

The Consequences of Your Belief System

Unedited Transcript

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It is great to be with you this morning. Thanks for joining us. We're going to talk this morning about the consequences of your belief system. We have a saying at Man in the Mirror. I know it originated with Pat. You've probably heard it. You've probably read it in one of his books. The saying is this. "Belief determines behavior." When we talk about this phrase, "Belief determines behavior," we often talk about it terms of our own beliefs and our own actions. In other words, we say, "What I do is an indicator of what I believe."

Today I want to take a little bit of a different perspective and talk about this same truth but look at it from the standpoint of other people. What others believe determines what they will do, and sometimes that can be frustrating when we see other people's actions. We're not excited about what they're doing. Everybody has a belief system. Sometimes we call this a worldview. Everyone's belief system has consequences. There are things that happen that we act a certain way because of the things that we believe in and then those consequences have an impact on the world around us. Your belief system, my belief system, the grocery store cashier's belief system, the school teacher's belief system, the police officer's belief system, the things that they believe about the way the world works will have consequences. They will be played out in their actions and on the people that they interact with. My belief system interacts with your belief system when we are in relationship with each other or even when we just interact with each other. Our belief systems impact each other.

We're going to look at a story about Paul interacting with some people who had a very different belief system than he did and then how he tried to address them with the gospel. The story tells us also how they reacted to him.

If you have a Bible, turn to Acts chapter 17, verse 18. Acts, as you all know, is sort of the story of the early church. Much of Acts is the story of Paul's journeys throughout the Middle East and throughout Western Asia. We're going to look at Acts 17:18-31. While we do this, why don't I just go ahead and give you the outline... This is what we're going to talk about today. The consequences of your belief system. First, we're going to talk about Paul at the Areopagus. Took me a long time to get the pronunciation of that word right, but Areopagus, which is also called Mars Hill. How many of you have heard of Mars Hill? Mars Hill is the Areopagus and I'm going to show you what that looked like actually. Then we're going to talk about what were Paul's Techniques. How did he interact with these people that had a very different belief system than he did? Finally, how does that apply to us? When we look at Beliefs and Their Consequences, how does that apply to us?

I'm going to just walk us through this story. Not quite verse by verse, but let's just walk through this story and see how this works. Acts 17, starting at verse 16. It says, "Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him and he saw that the city was full of idols." What happened is that Paul was on this journey. He and Silas had been in Thessalonica and then in Berea and he had Titus with them at some point. Then the people get mad at Paul. Everywhere Paul goes, he kind of stirs up a little bit of trouble. To protect Paul, they kept sending him to the next city. They get to Berea, the

people from Thessalonica sent word ahead to the people of Berea, "Hey, this rabble-rouser's coming. You got to worry about him." The people started getting stirred up about Paul in Berea.

They sent Paul on ahead, but the interesting thing is if you look at verse 15, basically there are a group of guys. They took them to Athens and then they dumped him there and then they left. He's all alone in Athens. He's all alone. Every place he's been recently, people have been mad at him. If that was me, what would I have done? I would have kept my mouth shut. I would have been like, "Everywhere I go, people want to kill me. Maybe I should tone it down a bit even if it's just until my friends get here." Not Paul. He's not waiting for them in Athens.

"His spirit was provoked within him and he saw that the city was full of idols. He reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him and some said, 'What does this babbler wish to say?' Others said, 'He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities,' because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection."

You can see Paul's basically going to talk to people where he can find them but he's talking to really some distinct groups of people. He goes to the synagogue to talk to who? The Jews. He goes to the synagogue to talk to the Jews but then he goes to the marketplace to talk. It says "whoever's there", but the people that would be in the marketplace would sort of be the common people. He's talking with the Jews in the synagogues. He's talking with the common people in the marketplace. Can you imagine you just like go into Publix and start over by the kiwi start talking about the gospel? That's basically what he's doing. He's finding people to talk to.

Then, as he's talking, he's attracting sort of the intellectual elite of Athens, the Epicureans and the Stoics. The Epicureans and the Stoics were sort of two branches of thinking that was common in Greece at this time. The Epicureans, they were a branch of Hedonism, so pleasure was their goal, but not what you think of when you think of hedonism. Normally when you think of Hedonism, you sort of think of sex and drugs and rock n' roll. That's not what the Epicureans were about. What they were about was avoiding anxiety and pain, avoiding anything that made you uncomfortable. As long as you were comfortable, as long as you were tranquil, then that was the highest good. Anything that kept you from being tranquil, anything that caused you pain, that was how they defined evil. Evil things, to the Epicureans, was anything that denied you comfort. There are some famous Epicureans you've heard of: Horace. Horace said the famous phrase, "Carpe diem." Seize the day. He was an Epicurean. Jefferson called himself an Epicurean. Christopher Hitchens, the noted atheist, called himself an Epicurean. They're pursuing tranquility, pursuing comfort, not wanting to have any trouble.

Then, the Stoics. The interesting thing about the Stoics is when you think of being stoic, you think of being sort of shut down and quiet but that's not really what Stoic philosophy is about. Stoic philosophy is about virtue and about ethics. A virtuous man, an ethical man, that's the definition of happiness. Evil then, is anything that keeps you from being a virtuous man, anything that keeps you from being an ethical man.

You've got these two groups of thinkers. The Epicureans and the Stoics, they would meet and they would have these philosophical arguments. It was a very intellectual time in Greece. Paul comes in and you have to recognize that Paul is a very disciplined thinker. He's an incredibly intelligent man. Read Romans and you can see how Paul can lay out an argument for a system of beliefs that completely holds

together just as well, if not better, than Epicurean philosophy or Stoic philosophy or any other kind of thought system, of belief system, that you could have.

In verse 19, they take him and bring him to the Areopagus saying, "May we know this new teaching that you are presenting?" Now, why would they take him to the Areopagus or Mars Hill? Let me show you what that would look like. In fact, here, watch this. That's the Areopagus, this sort of rocky outcrop. They would meet there. Now, this is a couple thousand years ago so it looked a little bit better than this, obviously. Sort of probably finished and maybe some structure there.

Does anybody know what this is behind it? That's the Parthenon. Do you know what the Parthenon was? It was a temple to Apollo. It was a temple to the Greek god Apollo. Think about this. In the shadow of the Parthenon is the Areopagus, Mars Hill. On Mars Hill, historically even before Paul was there, this is where they actually had their court and the serious crimes would come to Areopagus. They call it intentional homicide and rape and those violent crimes would be heard at the Areopagus. In Paul's time, what it had become more is a place where the best thinkers of the day, it was influential on the government, the people who were influential on the government. This was the intellectual center of Athens. In sort of the spiritual shadow of the Parthenon was this intellectual center.

They say to Paul, "'May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know, therefore, what these things mean.' Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new." Does that sound familiar? I just read an article yesterday about pan-sexuality, which I still don't get, but it's like, everything. Everything's cool. I mean, that's what we've come to. Everything's cool. Whatever you think is fine. However you feel is fine. Whatever you think you are is good. If you don't think you're anything, that's fine too.

Now, I don't want to debate the merits of it, all I want to say is this: that's new. What's it going to be tomorrow? I'm not sure that people really ... I mean, yeah. Everybody has their own experience and I think we should be compassionate and kind to people that are struggling to figure out why they feel the way they feel, but that's not an accurate diagnosis of the issue that people are facing. It's just the latest thing they're attaching on to it to try to figure out why they feel the way they feel. People are constantly trying to figure out how to diagnose and solve the issue that they don't know God, that they don't have a relationship with Christ. They just go, "Oh, well, it must be my income status. That must be the thing I need to solve. It must be my career choice. It must be my sexuality or it must be my political views." We're just constantly grasping at new things. Nothing is new. They were doing this 2000 years ago in Athens, these people that are constantly looking at new things, constantly trying to figure things out.

Verse 22, "So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said, 'Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way, you are very religious.'" Now, I just want to give you a little hint here. He's teasing them. Are they religious? No, they're not religious. They're philosophers. In fact, they kind of pride themselves on not being religious, yet where are they standing? In the shadow of the Parthenon. What Paul is saying is, "You guys, you don't think you are, but you're religious." In fact, the word religious would be the word that the Epicureans would use for the word superstitious. He's kind of needling them a little bit.

He says, "For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: to the unknown god. What, therefore, you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man." They're looking over his shoulder as he says this at a temple made by man. "Nor is he

served by human hands as though he needed anything since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods in the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God and perhaps feel their way ..." Feel their way is literally like your eyes closed, feeling your way. "Toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we are indeed his offspring.'"

Now, here's the interesting thing. What do you think Paul's quoting here? Got these two lines of poetry. What do you think he's quoting here? Psalms? Deuteronomy? No, he's actually quoting Hymns to Zeus. Why would he quote Hymns to Zeus to these guys? Because that's what their belief system was. He's talking to them. He's coming at them. He's starting with where they're already at. He's saying, "All right. You may have heard of the Socratic method." How many of you have heard of the Socratic method? The Socratic method, Socrates is where it comes from. Socrates was a student of Plato or maybe it was the other way around. The Socratic method is a way of sort of teaching by argument. You put something out there and then you have a discussion about that so that, in the process of having that discussion, you get to your conclusion. The interesting thing about the Socratic method is you often state something that you don't believe is true as your starting point so that in discussing that and having that conversation about this sort of premise or theory that you put forward, you argue that to the point that you get to a place that logically makes more sense. It's exactly what Paul is doing here.

He is not speaking to them like a preacher. He's not speaking to them like a theologian. He's speaking to them like a philosopher. Why? Because they're philosophers! So he's speaking to them in ways that they will understand, starting with places that they can't argue with him about so that he can bring them to the place, logically, where he knows that the argument will eventually end up. This is the great thing about Christianity, guys. It's not an emotional like hyper-religious, take a leap of faith off a cliff kind of belief system. You can argue spiritually for Christianity, but you can argue logically for Christianity too. This is exactly what Paul does.

When he says, in verse 26, he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, he's saying that because both the Epicureans and the Stoics believed in the brotherhood of all mankind. He goes, "Great, we are a brotherhood. We started with one man." The great thing about this argument is, in this case, it actually attacks a very real issue then and a very real issue now. That issue is racism. If we all came from one man, then we're all one race, the human race. Sure, differences happened as mankind proliferated across the earth, differences happened, and so we have people that look differently from each other. What Paul is saying here is we are all one people. We came from one man. There is no difference between any of us. Even in Athens, he's attacking one of the social issues that's happening in the day.

Verse 29, "Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man." Again, attacking the idols that are throughout the city, attacking the Parthenon and this system of idol worship that the people have. "The times of ignorance God overlooked," verse 30, "but now he commands all people everywhere to repent because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness, by a man whom he has appointed. Of this, he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

This is Paul's linchpin. It's all mankind, even your own poets to Zeus say that we're all children of God, and you can't make God, you can't form idols, God doesn't need to be served by human hands by these people that work in the temples and burn the incense and do all the stuff that they did in the temples.

You can know God personally. That's what Paul is saying to these philosophers who want to do, what? Create these elaborate systems of belief and argument that sort of obscure who God really is. For what reason? So they can trust their own thinking.

Then Paul says, here's the linchpin, here's the logical linchpin that proves Christianity, "Jesus Christ rose from the dead." That is a logical argument. If Jesus rose from the dead, then nothing else matters. If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, Christians, then nothing else matters. The central linchpin of logic and reasoning about the meaning of life and ultimate truth is: Did Jesus rise from the dead or not? Was he who he said he was or not. Paul is emphatically stating God proved who he is and who we are by raising Jesus from the dead. "So you need to repent," he says to them.

I think what he's talking about is not necessarily, although includes this, but not necessarily repent of your sin, but it's repent of these belief systems that really don't work. All you do is sit around and argue with each other all day long so that you convince yourselves that your belief systems work. Paul's saying, "Repent of that. You guys are logical guys. Why are you doing this? This is stupid. Then, you even argue that there's really no such thing as God and then what do you do? Then you go up the hill to the Parthenon and worship Apollo just to be safe." Paul's calling them on this.

How do they react to this? Gloriously, right? "Now when they heard the resurrection of the dead, some mocked." They had already called him a babbler earlier. "Some mocked but others said, 'We will hear you again about this.' So Paul went out from their midst but some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them." He leaves that place, he takes with him only the people that want to listen to him more, and then some of those people end up coming to faith.

This is Paul at the Areopagus. Let's look now at Paul's techniques. He used sort of a series of techniques here. Let me run through them really quick.

First of all, *he listened to his heart*. In verse 16, it says, "His spirit was provoked within him as he saw the city full of idols."

I was at a dinner a couple of weeks ago with some guys that work with Man in the Mirror. We were at the Discipleship.org National Disciple Makers Forum. We had five or six guys there. Pete Alwinson was there with us and Jeff Kisiah, our national field director, and some of our area directors from around the country. There were five of us sitting at dinner in O'Charley's the night before.

We're sitting on one of those high tables in the bar and we had this wonderful young lady who was our waitress. She takes all of our orders and Pete Alwinson looks at her and he says, "Ma'am, we're Christians and we're going to pray for our meal here in just a minute. Is there anything that we could pray for for you?" Her whole face changed and she went, "Oh, yes!"

This young woman spent the next two or three minutes pouring her heart out about how she had overcome addictions in her life over the last three years and was trying to get her six-year-old son back and, at 26 years old, had moved into the first apartment she had ever had on her own, the first time she had ever lived on her own, and she was saving her money and she was doing her parenting classes and she was visiting her son every chance she got and she was working 50 and 60 hours a week to put

money in the bank and, "I can't go to church on Sundays because they schedule me for doubles every Sunday because I'm taking every shift I can get."

Then she like had this shocked look on her face--and she's almost like this--and she went, "I haven't told anybody that." She's like, "People know different parts of that but I haven't told anybody that whole thing." We said, "Well, we're going to pray. Do you want to pray with us?" "Oh, yeah." She leaned in and put her arms around two of our guys and we prayed for her. Then she stood up and she said, "I'm going to be gone for a few minutes. I need to go in the back and cry because all these emotions are coming out that I've just kept bottled up for so long. Thank you for asking me to pray for me." She came back ten minutes later. We didn't care. Eyes all puffy. She said, "I'm so sorry I was gone, but I told you I had to go cry."

Pete listened to his heart. His heart within him looked at this woman and knew that she needed something. He didn't even know what. He said, "I'm going to offer to this woman to pray for her." I don't know how much it changed her life but certainly changed her attitude towards Christian men in that moment.

In verse 17 then, *he went to where the people were*. He went to the synagogue. He went to the marketplace. You know, I think too many Christians, we just hang out with other Christians. We have our Christian friends, but Jesus was known for hanging out with the wrong crowd. He was criticized for it. We've got to go to where the people are. He talked to whoever was there. They were Jews, he talked to Jews. They were common people, he talked to common people. They're intellectuals, he talked to intellectuals. He talked about the gospel. He didn't get into any conversations about politics and sports. I mean, those things are fine. The weather, those things are fine but ultimately, we owe it to people to talk to them about what's true, to talk to them about the gospel.

He told a story. Paul was a scholar and a debater and he was prepared to share the gospel in that way. We all have a story. You know, he acted differently at the beginning when he was just telling people who Jesus was and then at the Areopagus, he spoke much more logically, much more reasonably because the people he was speaking with were reasoning people. In the marketplace, he told stories. He spoke in their context. He looked around him, he played off the stuff that was around him. There's the temple to Apollo. I guess you guys are pretty religious. Then he used that as a jumping off point. You know, he even acknowledged that they were searching for truth. He didn't put them down for believing things that may or may not have been true in his opinion. He just acknowledged them for seeking truth. He spoke in their context.

Finally, *he spent extra time with the willing*. You know, you don't have to keep beating your head up against a brick wall with somebody who doesn't want to hear about the gospel. Just move on. There are people that want to talk to you about the gospel. Talk to those people. The people that don't want to talk to you about the gospel, you planted a seed. Let somebody else water it. Let somebody else tend that sprout, that bud if it ever becomes. In the meantime, you talk to the willing.

Let's talk about Beliefs and Their Consequences. Let me give you a mundane example. I'm going to use this chair right here. This is a chair. Everybody agrees with that, right? This is a chair. Now, when I look at this chair, if I'm going to sit in it, I am sitting in this chair because I have a certain belief about this chair. I believe that if I sit in it, it's going to hold my weight. What do I base that belief system on? Well, my belief system is based on it looks solid, it's got tubular steel. It looks like it's well-constructed. I've come in here a couple of hundred of times over the last fifteen years and I've sat in one of these chairs. The

chair's never fallen apart on me. You guys all came in with the same belief system about this chair that I had. I would hazard to guess that none of you walked in and picked a table and then picked a chair and then started looking at the chair and made sure that all the screws were tight and pushed on it a little bit. No, you pulled the chair out and you sat in it, right? We all have chairs. This chair is a great example of a belief system.

You know, it's become instinctive to be comfortable in this chair when I come in here and I need a place to sit. We all have belief systems that are just like that. Now, if I came in and there was a rickety chair like this picture here and it looks like it's going to fall apart the moment I sit on it, I'm not going to trust the chair. Now, let's say you wanted to convince me to sit in this chair. What might you say to get me to sit in this chair? What might you say? "I'll give you \$50." I like that one. You'd say, "It's fine. Trust me. The chair's fine. Don't be such a baby. Just sit in the chair." My reaction to that would be what? "You're crazy. I'm not sitting in that chair." What if you tried to make me sit in the chair? "You have to sit in the chair." Well, I would resist you. If I was worried about looking stupid when the chair fell apart or if I didn't want to hurt myself, if you kept badgering me to sit in that chair, I'm going to start to get angry with you.

Everybody's got a chair. This chair represents the belief system about how the world works. Every day when I live my life, I'm putting my faith in that belief system to help me make the right decision. Big decisions like what job to take and what person to marry and what house to buy; smaller decisions like how to treat someone or where to shop, what to eat, what to wear; and meta decisions like who to trust, what is true, what happens when I die.

Guys, when we share the gospel with somebody, we are asking them to put their faith in a new chair. It might be a chair that's not like anything they've ever seen before. It might be a chair that, in the past, has not been very trustworthy to them. Maybe they have experiences in a church where they've been hurt or they've seen other people hurt. Maybe they've been around other people that love that chair and those people were jerks. Those people were hurtful. Those people were hypocrites. Every time we present the gospel to somebody, we're asking them to sit in a chair that they may think that they have experiences with that chair. We may think that this is the chair, but when they think about the gospel, they may think that that's the chair. They're not going to sit in it.

Here's our big idea. *Don't be shocked when people act in a way that's consistent with their beliefs. Just share the truth in love.* This is hard when people come at you acting consistent with their beliefs. When they accuse of us of things in Christianity, we're racist, we're homophobic, we're stupid, we have backward thinking, of course they think that way. They don't trust our chair. They've got a chair of their own. Now, let's be honest. It's not really a great chair. It's not very stable. You know what they have the advantage of in their chair? They can look around and see a lot of other people sitting in similar chairs going, "It's fine."

You know, a lot of people are sitting in chairs like this. They've found the one strong leg so they're sort of putting their weight on that leg. Have you ever sat in a chair that you're afraid is going to fall apart but you're like, "I know this leg's good so I'm going to sort of move my weight onto that." That's what they're doing. Are they comfortable? No. Is it comfortable to sit in a chair like that? They look around, they see a lot of other people doing the exact same thing. What are those people doing? "This is the best chair ever. I mean, don't you love the way you can sort of lean forward and to the left and the chair just feels so stable?" That's what people are saying to them. We're saying, "No, no, no. We got a chair

with four stable legs. You can relax in it. You can lean back in it. The God who made it for us made this chair perfect for us," but they don't believe it and so we've got to be ready to break through that.

We're a little over but let me give you a couple quick verses sort of to help us think about sort of why this is like this. Now, Paul left Athens by the way, and he went to Corinth. He lived there for a year and a half, built the church there, wrote them a bunch of letters, at least three letters. In 1 Corinthians, he's writing them after he's been gone for a while. He's really frustrated with them.

This is what he says in 1 Corinthians 1 about this exact issue. "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing. But to us who are being saved, it's the power of God." Then, if you drop down to verse 22, he says, "For Jews demand signs, Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified. A stumbling block to Jews and folly, foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ, the power of God"--the Jews seek signs,--"Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God"--Greeks seek wisdom. "For the foolishness of God is wiser than men and the weakness of God is stronger than men."

Well, it seems like such a logical argument. Why don't people understand it? Well, because of this, then in the next chapter he says this, "The natural person does not accept the things of the spirit of God for they are folly to him and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned." The spiritual person judges all things but is himself to be judged by no man," verse 16, "For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ."

Don't be shocked when people act in a way that's consistent with their beliefs. Don't be upset, guys. Just share the gospel. Just share the truth. Spend more time with the willing. Talk to people in the context that makes sense for them, for where they're at spiritually, and recognize that until you have the mind of Christ, you can't really understand spiritual things. Pray that God would bring the people that we speak with the mind of Christ so that they can discern the truth of the gospel.

Let's pray.

Father, we know that even we don't always trust the chair that you've given us to sit in, the belief system that you are God, that you love us so much that you would cover the debt of our sins with the death of your own Son, and that your power would raise him from the dead to defeat death and wipe all those sins away, Lord, not put them aside so that they're not considered, but actually eliminate them. Lord, this can't make sense to people who live in a world where your debts are never erased. This can't make sense to a people, Lord, who only believe in the physical world and what they can see and feel and experience. This may not make sense to a people who want to define their own ethics, their own virtues. Lord, I just pray that you would give us the mind of Christ, that we would love people well so that they could come to a saving knowledge of you. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.