

# Who am I Listening To?

## Acts 17:16-34 –The Universe vs. God

This study explores Paul’s encounter with the philosophers of Athens. Surrounded by idols and competing worldviews, Paul calls them to turn from vague spiritual seeking toward the living God. Today, we often hear people speak of trusting “the universe” or “positive energy.” This study challenges us to ask: Are we listening to the universe or to God?

### I. Why This Study?

#### A. Objective:

1. To explore how Acts 17:16-34 reveals the difference between cultural spirituality and God’s voice.
2. To examine how vague spiritual beliefs can block true faith in Christ.
3. To gain biblical wisdom for discerning the voices that shape our worldview.

#### B. Relevance:

1. Like Athens, our world today worships many “gods”—from success and self-help to nature and the universe.
2. This passage challenges believers to tune out the noise of culture and listen for the voice of the Creator.
3. Paul’s speech at the Areopagus gives us a model for engaging a spiritual but confused world.

### II. Context of Acts 17:16-34

#### A. The Background of Paul in Athens:

1. Paul is disturbed by the city’s \_\_\_\_\_ and begins reasoning in the synagogue and marketplace (vv. 16-17).
2. Epicurean and Stoic \_\_\_\_\_ debate him, curious about his message (v. 18).
3. Paul is brought before the Areopagus, the council of \_\_\_\_\_, to explain his teaching (vv. 19-21).
4. Paul proclaims the “unknown god” as the \_\_\_\_\_ of the universe, calling them to repentance (vv. 22-31).
5. The response is mixed—some \_\_\_\_\_, others want to hear \_\_\_\_\_, and a few \_\_\_\_\_ (vv. 32-34).

**B. Historical Insight:**

1. Athens was the \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ center of the ancient world.
2. Epicureans believed the gods were \_\_\_\_\_ and that pleasure was the highest good.
3. Stoics valued reason and harmony with \_\_\_\_\_, but saw god as impersonal.
4. The “unknown god” altar reflected spiritual \_\_\_\_\_ — worshiping what they didn’t understand.

**C. Key Takeaway:**

The universe cannot \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, or \_\_\_\_\_ our lives. Only the Creator God, revealed through Christ, offers truth and salvation.

### **III. What Happens When I Confuse the Universe for God?**

**A. The Seduction of Cultural Idols and Philosophies (vv. 16-18)**

1. Key Verses:

- a) *“Paul was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.” (v. 16)*
- b) *“Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him.” (v. 18)*

2. Key Lessons:

- a) *Our modern idols include vague spirituality, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and worship of “the universe.”*
- b) *Listening to these voices leads to confusion and \_\_\_\_\_.*
- c) *Dr. Yolanda Pierce writes: “In a world full of voices promising peace, it is the voice of the living God that we silence to our own peril.” (In My Grandmother’s House)*

**B. Proclaiming the Creator Beyond the Universe (vv. 19-31)**

1. Key Verses:

- a) *“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.” (v. 24)*
- b) *“In him we live and move and have our being.” (v. 28)*

2. Key Lessons:

- a) *God is not an impersonal \_\_\_\_\_ or the \_\_\_\_\_ itself. He is Creator, personal, and sovereign.*
- b) *Paul uses the Athenians’ own poetry, but \_\_\_\_\_ them to the true God.*
- c) *Gregory of Nazianzus taught: “The mind that seeks God in creation must not stop at the creation but seek the Creator.”*
- d) *Dr. Barbara Holmes writes: “The universe testifies to God but is not God. Black faith knows the difference because survival depends on it.” (Joy Unspeakable)*

**C. The Decision: Mockery, Curiosity, or Faith (vv. 32-34)**

1. Key Verses:

- a) *“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.’” (v. 32)*

2. Key Lessons:

- a) *The gospel demands a \_\_\_\_\_. Vague spirituality offers comfort without \_\_\_\_\_.*
- b) *The resurrection \_\_\_\_\_ us with a choice—keep listening to the world or believe in Christ.*
- c) *Dr. Mitzi J. Smith writes: “Resurrection is not metaphor—it is the divine interruption of death, injustice, and hopelessness.” (I Found God in Me)*

**IV. Scholars’ and Theological Insights on Listening to God**

**A. Gregory of Nazianzus (Church Father):** “It is madness to revere the creation and ignore the Creator.”

**B. Irenaeus of Lyons (Church Father):** “The glory of God is the human fully alive—and fully alive only in the knowledge of God.”

- C. **Dr. Yolanda Pierce:** “The noise of the world competes with God’s voice—but our souls know the difference.” (In My Grandmother’s House)
- D. **Dr. Barbara Holmes:** “Spirituality divorced from the God of justice and resurrection is powerless against evil.” (Joy Unspeakable)
- E. **Dr. Mitzi J. Smith:** “The gospel disrupts our comfort and forces us to confront what we really believe about life and death.” (I Found God in Me)
- F. **Dr. Reggie Williams:** “The god of the market and the god of the philosophers offer no hope—but Christ crucified does.”
- G. **Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas:** “God is not a cosmic vending machine responding to our positive thoughts. God is justice embodied.”

## V. Prayer Focus

- A. Pray for wisdom to discern the voices shaping your beliefs.
- B. Ask God for courage to resist cultural philosophies and spiritual half-truths.
- C. Pray for ears to hear the voice of the living God and respond in faith.

## VI. Key Takeaway

The universe is not God. Cultural spirituality can soothe but cannot save. Only the Creator, revealed in Jesus Christ, speaks words of life, hope, and resurrection. The question is not just what we believe but who we are listening to.

## VII. Discussion and Reflection Questions

1. What modern spiritual ideas or practices tempt us to trust the universe instead of God?
2. Why do you think vague spirituality is so popular today?
3. How does Paul’s message challenge today’s “spiritual but not religious” mindset?
4. Where are you tempted to listen to cultural voices more than God’s Word?
5. What helps you tune out the noise and hear God’s voice more clearly?