

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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SIMON VERSUS SIMON

Acts 8:9-24

INTRODUCTION TO SCRIPTURE READING

In the continuing saga of the life and times of Simon Peter, we jump today from Acts 5 to Acts 8. But before we get to our Scripture text, I want to give you a brief overview of what took place in the interim. When we left Peter and the other apostles at the end of Acts 5 last Sunday, they were praising God for the honor of being dishonored for the name of Jesus (5:41). And though they had been ordered by the Jewish Council to cease and desist from speaking and teaching in the name of Jesus, they did just the opposite. Every day they were in the temple courts and in homes, wherever anyone would listen, spreading the message of the gospel. In verse 42 it says they never stopped. They didn't let up, not even for a minute. They had been so changed by the Lord Jesus and His saving work on their behalf, and so filled with the Holy Spirit, that they couldn't *not* tell people about Him.

That is where we ended last Sunday. In Acts 6, we find the biblical origin of the office of deacon and the calling of the first deacons, as the church in Jerusalem dealt with a practical problem in its midst. It seems that in the church's ministry of care and compassion for the widows among them, there was a perception of favoritism toward one group of widows, and of discrimination against another group. The first deacons were called and set apart in order to make sure all the widows, both those who spoke Hebrew and those who spoke Greek, were properly cared for, without discrimination or favoritism. As a result of this action, it says in verse 7 that the Word of God prospered, and the number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly. God was still on the move.

Acts 6 also tells of the arrest of Stephen, one of the seven deacons, and of his trial before the Jewish Council. Stephen's long speech to the Council is recorded in Acts 7. When the members of the Council and others in the courtroom couldn't take any more (not because of the length of Stephen's speech but because of its content and his witness to Christ), they turned into an angry mob, and they grabbed Stephen, dragged him out of the city, and stoned him to death. Stephen thus became the first Christian martyr, the very first follower of Christ to die for his faith in the Lord Jesus. Standing nearby while all this took place, taking pleasure in the death of Stephen, was Saul, the church's archenemy (8:1).

That very day, – the day of Stephen's martyrdom – “a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem” (8:1), which led to a great dispersion, as the believers (all except the apostles, who remained in Jerusalem) were scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria. This great dispersion actually resulted in the spread of the gospel, as the believers preached the message about Jesus wherever they went (8:4).

As you know, the disciples had been commissioned by the Lord Jesus on more than one occasion to go into all the world to preach the gospel and to make disciples of all nations.

Before His ascension into heaven, in Acts 1, Jesus instructed the disciples to stay in Jerusalem – not forever, but just until they received the promised gift of the Holy Spirit. In Acts 1:8, He told them that they would receive power from heaven itself when the Holy Spirit came upon them. And, in the power of the Spirit, they were to be His witnesses, in Jerusalem – yes, but also in the outlying regions of Judea and Samaria, and even to the ends of the world.

Jesus had given them their mission. It was, and remains, a world-wide mission. He told His followers to go, and to take the message of the gospel to the whole world. But they didn't go. They stayed in Jerusalem, even after they received the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. They stayed ... until persecution came. In His providence, God used this wave of persecution to force the church out of its cocoon. God sovereignly used opposition to the gospel to actually advance the spread of the gospel throughout all of Judea and Samaria, on the way to making Christ known to the ends of the earth. Persecution led to proclamation. When persecution came, the believers went. And they took the gospel with them wherever they went. Isn't it amazing how God accomplishes His plans?

The point man for the persecution was Saul. His goal was simply to destroy the church. He wanted nothing less. He was a man on a mission. I'm sure he thought it was a mission from God. I'm sure he thought he was doing the Lord's work. I'm sure he thought he was serving God's purposes. But when he came to faith in Christ, he discovered how wrong he had been. At this point in his life, though, before his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus, before he changed his name from Saul to Paul, he would stop at nothing in his desire to stamp out the church. It did not work out the way Saul wanted, however. Instead of smothering the gospel, the persecution only succeeded in spreading it (Stott).

As an example of how the gospel spread, beginning in Acts 8:5, Luke tells of Philip (like Stephen, one of the original deacons) going to a city in Samaria and preaching the gospel there. Great things happened as a result. Lives were changed. Miracles took place. And, as it says in verse 8, "there was great joy in the city."

All of this is background and context for today's Scripture reading from Acts 8:9-24, where Simon Peter the apostle meets Simon Magus the sorcerer. Let's give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word.

NO STORY

If you have heard me preach more than a few times, you know that, more often than not, I like to start out the message with a story to get your attention and to focus our minds on the teaching of God's Word. Sometimes the story is humorous (or intended to be). Sometimes it is more serious. Sometimes it is a little of both. I'm not going to tell a story today. The dramatic story we just read of the showdown in Samaria between Simon and Simon, as well as Luke's account of the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the new believers in Samaria, ought to be enough to grab our attention and keep it.

THE TROUBLE WITH SIMON

I want you to meet Simon the sorcerer. He is sometimes known as Simon Magus (Simon the Great). Simon was a big shot in Samaria. He had lots of followers. When he showed off his powers as a sorcerer, people were amazed. He dazzled them with his wizardry. He performed miracles and wonders. The Samaritans were in awe of him. He was known in Samaria as “the divine power known as the Great Power” (8:10). Many of those who had heard of him believed his power came from God. In reality, though, his power came from a demonic source. Not from God but from Satan, the deceiver.

When Philip arrived with the message of Christ, accompanied by miraculous signs and wonders, the people of the city turned from following Simon and embraced the gospel. In verse 13 it says that even Simon believed. He professed his own faith in Christ and received baptism. Simon himself was so impressed and amazed by the miraculous things he saw Philip do, that he shadowed Philip everywhere he went, so he wouldn’t miss any of the action.

Then, as we read, the apostles in Jerusalem sent Simon Peter and John to Samaria to see if the Samaritans who responded to Philip’s preaching were true, authentic Christian believers. For now, we need to look past the theological questions raised by verses 14-17, important as they are. We’ll have to take a look at these verses another time.

What is clear is that, as Peter and John laid their hands on the Samaritan believers, the Samaritans received the Holy Spirit in their lives, and Simon was impressed. He wanted the power to impart the Holy Spirit for himself. Simon apparently had some pretty remarkable powers. But he recognized that the apostles had a power he did not have. And he wanted it. He wanted it badly. He wanted it so badly that he offered to buy it. He offered to pay money for it. He basically said to Peter and John: “Name your price. Tell me how much you want. Just give me the same ability you have. I’ve got to have it!”

There is a term for what Simon was trying to do. It is called *simony*. It is named after this Simon in Acts 8. In church history, simony came to mean the sin of buying (or attempting to buy) power or influence or some position in the church with money. More broadly, it is the sin of using the Christian faith for personal gain or as a means to make money. It is, sadly, the enduring legacy of Simon’s life.

In one sense, I suppose, Simon is an easy target for us. It is easy to see his sin. It is easy to see where Simon went wrong. It is easy to see that God does not want us to be like Simon. Given the spiritual insight that Simon Peter was given into Simon’s heart, we can reasonably conclude that Simon’s conversion was not real. His conversion was counterfeit, just like the claim that his powers came from God. Yes, he did make a profession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Yes, he did receive baptism as a sign of his faith and his new identity as a follower of Christ. Yes, he did become part of the new fellowship of believers in Samaria. Yes, at some level, he did believe the message Philip preached. As John Piper points out, though, there is a kind of faith, a kind of believing, that is not true saving faith. Making a personal and public profession of faith in Christ, by itself, does not guarantee that you are saved. Receiving baptism is not a guarantee that your faith is real. You can believe all the

right things in your head about God, about the person and work of Jesus Christ, about all the essential doctrines of the Christian faith. You can say all the right words and believe it all in your head without ever really putting your trust wholeheartedly in Jesus Christ as your Savior. Without ever giving over control of your life to His loving Lordship.

Simon evidently manifested a kind of faith. But it was not saving faith. Despite his profession of faith and his baptism, he was not truly converted. As the Holy Spirit enabled Peter to discern, Simon's heart was not right before God (8:21). Simon was a counterfeit Christian with a counterfeit faith.

God does not like counterfeits. He does not like hypocrites, people who appear or pretend to be one thing, when in reality they are something else. He does not want any of us to be hypocrites. He does not want any of us to be counterfeit Christians. Or to have a counterfeit faith. It is worth taking the time to examine your heart, to see if your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and your commitment to Him are the real deal. And to see if, like Simon, you are captive to any sin which must be renounced and repented (8:22).

Sure, it is easy to find fault with Simon and to see where he went wrong. But I wonder if, in at least one way, we may really be a lot like Simon. What prompted Peter's rebuke of Simon was Simon's offer to buy the gift the Holy Spirit had given to Peter and John. Simon wanted something he did not have. He wanted for himself what the apostles had. He coveted what they had.

Aren't we, maybe, just a little or maybe a lot like Simon in this way? Do you ever covet what someone else has? Maybe it is their car. Maybe it is their house. Maybe it is their job or their income or their lifestyle. Maybe it is their spouse. Maybe it is their looks or their health. Maybe it is some ability they have that you wish you had. Maybe it is even some ministry, some position of authority or stature in the life of the church, or a particular spiritual gift you covet for yourself. Maybe, like Simon, you would be willing to pay big bucks if you could, in order to possess whatever it is you covet.

If you ever struggle with thoughts or desires like this, I guarantee you're not alone. But I can also guarantee that this is not how God wants any of His children to think or live. Coveting is still a sin, just as it was back when God gave His people the Ten Commandments. Covetousness is a glaring example of selfishness. Of self-centeredness. Of self-absorption and self-gratification. Instead of coveting something we don't have, the Bible counsels us to be content with what we do have (Hebrews 13:5).

Self-centeredness and greed can ultimately destroy you. I'm sure some of you know the story of Gollum in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Originally, his name was Smeagol. But in his selfish obsession with possessing the Ring and the powers it held, Smeagol was transformed – actually deformed is a better word – into Gollum. He became a slave to the Ring who would do anything to retain his “precious” possession. His selfish obsession would ultimately destroy him. Smeagol isn't all that unique. There are people in this world who want so badly to gain or possess something that it eventually kills them. Or changes them –

and not in a good way. Or causes them to lose everything in their lives that really is important. In the name of Jesus, dear friends, do not let it happen to you.

Peter had no tolerance for Simon's selfish obsession. Nor did he display any patience with Simon's mistaken belief that God's gifts and blessings were available for purchase in the gift store. Do you know what Peter said to Simon after Simon offered to buy the gift of the Holy Spirit? A pretty literal translation of verse 20 would be: "You and your money can both go to hell!" Good old Peter, he didn't leave any doubt about where he stood, did he?

But he did not stop there. With the help of the Holy Spirit, Peter diagnosed the condition of Simon's heart. It was a spiritual gift Peter had received. Peter knew that unless Simon repented and turned to the Lord in true faith, his story would not have a happy ending. He urged Simon to repent of his sin. He urged him to turn to the Lord. He urged him to seek the Lord, to pray to the Lord for forgiveness. He held out the mercy and grace of God to Simon, the same mercy and grace that are available to you and me today.

I'm sorry to say that Simon did not heed Peter's call. He resisted Peter's plea to turn to God. He did ask Peter to pray for him, which was not a bad thing in itself. He asked Peter to pray that he would be spared from God's judgment and punishment for his sins. But Simon would not do the one thing he himself could do to prevent God's judgment on him. He did not repent. Which is a tragedy.

CONCLUSION

As the followers of Christ were driven out of Jerusalem by this wave of persecution, the message of the gospel spread and prospered. In the Samaritan city to which Philip went, the gospel bore much fruit, and brought great joy to the people. It did not bear fruit in every life or bring joy to everyone, as the life of Simon attests.

I pray that none of us will resist or reject the message of the gospel of grace, as Simon did. I pray that none of us will be found by God to be counterfeit Christians or to have a counterfeit faith. I pray that none of us will either consciously or subconsciously allow the sin of covetousness any room in our lives. I pray that the gospel itself will bear much fruit – and continue to bear much fruit – in and through our lives, and through our witness as a church. And I pray that, as a result of our witness and service to others in the name of Jesus, the number of Christ's followers here in northern Virginia and in the greater Washington area will increase dramatically, and there will be great joy in the city.

Lord, let it be so, to the glory of Your name. Amen.