5:3, 6).

The Bible does not say that we can advance the kingdom of God by human effort and human service. No, Jesus says, "**Apart from Me you can do nothing**" (Jn. 15:5).

I realize that this is counter-cultural. I realize that this goes against our self-sufficient, do-it-yourself, tendencies. But I must point out that this is fantastic news!

This thing called "life"—you don't need to handle it on your own. There is help—Divine help!

I know what the cliché says, but the message of Scripture says otherwise: God helps those who are helpless.

God gives an invitation to the psalmist, "**call upon Me in the day of trouble; I shall rescue you, and you will honour Me**" (Ps. 50:15).

I realize that it is sobering to be 'poor in spirit', it is sobering to be 'hungry', 'in need', or 'in trouble', but there is an immensely positive aspect to this equation.

Those who are **poor in spirit** receive **the kingdom of God**.

Those who **hunger and thirst for righteousness** gain **satisfaction**.

Those who are **in trouble**, and ask for God's help, receive it.

Those in need receive help because **Jesus came not to be served, but to serve**.

If we bring our self-sufficiency to church, I suspect we will leave highly disappointed. Because I'm afraid that the only passages I have found where God promises progress, reward, and satisfaction are in those passages where the person approaching God comes in a state of great need and desperation.

Let's extend this principle to the Kirk. Would you like to see St. Andrew's grow in Christian maturity and increase her influence upon the surrounding community?

Would you like to see the endeavours and initiatives of St. Andrew's tangibly rewarded?

Would you like the members and adherents of St. Andrew's to be collectively satisfied in their relationship with Jesus Christ?

If the answer to these questions is 'Yes!', let us remember what is required. Weakness, hunger, and need.

*Our desperation uniquely qualifies us to receive the Lord's help.*

If we are weak, we will plead for strength. If we are hungry, we will beg for that which satisfies. If we see ourselves in need, we will ask for help.

And when we do this—when we pray—Jesus promises to serve us.

God promises to help those who are helpless.

While conversing with friends who do not profess faith in Jesus, it has often been suggested to me that Christianity is just a 'crutch' for the weak. Those with whom I have conversed with in this regard are always surprised when I agree with them.

I say, 'Yes, Christianity is a crutch.'

I tell them, 'Apart from Christ I am spiritually crippled, and unable to walk.'

Or, as the apostle Paul has said, **"I will boast of my weakness that the power of Christ may dwell in me"** (2Cor. 12:9).

That's an interesting equation, isn't it?

More weakness means more power.

More need means more assistance.



Therefore, we must conclude that, in some sense, *weakness is good*—in some sense being needy is good, if it causes us to seek Christ.

Perhaps the analogy of a crutch is a poor one. Because Christ is so much more than a crutch, isn't He?

Jesus is our everything. **In Him we live and move and have our being** (17:28).

Friends, it is my great privilege to declare to you that there is no need for any of us to limp around as followers of Jesus.

There is no need for St. Andrew's to limp through her programs, initiatives, and ministries.

If we confess our need, and are *desperate* for Christ's assistance, He promises to help us.

Everything we need is found in Him. Jesus has come to serve you and to give you strength.

And may we, in turn, use that strength to serve one another.