THE SCROLLS

The Gospel Goes Global: Every Road Leads to Mission | Acts 8:9-13

Life Lesson

When we read the story of Simon the Sorcerer, we confront the terrifying reality of counterfeit faith. Simon was captivated by the Gospel's spectacular miracles and even submitted to baptism, yet his heart remained unyielding to Christ. He wanted the power of the Holy Spirit to elevate his own greatness rather than submit to Jesus' Lordship. His story serves as a sobering reminder that intellectual assent, emotional amazement, and even mere agreement are not the same as saving faith. True discipleship is not about seeking what God can do for our kingdom; it is about dying to ourselves so we can wholly surrender to Him.

Examine Scripture

Read Acts 8:9-13

As you read Scripture, slow down and ask these three questions to move from information to transformation:

1. What does this passage reveal about who God is?

2. How is God calling you to grow or change?

3. What is God leading you to do or who is He calling you to be in your everyday life?

Simon Says . . .

It is one of Christianity's most terrifying realities: a person can look the part, speak the language, and even be baptized, yet remain entirely dead in their trespasses and sins. Jesus addresses this when he calls out the Pharisees: "Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside of it may also become clean. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which appear beautiful on the outside, but inside are full of the bones of the dead and every kind of impurity. In the same way, on the outside you seem righteous to people, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" (Matt. 23:26-28).

When we read Acts, our eyes are naturally drawn to the Early Church's explosive growth, the undeniable power of the Holy Spirit, and the miraculous breaking down of centuries-old racial barriers. We love to look at chapters like Acts 8 for the blueprints of revival. But nestled within the authentic outpouring of grace in Samaria, Luke gives us a sobering, flashing warning about the deceptive nature of counterfeit faith.

Through the story of a man named Simon, the text exposes a dangerous, subtle trap that still plagues the church today: the fatal confusion between being fascinated by God's power and being surrendered to God. Like Simon the Sorcerer, many people approach Christianity, drawn to the spectacle, the emotional high, or the perceived benefits of the Kingdom, yet they have no desire to submit to the King. They want the crown without the cross. They want the thrill of the miraculous without the death of the self. They want the benefits of God without God Himself!

As we examine Acts 8:9-13, we are compelled to move beyond superficial religion and ask a penetrating question: Are we simply astounded by what God can do for us, or has His character truly regenerated our hearts? Have we experienced the reality of true salvation, or have we simply been mystified by the mysteries of God?

"A man named Simon had previously practiced sorcery in that city and amazed the Samaritan people, while claiming to be somebody

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great. They all paid attention to him, from the least of them to the greatest, and they said, 'This man is called the Great Power of God.' They were attentive to him because he had amazed them with his sorceries for a long time" (vs. 9-11)

Luke introduces us to a man named Simon who held the entire region of Samaria under a spell of deception. Notice the key words used to describe him: he "practiced sorcery" and "astounded the Samaritan people." The Greek word for sorcery, "mageuō" (μαγεύω), suggests he was not just performing simple sleight-of-hand card tricks. He was tapping into dark, occultic, demonic power to manipulate the masses.

Though much is debated about who Simon was, Luke clearly understood him as some sort of mysterious celebrity. In fact, a legend tells of a Samaritan man named Simon who could perform magic and was a self-proclaimed god. Justin Martyr and other Early Church theologians attribute this legend to Simon. Some argue that he was the first Gnostic (a biblical heresy focused on mystic spiritualism). Though we do not know for certain whether Simon is indeed this man of legend or the father of Gnosticism, we do know that he captured the attention of those around him.

Verse 9 reveals Simon's underlying motivation and ultimate goal: he was "claiming to be someone great." This may explain why the Early Church viewed him as the legendary Simon who claimed to be a god. Simon was building his own kingdom, brand, and platform. John Owen often warned of the human heart's deep deceitfulness, noting that pride will use any means necessary, even spiritual things, to exalt itself. Simon is the prototype of the modern-day false teacher who uses spiritual things and twists spiritual truth to gain popularity. John MacArthur astutely points out that Simon's "religion was entirely self-centered"; he wanted to be the center of attention, the focal point of the world's adoration.

And for a long time, it worked. Verse 10 says, "All of them, from the least to the greatest, listened to him." They mistakenly equated the spectacular with the divine, calling him "the great power of God." Charles Spurgeon once warned his congregation about this exact trap: "Do not be carried away by the brilliant, the spectacular, or the astonishing. The devil can do many things to dazzle the eye, but he can never regenerate the heart." The Samaritans were captivated by the show and blinded to the truth, being spiritually manipulated. Paul warns us about such false teachers and false disciples in (2 Tim. 3:2-5): "For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, proud, demeaning, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, without love for what is good, traitors, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than

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lovers of God, holding to the form of godliness but denying its power. Avoid these people."

"But when they believed Philip, as he proclaimed the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized." (v. 12)

Then the narrative shifts in a remarkable way, revealing the incredible beauty and power of the true Gospel. Philip, a true disciple of Jesus, arrives in Samaria. Notice what Philip does not do. He does not try to "out-magic" Simon. He does not bring a bigger show or a more spectacular gimmick. What does he do? Philip "proclaimed the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ" (v. 12).

Notice the contrast between Simon and Philip. Simon claims to be great and make a name for himself, yet Philip proclaims the Gospel and preaches the name of Jesus. Simon is concerned with creating a following; Philip is concerned with making disciples. Simon wants the credit for what he does; Philip cares only about the glory of Jesus Christ.

When the genuine light of the Gospel shines, the counterfeit shadows of culture vanish. Philip preached a Person (Jesus Christ) and a domain (the Kingdom of God). Only the Gospel can penetrate the darkest, most deceived cultures on earth. We do not need better performance to reach the lost; we need a clear, unashamed proclamation of Jesus. Often, we resort to gimmicks to win people to Christ, producing short-lived emotions rather than true salvation. Salvation comes only from clearly articulating the Gospel. The message (the Gospel) has power, not the method. It need not be heretical or sacrilegious to be ineffective. It could be the truth of Scripture used to manipulate emotions and decisions. The Gospel does not need our help to be relevant or powerful. We are not called to make the Gospel more attractive; we are simply called to share it.

If we faithfully share the true Gospel, the result will be similar to the text: "they believed Philip… both men and women were baptized" (v. 12). Do not miss what happened in this Samaritan city. It is a monumental cultural shift! The Gospel is tearing down ethnic barriers (Samaritans are being saved) and gender barriers (both men and women are being saved). Simon's deception was broken not by human ingenuity but by the Gospel's foolish preaching. The Gospel does not create walls and division; it heals them!

"Even Simon himself believed. And after he was baptized, he followed Philip everywhere and was amazed as he observed the signs and great miracles that were being performed." (v. 13)

Did Simon actually get saved? If we only had (v. 13), we might think so. He "believed," he went through the waters of baptism, and he

Personal Reflection

1. In your private prayers and public worship, are you primarily seeking the benefits of the Kingdom, or intimacy with the King Himself? Is Jesus merely a means to your desired end, or is He the end?

2. What external religious practices or past experiences are you currently relying on to validate your salvation, and could they be masking an unyielded heart?

3. In what ways are you tempted to use your faith, ministry involvement, or service to gain the applause of others rather than to die to self so that God alone receives the glory?

4. Are you merely "amazed" by good preaching and spectacular moments at church, or are those moments producing the fruit of genuine repentance and obedience in your daily life?

5. When you attempt to share your faith or influence your community, do you rely on human ingenuity, programs, and persuasion, or is your confidence placed solely in the raw, unashamed power of the Gospel?

Commentaries

ESV Expository Commentary: John-Acts (Volume 9) by Iain M. Duguid, James M. Hamilton Jr., and Jay Sklar

Expositor's Bible Commentary (Abridged Edition): New Testament Edited by Kenneth Barker

Acts by John MacArthur

Mt. Zion's Mission

Mt. Zion Baptist Church exists to ***MAKE***, ***MATURE***, *and* ***MULTIPLY*** *disciples of Jesus Christ.*

joined the church. The Greek word for believed used here is "pisteuō" (πιστεύω). It is the same word used elsewhere for those who truly believe in the Gospel. Yet, as we read further into chapter 8, Peter rebukes Simon, telling him his heart is not right before God and that he is "poisoned by bitterness and bound by wickedness" (v. 23).

How can a man believe, be baptized, and still be lost? Because there is a vast difference between superficial intellectual assent (being convinced) and saving faith (true confession and repentance). In other words, agreement with the Gospel is not enough. There must be repentance and confession. In his classic work The Almost Christian Discovered, Matthew Mead observed, "A man may go far, he may have the outward ordinances, the knowledge, the profession, and yet be but an almost Christian." Simon believed the facts about Jesus, perhaps even agreed, or at least was impressed by Philip's works, but he never surrendered to Jesus' Lordship. As James 2:19 reminds us, "Even the demons believe—and they shudder." Counterfeit faith is one of Satan's favorite tools against the Church.

Look closely at the end of (v. 13) to see the true condition of Simon's heart: he "was amazed as he observed the signs and great miracles that were being performed." Do you see the thread Luke is weaving? In (vs. 9 and 11), Simon amazed the people. In (v. 13), Simon is amazed by Philip's miracles. The Greek word for amazed is "existēmi" (ἐξίστημι), meaning to be amazed, fascinated, or out of one's mind with wonder. Simon merely traded one fascination for another. He was not convicted of his sin; he was captivated by Philip's power. He did not want the Savior; he wanted the secret to Philip's success. He viewed the Holy Spirit as a commodity to be acquired, not a Lord to be adored.

Charles Spurgeon captured the essence of Simon's tragic condition: "A baptized pagan is still a pagan. The washing of the flesh does not wash away the filth of the spirit." Simon's faith was counterfeit, rooted in what God could do for him rather than in who God is. This forces us to turn the spotlight on our own hearts. It is entirely possible to sit in a pew, affirm the right doctrines, be baptized, and follow the crowd, while completely missing the transforming grace of Jesus Christ.

Simon's tragic counterfeit faith pleads with each of us to examine ourselves and determine whether we are truly in the faith. We must refuse the temptation to treat God as a cosmic dispenser of blessings, a quick fix for our problems, or a conduit to our own success. Instead, we must look upon the cross of Jesus Christ, not merely to be fascinated by the spectacle of His suffering, but to be utterly broken and resurrected by His saving grace. May our lives be defined not by shallow thrill-seeking that chases the next great miracle, but by a deep, abiding surrender that rests entirely in the King's unmatched glory.