

10/25/15

Acts 8:9-24

Is Yours a Saving Faith?

But there was a man named Simon, who had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he himself was somebody great. They all paid attention to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, "This man is the power of God that is called Great." And they paid attention to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed.

Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit. Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, saying, "Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity." And Simon answered, "Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me."

(Pastor Prays)

We've just read a long passage with a troubling conclusion concerning a man named Simon. I am afraid that Simon's life is a cautioning tale for many in the church. V. 13 tells us Simon believed and Simon was baptized, yet in v. 20, Peter tells Simon he's going to hell and in v. 21: *You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God.* V. 22: *Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you.* Then in v. 23 Peter tells Simon: *For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity.*

These are harsh statements coming from the apostle that seem to indicate that although Simon claims to have believed and was even baptized, he missed the Gospel. That bothers me. I've honestly been wrestling with this all week.

The Bible teaches that it's clearly possible to *think* you are a Christian and not *be* one at all. Simon looked good externally but had not changed internally. When you read the

story, you find out that Simon wanted power without repentance, pleasure without sacrifice, and, really, he wanted the gifts without really knowing the giver, and that's what's troubling to me about the therapeutic positive preaching that promises big while costing little.

It's the "bargain basement Gospel" and it turns out you really do get what you pay for, and it frightens and frustrates me to think that the Gospel of Jesus is used as a coping mechanism, a way to make it through or to be encouraged or to find peace. All those things are true, but those things are gifts when it is the Giver we seek. I really think this passage teaches us:

If You Desire the Gift More Than You Do the Giver, You Missed the Gospel

From this passage, I'd like to give you some thoughts on the Gospel:

The Gospel Glorifies Jesus and Nothing Else

Let's get into the passage. Philip is in Samaria preaching, and in v. 9 we are introduced to a man named Simon. Simon is a magician, sorcerer and wizard. (I saw a few of them at the Renaissance Festival yesterday.) V. 9 tells us that his magic was so good, people were amazed. In fact, when you read v. 9, he seems to be pretty amazed with himself: *But there was a man named Simon, who had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he himself was somebody great.*

He was saying, "I'm somebody great." It worked. V. 10 says, *They all paid attention to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, "This man is the power of God that is called Great."*

V. 11 says the same thing. They paid attention to him and were amazed. For Simon, life had become all about him, his magic, and his amazing power. Everybody loved him, from the youngest to the oldest. In fact, in v. 10, they started saying "this man is the Power of God that is called Great," until v. 12.

In v. 12 there is a contrast. "But" when they believed Philip as he preached the Good News about the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized. Look, when Jesus is glorified, it transcends tricks and amazement. Simon had the "wow" factor; Philip had the crucified Christ. And when you get to the end of the story, even though Simon has joined the church, he really wasn't changed.

The Gospel glorifies Jesus and nothing else. The Gospel sets Christ up right up next to our lives and exposes us. He shows us the bankruptcy of self-help. It's why I abominate the "prosperity Gospel," and "positive confession." Positive confession says your words have power. Just keep saying positive things about your future. You are going to create your destiny by just saying positive things about your future.

Your words don't have power. *God's* words have power. That's where I put my faith, not in what I say but in what God has written. I'm reading a book right now about this neo-prosperity movement, and it's deceptive, brother and sisters, because it presents all the gifts – provision, health and family stability and long-term happiness -- it presents all these gifts as the end instead of pointing you to the giver.

It's telling you that when a drunk driver plows into a crowd at the Homecoming parade and kills your daughter, you just need to speak "positive words" and you can control your destiny. It's bankrupt.

Jesus Christ is there in your pain and He's enough. His death on the cross, His resurrection, His Lordship is enough. The prosperity gospel provides your "stuff." The real Gospel provides you a *Savior*. Stuff will burn, but a Savior, our Savior, lives forever. Simon preached a gospel of self, Philip preached the Gospel of Christ, and that's where we stake our claim.

Before I move on to the next point it might be good to ask a question or two for reflection. What is your motive for being a Christian? Who is at the center of your world? For Simon, it was Simon. Who is it for you? Let me go a little deeper. What is the condition of your heart? In v. 12, Peter tells Simon, "You have neither part nor lot in this matter. Your heart is not right before God." What do you think when you hear the word "repent"? V. 13 tells us Simon believed, but we found out in v. 22 that Peter tells him to repent of his wickedness.

Do you see that Simon had a faith that was not a saving faith? This is a hard thing to get a hold of, but it's a theme that runs throughout the Bible. James writes "faith without works is dead," that even the demons believe and shudder. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:2, *if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain*. There is a believing that's in vain. Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord' will enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.

James, Paul, Peter and even Jesus tell us a saving faith comes from understanding that the Gospel glorifies Jesus and nothing else.

Let me give you a second thing to consider:

The Gospel Unifies People Regardless

The Gospel doesn't erase our culture or make us blind. It redeems the sinfulness or prejudices. Let me show you.

In v. 9, Philip is preaching to the hated Samaritans. The Apostles, who were the authority in the church before we had the Bible, they were about the people getting saved in Samaria. V. 14 tells us Peter and John went to Samaria to see and when they did, in v. 15, they prayed for them and in v. 17 the Samaritans received the Holy Spirit like the Jews did on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem. In fact, some have called this the Samaritan Pentecost.

I can't really explain what's happened here. There doesn't seem to be a normative way people receive the Holy Spirit in Acts. In Acts 10, Cornelius and the Greeks received the Holy Spirit as soon as they believed. Acts chapter 19 is a whole different thing. Because there is no closed system, what Luke is describing is just what he sees. And he saw the Holy Spirit descend when the Apostles put their hands on them and it was visible. This should be a *description*, not a *prescription*. It's not how it's going to happen each time. What you have to look for is: God confirms the Samaritans are His children through faith in Christ. God brought unity to Jews and Samaritans but only in Christ.

The greatest answer to racism is the Gospel because it unifies. God showed equality. Samaritans were thought of as second-class before this happened. It showed God's love for His people regardless of the background. He loves us in Christ. This informs who we seek to reach and who we hope to become. In John chapter 16, Jesus promised the Holy Spirit would come. In John Chapter 17, Jesus prayed and asked the Father "make them one as we are one." The two are related. It's what the Spirit does. Rev. 5:9 tells us Jesus ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.

The Gospel glorifies Jesus and nothing else. The Gospel unifies people regardless.

The Gospel Clarifies Christianity Fully

John MacArthur says the work of the church isn't difficult because of what Satan is doing in the *world* but rather because of what Satan is doing in the *church*.

The man named Simon saw Philip do miracles and signs which pointed to Christ, the Giver. But what Simon wanted was the gift, not the Giver. In v. 19, Simon says to Peter (After Peter prayed for believers): *Give me this power so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit*. He didn't want Jesus as the Pearl of Great Price. He wanted Jesus to help him be amazing again. That's a different religion.

Seeking personal benefit without genuine repentance is a cost-cutter faith with a tragic ending that no positive confession can change. Peter the Apostle says several things to Simon from v 20-23. Peter tells how you are going to perish; literally, you're going to Hell. You have no part with us. Your heart is not right before God. You're wicked and need forgiveness. In v. 23, Peter says you're in the gall of bitterness and the bowl of iniquity.

These are some strange phrases. Gall is a bitter taste in your heart. You don't feel like life is fair and it makes you bitter. Bitterness eats your heart like acid. Simon, your heart is drowning in bile. You're in a bowl of iniquity. You're a slave to sin. I don't know what your sin is - sex, alcohol, porn, phone, body image, the pursuit of money or a job. You're a slave to it. You do what it wants.

The Gospel is not about remaining as a slave. The Gospel is redemptive. To purchase. The amount paid is the blood of Jesus and the good received is sinners, sinners who are set free. Christ's perfect life for your sinful life. Christ's death on the cross for your

forgiveness. His resurrection for your hope. His ascension for your confidence. All of those things are gifts. It comes through faith, but not like Simon's. It's a faith that comes with repentance, when you believe enough that you turn from your old life and turn to Christ.

Come and love the Giver, Christ. And receive all the free gifts of being a child of God the Father through Jesus Christ by the Power of the Spirit.

(Pastor Prays)