

## LOOK UP, ACTS 17:16-34

Ten Step Program #2

◆**Intro:** As a US Navy Chaplain, my father served two tours of duty in the Vietnam War. One of his comments about that experience was that seemingly irreligious men can become religious men quickly on the battlefield. Comedian Mike Warnke tells a story of time spent in the Vietnam War too that illustrates the point. He recalls walking through the jungles with his platoon and noticing a soldier with him who was wearing around his neck not just a cross, but a star of David, a small statuette of the Buddha, a lock of goat's hair, and a silver crescent. Mike asked him what that stuff all meant. The stammering wide-eyed reply was, "Er, I, uh... I believe!" "In what?" asked Mike. "I dunno, but in my position, I can't afford to make anybody mad!"

◆That young soldier reminds me of the Athenians in our text from Acts 17. Athens. **(show pix)** The place of the great Acropolis that can be seen from miles around. Know what else was in Athens? Verse 16 says the "city was full of idols." The greek term is the word *κατειδολος*; it mean "under idols", or swamped in them. Athens was a veritable smorgasbord of idols. The ancient historian Pliny, says that there were over 30,000 idols in Athens during this time in history. There was a saying that it was easier to find a god in Athens than it was to find a man.



◆Quick review: do you recall how we summarized the First Commandment last week? (Trust God.) Do you hope in sex,

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or in money, or fame, or whatever you're immersing yourself in to insure your happiness?... Dont! Acknowledge God in everything you do! That brings thriving.

◆Closely related now is Commandment number 2.

◆**1.** OK. Command number 2. Command 1 and Command 2 are so closely related that some churches consider them one, and divide the tenth command instead into two parts. Don't have other gods, ...and don't make a symbol of God. I like the way the Message translation puts it.

◆*No carved gods of any size, shape, or form of anything whatever, whether of things that fly or walk or swim. Don't bow down to them and don't serve them because I am God, your God, and I'm a most jealous God, punishing the children for any sins their parents pass on to them to the third, and yes, even to the fourth generation of those who hate me. But I'm unswervingly loyal to the thousands who love me and keep my commandments. Ex.20:4-6 Msg.*

◆**The second commandment is the instruction to look up to God.** We'll call it the Look Up command. Look up in the sense that he is your chosen role model. Look up also in the sense that he is far higher and bigger, and weighty, and holy, and powerful, and intelligent and beyond... than we puny humans can ever hope to be. Fact is, he is God. He is big big BIG. Mohammed Ali is not the greatest. God is the greatest. Michael Jordan is not the greatest of all time. God is the greatest of all time.

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◆A. The reason that God says to avoid making/having idols is that idols keep my eyes on the earth, and I forget to look up to the one Great God. I forget his size, and our comparison, and the appropriate honor he deserves. The Catechism puts it like this.

◆**Q97. May we then not make any image at all?** A97. God can not and may not be visibly portrayed in any way. Although creatures may be portrayed, yet God forbids making or having such images if one's intention is to worship them or to serve God through them.

◆Idol worship is when we take the concept of the Almighty God, and boil him down into a material object, or even a physical ritual. It is our supposition that we can manipulate or control God, or the spiritual realm. It's a philosophical materialism.

◆[My dad told me in Vietnam he observed many oriental statues before which people would bow in prayer. If they were concerned about the message the idol would bring to the spirit realm, they would actually wipe honey on the lips of the idol, to insure a sweet report. They would laden altars with flowers and fruits as gifts to feed and please the spirits, as though the spirit realm is also dependent on the material.]

◆*"I have no need of a bull from your stall or of goats from your pens, for every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills. I know every bird in the mountains, and the*

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*creatures of the field are mine. If I were hungry I would not tell you, for the world is mine, and all that is in it.” Psalms 50:9-12, NIV.*

◆ The moment you begin to think that God answers to you and not the other way around... *every time you think that God can be manipulated, have his chain pulled, or be forced to bless you, you have begun to lose connection with the true God.* This is actually what was happening in Athens. They had lots of religion and religions. They were devoid of actually knowing the true God, the Creator of all things.

◆ “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 hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.” Acts 17:24, 25, NIV.

◆ B. [Example of idols] Now maybe you don't have a little statue of a fat, squatting, Chinese teacher on a shelf in your kitchen. But lets ask “What material thing might I lean toward for the hope of blessedness?”

◆ Do I wear my cross (or other) because I think that I'll be safer because of it, or to proclaim to the world that you love Jesus? By the way, you might need to articulate that when someone comments on your cross, because it's also fashion jewelry for people who think nothing of Jesus.

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- ◆ Do I wear my bible wristband because I think God will stay with me more when I do? If one is good for me, are 6 better?
- ◆ Do I set my Bible out on the counter so I feel like I'm a god-following person and God is watching over my home more, even though I hardly ever actually read it? Do I think the devil will not tempt me, or will leave my kids alone because there's a Bible on the counter? Then I'm treating my Bible like an idol. By the way, it's not true.
- ◆ Do I hold a religious ring when I pray, or a wooden cross? Again don't get this wrong. I sometimes pray with a prayer cross. But it is your thinking that matters here. Am I thinking I can get close to God because of the wood? Because if I am it's an idol, and friends, if we start thinking of God in terms of small material things, our understanding of his place in the universe is obscured.
- ◆ How about a material spot? These can be idols if I'm not careful. I encourage you to have a special place for devotional time. It helps you focus quickly. It aids in putting other needs or preoccupations aside. But now if that's the only place I ever speak to God, I'm in danger of idolatry.
- ◆ Now what happens when we start hoping though our idols even inadvertently?
- ◆ **2. Use of idols leads to diminished living.**

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◆**A.** The main danger in idol use lies in it's diminishment of God's rightful, and actual majesty. In the film Joe vs the Volcano, Joe (Tom Hanks) is dying of cancer and despairs of life. He decides to offer himself to the god's of a certain island by jumping into it's volcano. In the course of traveling there he shipwrecks and is floating desperately on the sea. But at one point, as the moon rises, he begins to realize God's reality. And he prays this prayer: Dear God, whose name I do not know. Thank you for my life. I forgot how big..." **show clip.**

◆Friends, when we remember how big... God is and put him at the center of life, our perspective on things is altered.

Hope becomes more normal. Our interaction with all of life changes.

◆**B.** Another result is unnecessary anxiety. Look at the anxiety that accompanies not worshiping the one True God! Look at that poor soldier desperate not to make anybody mad! Look at the anxiety of the Athenians even erecting a statue to an unknown God, just in case! Can you imagine the despair we'd live in if the Harry Potter tales where the way life really is?! Who knows what creature will appear or what specter will show up to ruin your day or your life. And if you are not a master wizard you might not know the spell, the incantation, or potion (variations of idols, right?) to use...

◆This is unnecessary trauma folks! Look up, people! Look up! To the Maker of the heavens and earth! He is "*higher than the*

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*mountains that I face. Stronger than the power of the grave. Constant though the trial and the change. One thing remains: His love never fails, and never gives up. It never runs out on me.*" -Jesus Culture, One Thing Remains.

◆**C.** Another diminishment: idol worshipers are by nature fickle, and wishy washy, constantly turning from one thing to another, this god to that one, this drug or that experience. When we don't worship the true God, we are forever vacillating.

◆ Lets back up to chapter 14:8-18. It takes place in Lystra, modern day Turkey just east of Greece. These folks think Paul and Barnabas are gods! The priest of Zeus shows up at the gate with some big cows in tow to sacrifice to Paul and Barn! But by vs 19 they're trying to kill them instead of sacrificing to them! Talk about fickle! These people have no groundedness because they don't know God.

◆ This is how we become when we submit to idolatry no matter what shape it comes in.

◆ *Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things."*  
*Colossians 3:2, NIV.*

◆**D.** We don't have to live in anxiety, and frantic, fickle vacillation, friends! You don't need religious things or places, or idols to reach God. Just look up. We have Christ! (v31) We can go straight to God's throne room anywhere anytime through the

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privilege Christ has purchased for us! He is the only **image** you need! You don't need anything else. Look up!

◆*"For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together."* Colossians 1:13-17, NIV.

### ◆3. Ways to look up.

◆A. Give constant credit to God the Creator for everything good. v25-25. What does Paul say to the frantic Athenians who even have an altar to a god they don't know yet? You need to know God is the creator. He is not created. He needs nothing from us. We don't bribe him into helping us.

◆*"Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows."* James 1:17, NIV.

◆Teach yourself by thanking God that he is bigger, everywhere, beyond and powerful.

◆B. Talk with God the Father through Jesus' name often, out loud, and everywhere. v26-29. To rely on things, idols, for our security or connection to God misses his father nature. To cherish a piece of the Wittenberg Chapel door, or a stone from St. Peter's tomb, actually teaches us to think of God as distant. (Oh, the closest

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we can get is something tangible like sand from Israel or water from the River Jordan.) No!

◆1) V18 The Epicurean philosophers of Athens began around 270 BC. They taught that the gods were remote, uninvolved in human life, without influence on human affairs.

Everything is chance, they said. So seek pleasure to escape your troubles. To this Paul says, God is father. Every moment we live is in him, by him.

◆V29 ""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 man's design and skill." Acts 17:29, NIV.

◆2) The Stoic philosophers, arising around 265BC were pantheists. They believed in fate, destiny. You can't control life. You can merely endure it. They taught the way of suppressing desires, longings, emotions. Be stoic. Feel not.

◆Paul tells them God is father. God is close. Seek him. Reach out for him. Find him. So I challenge you, talk with him often, everywhere, out loud and you will see how much more he is than a piece of silver or wood. Go to him in misery. Praise him even when things make no sense. Jesus has made you a way!

◆**Conclusion:** Why should we pretend a circle of wood and weaving can catch a dream? Do you think you can pack God in your suitcase and pull him out when you want him? Never reduce God to your little box, or your little trinket. It will only result in

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reducing your life. You want to know how to live healthily, happily in this earthly existence? Revere God! When the prophet Jeremiah addresses the subject of idols, God is contrasted as Creator, or the Maker of All Things (cf Jer.10). At the dedication of Solomon's glorious temple built to honor God, he said, "

◆""But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!" 1 Kings 8:27, NIV.

◆President Theodore Roosevelt's love of the outdoors is well documented. He was responsible for the creation of several national parks and monuments. In his first inaugural address, he spoke freely of the blessings of God upon our nation, saying, "I reverently invoke for my guidance the direction and favor of Almighty God."

◆It is said that when President Roosevelt entertained diplomatic guests at the White House he was fond of taking them out to the back lawn at the end of the day. As the president stood gazing at the night sky, all eyes would eventually be cast heavenward, as his were. In his day, the vast array of stars was not dimmed by the city lights, and the magnificent display of God's brilliant creation would overcome the party. After a long moment, Mr. Roosevelt would say, "Gentlemen, I believe we are small enough now. Let's go to bed."

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◆“Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys.” Luke 12:33

◆“So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.” 2 Corinthians 4:18

◆“But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ,” Philippians 3:20, NIV.