

October 23, 2022

Simon Wants to Buy Power

Printed Text • Acts 8:9–24

Devotional Reading • 1 Corinthians 1:18–25

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: DISCUSS Simon’s motivation to receive the Holy Spirit; REFLECT on any selfish desires for God’s power; and CREATE a list of true and sincere motives for following Christ.

In Focus

Although it was not really much of a sacrifice from his salary as a successful corporate lawyer, Robert Jones put large amounts of money in the offering. He had been attending church and placing his money in the offering tray for missions every 1st Sunday of the month for years. When it was time to elect members to the various church committees, Mr. Jones thought he would easily be elected to his favorite committee: missions. After all, he gave plenty of money to this cause and everyone seemed to know it. But instead of electing Mr. Jones, the people of his church voted for Warren, a humble man who had already gone on a number of missions trips, including one where he dug up septic systems. Mr. Jones was furious and thought, *‘Don’t these people know how much I am giving to the church, especially to the missions’ ministry? What can Warren possibly give that I can’t?’*

What do you think is Mr. Jones’ motivation for running for leader of the missions committee? Why do you think the people did not vote for him? Do churches ever favor the wealthy people in the congregation? Can money buy a person’s way into church power? In today’s lesson, we will see how consequences come from thinking money can buy everything, especially the Holy Spirit.

Keep In Mind

“And when Simon saw that through laying on of the apostles’ hands the Holy Ghost was given, he offered them money,” (Acts 8:18, KJV)

Words You Should Know

A. Used Sorcery and Bewitched (Acts 8:9) *mageuo kai existemi* (GK.) – Practiced magic

B. Had Regard (v. 11) *prosecho* (GK.) – Denotes paying attention

Say It Correctly

Simony. SI-muh-nee

Sorcery. SOR-sur-ree

KJV

Acts 8:9 But there was a certain man, called Simon, which beforetime in the same city used sorcery, and bewitched the people of Samaria, giving out that himself was some great one:

10 To whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, This man is the great power of God.

11 And to him they had regard, because that of long time he had bewitched them with sorceries.

12 But when they believed Philip preaching the things concerning the kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.

13 Then Simon himself believed also: and when he was baptized, he continued with Philip, and wondered, beholding the miracles and signs which were done.

14 Now when the apostles which were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent unto them Peter and John:

15 Who, when they were come down, prayed for them, that they might receive the Holy Ghost:

16 (For as yet he was fallen upon none of them: only they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.)

17 Then laid they their hands on them, and they received the Holy Ghost.

18 And when Simon saw that through laying on of the apostles' hands the Holy Ghost was given, he offered them money,

19 Saying, Give me also this power, that on whomsoever I lay hands, he may receive the Holy Ghost.

20 But Peter said unto him, Thy money perish with thee, because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money.

21 Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter: for thy heart is not right in the sight of God.

22 Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee.

23 For I perceive that thou art in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity.

24 Then answered Simon, and said, Pray ye to the Lord for me, that none of these things which ye have spoken come upon me.

NLT

Acts 8:9 A man named Simon had been a sorcerer there for many years, amazing the people of Samaria and claiming to be someone great.

10 Everyone, from the least to the greatest, often spoke of him as "the Great One—the Power of God."

11 They listened closely to him because for a long time he had astounded them with his magic.

12 But now the people believed Philip's message of Good News concerning the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ. As a result, many men and women were baptized.

13 Then Simon himself believed and was baptized. He began following Philip wherever he went, and he was amazed by the signs and great miracles Philip performed.

14 When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that the people of Samaria had accepted God's message, they sent Peter and John there.

15 As soon as they arrived, they prayed for these new believers to receive the Holy Spirit.

16 The Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them, for they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

17 Then Peter and John laid their hands upon these believers, and they received the Holy Spirit.

18 When Simon saw that the Spirit was given when the apostles laid their hands on people, he offered them money to buy this power.

19 "Let me have this power, too," he exclaimed, "so that when I lay my hands on people, they will receive the Holy Spirit!"

20 But Peter replied, "May your money be destroyed with you for thinking God's gift can be bought!

21 You can have no part in this, for your heart is not right with God.

22 Repent of your wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive your evil thoughts,

23 for I can see that you are full of bitter jealousy and are held captive by sin."

24 "Pray to the Lord for me," Simon exclaimed, "that these terrible things you've said won't happen to me!"

The People, Places, and Times

Sorcery. In Unger’s Bible Dictionary, sorcery is defined as “the practice of the occult arts under the power of evil spirits or demons and has been common in all ages of the world’s history” (1039). In this country, we are more familiar with a type of magic that is simply sleight of hand, using such tricks as hiding cards up the sleeve or drawing attention away from the hand doing the trick. But there is another magic that is drawn from the power of evil spirits. For example, the practitioner may actually do things that are not within the realm of the everyday laws of physics.

In today’s Scripture, we will be reading about Simon the sorcerer, who called upon these occult arts to do such wonders that people held him in great awe. Simon took upon himself the title of “the great one.”

In many traditional cultures in Asia, Africa, the Americas, and Europe, sorcerers scare people. If people do not sacrifice chickens and other animals and items, the sorcerer invokes fear that evil spirits might hurt them. And all along, the sorcerer is getting rich from the sacrifices. All through the Bible, magical arts are condemned because of their connection with evil spirits and because they lead people to do terrible things out of fear, including sacrificing their own children.

Background

The Book of Acts is a book of history and faith. In addition to providing a transition between the Gospels and the Epistles, Luke, the writer of Acts gives us the vital historical facts of how Christianity began and spread. In Acts, selected events in church history are recorded that demonstrate Christian doctrine and practice. Clearly, it is through the power of the Holy Spirit that the men and women of God are able to testify that Jesus is the Christ. There is great emphasis on the connection between the Old Testament, the Jews, and Christianity. There is an even greater emphasis that salvation is not bound by a believer’s race or ethnicity; rather, it is extended to all humankind. In Acts, it is clear that it is only Jesus, the Christ, who is able to fulfill the needs of the Gentiles and the Jews.

At-A-Glance

1. Introducing Simon the Sorcerer (Acts 8:9–11)
 2. Many Turn to Christ (vv. 12–13)
3. The Believers Receive the Holy Spirit (vv. 14–17)
4. Simon Attempts to Buy the Power of the Holy Spirit (vv. 18–24)

In Depth

1. Introducing Simon the Sorcerer (Acts 8:9–11)

Today’s Scripture passage begins in the midst of a great evangelistic campaign in Samaria. After the stoning of Stephen, believers, except for the apostles, scattered everywhere while spreading the Gospel. Philip, one of the deacons who was appointed along with Stephen, went to Samaria and began preaching and performing miraculous signs. Because of his witness, many came to Christ. Simon the sorcerer was among the Samaritans who heard Philip’s preaching and saw the accompanying signs and wonders. Simon had enjoyed tremendous popularity among the Samaritans.

Scripture tells us that Simon had been practicing the magical arts and had deceived many with his false claims of greatness. Simon's abilities as a magician had "bewitched the people" (Acts 8:9, KJV).

Even today, people mistakenly believe that the only difference between magic and miracles is that the latter is more impressive and is practiced by Christians. The truth is far more important. Miracles clearly point to God, while magic manipulates and points away from God. Faith comes through hearing the Word and not through seeing miracles.

2. Many Turn to Christ (vv. 12–13)

The Samaritans had previously believed in Simon because of his magic. They had no faith in Simon; rather, their belief was predicated on his magical abilities. Through the preaching of Philip, the faith of the Samaritans was based on the Good News of Jesus, the Christ, and the kingdom of God. The Samaritans saw Philip's miracles as confirmation of the truth of the resurrection of Christ. The miracles aided— not caused—their faith. Now that faith in Jesus was the basis of their belief, they turned away from Simon. Even Simon himself believed and was baptized.

3. The Believers Receive the Holy Spirit (vv. 14–17)

When news of Philip's successful ministry in Samaria reached Jerusalem, the apostles immediately dispatched Peter and John to Samaria. That these two elder statesmen were sent to Samaria should not be misread. There was no lack of faith on the part of the church in Philip's ability to preach salvation. This fact is apparent when we see that Peter and John did not preach in Samaria.

Instead, they prayed and laid hands on the Samaritan converts. As a result, God gave the Samaritans the gift of the Holy Spirit. The sending of Peter and John is better understood in light of who the Samaritans were. They were a mixed-race people with some Jewish lineage but possessed an alternative style of worship. They shared some of the same beliefs as the Jews: They claimed an Abrahamic lineage and they were also awaiting a Messiah. By sending Peter and John, the church in Jerusalem was affirming its unity with the emerging church in Samaria. The impartation of the Holy Spirit ensured the unity of the church. The Holy Spirit also provided a witness in the form of the apostles Peter and John. The apostles were credible and authoritative witnesses to the Jews that the acceptance of Samaritans into the church was equal to that of the Jews.

The fact that the apostles "laid their hands" on the Samaritan converts is no evidence that this was the only way for the Samaritans to receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:17). On the Day of Pentecost, there was no mention of laying on of hands, yet the Holy Spirit was imparted to all of the disciples who were present and believing. Additionally, when Peter preached to Cornelius' household, there is no mention of laying on of hands to receive the Spirit (Acts 10:44).

There is also little scriptural evidence that the twelve apostles were the only men empowered to impart the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands. When Paul, formerly Saul of Tarsus, was converted, it was Ananias who laid hands on him so that Paul might be healed and receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 9:17–18). Ananias was neither an apostle nor a deacon. Instead, the laying on of hands and the receipt of the Holy Spirit by the Samaritans at the hands of the apostles marked a critical breakdown of religious and racial barriers. Philip had already baptized the believing Samaritans; thus, they were already saved. The apostles now witnessed the inclusiveness of the church. They saw that God was giving these Samaritans the exact same gift of the Holy Spirit that He had given to the apostles and disciples in Jerusalem. There was no barrier between the believing Jews and the believing Samaritans. There was one faith, one baptism, and one Spirit (see Ephesians 4:4–6).

4. Simon Attempts to Buy the Power of the Holy Spirit (vv. 18–24)

Superstitious Simon wanted to be able to impress people again with his magical powers, but he did not understand that the gift of the Holy Spirit is freely given to all who believe. Earlier, we read that Simon believed and was baptized. At this point, we wonder whether his profession of faith was genuine. When Simon saw Peter and John laying hands on people to receive the Holy Spirit, he wanted this same power for himself, and he was ready to pay for it.

Peter saw through Simon right away. This was definitely not a genuine desire for spiritual power. In his heart was a desire to have center stage, and this is the opposite of what God desires to see in us. God wants us to give Him preeminence. Many people today are confused about paying for spiritual blessings. God is not like the waiter who gives you better service if you tip better. Even our good works will not open the door of heaven for us. In Ephesians 2:8–9 (KJV), we read: “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.” Every gift we receive from God is just that—a gift! Even our spiritual gifts are free from our heavenly Father (Ephesians 4:7–13).

We would like to see a happy ending to this story recorded in Acts 8, but it’s not there. Instead of Simon praying to God in deep repentance, he asked Peter to pray for him that the punishment for his sins would not fall on him. In other words, Simon was not sorry for his sins; he just wanted to get off the hook from the punishment.

Search the Scriptures

1. What was Simon doing to amaze the people of Samaria (Acts 8:9)?
2. How did the Samaritans respond to Philip (v. 12)?
3. What terrible thing did Simon try to do (vv. 18–19)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. Peter gave Simon a warning. Why do you think what Simon did was so terrible?
2. Name some other times when the Holy Spirit was given through the laying on of hands. What are some similarities in these cases? What are some differences?

Liberating Lesson

Simon reminds us of some preachers who seem to be in the ministry primarily for fame and fortune. What are some signs of authenticity or insincerity you can see in some preachers?

Application for Activation

It may be easier to see false motivations in others than ourselves. Finish today’s lesson by creating as a list of true and sincere motives for following Christ. Now examine your heart to see how you measure up, and then ask God to help form your attitudes and motives to be true and sincere.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Acts 8:9–24

9 But there was a certain man, called Simon, which beforetime in the same city used sorcery, and bewitched the people of Samaria, giving out that himself was some great one:

For some time before Philip arrived in Samaria, the town had been “bewitched” (Gk. existemi, ex-IS-tay-mee) by a man named Simon. He practiced witchcraft or “sorcery” (Gk. mageuo, mag-YOO-o) which means “the practice of magic.” Simon used his magical skills to persuade the people of Samaria that he was someone great (see 5:36).

10 To whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, This man is the great power of God.

Everyone—“the least” (Gk. mikros, mikROS) and “the greatest” (Gk. megas, MEG-as)—crowded around Simon saying that he was in some way the special channel of the power of God or the supreme emanation of God Himself.

11 And to him they had regard, because that of long time he had bewitched them with sorceries.

For a long time, the people “had regard” (Gk. prosecho, pros-EKH-o) or were devoted to Simon because he had used witchcraft to bewitch or influence them.

12 But when they believed Philip preaching the things concerning the kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.

Philip did not preach about himself. Philip was “preaching” (Gk. euaggelizo, yoo-ang-ghelID-zo), “the things concerning the kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ.” The Samaritans “believed” (Gk. Pisteuo, pist-YOO-o) and “were baptized” (Gk. baptizo, bap-TID-zo).

13 Then Simon himself believed also: and when he was baptized, he continued with Philip, and wondered, beholding the miracles and signs which were done.

Simon believed and was baptized. He followed Philip everywhere, captivated by the great signs and miracles he saw. After having amazed others with his magic practice, he himself was amazed.

While the text says that Simon believed, the question remains: did his belief lead to repentance and salvation?

14 Now when the apostles which were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent unto them Peter and John:

In Acts 8:14, we read that when the apostles (Gk. apostolos, ap-OS-tol-os) “heard” (Gk. akouo, a-KOO-o) that Samaria “had received” (Gk. dechomai, DEKH-om-ahee) the Word of God, they sent Peter and John to investigate. The Greek words for “sent” (Gk. apostello, a-pos-TEL-lo) and “apostle” have the same root meaning, literally “the sent ones.” On one occasion, James and John wanted to call fire down from heaven to consume a Samaritan city (Luke 9:51–56). It was fitting that one of them should be part of the delegation that now went to welcome the people of Samaria into the church.

15 Who, when they were come down, prayed for them, that they might receive the Holy Ghost:

When they arrived, they discovered that although the people of Samaria had believed and had been baptized into the name of Jesus, they had not yet received the Holy Ghost. So they prayed for them that they might “receive” (Gk. lambano, lam-BAHN-o) the Holy Ghost.

16 (For as yet he was fallen upon none of them: only they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.)

Acts 8:16 says that the Holy Ghost had not yet come “upon” (Gk. epi, ep-EE) any of the Samaritans. They had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. This statement raises some questions that have caused much perplexity and division: How did the apostles know that the Samaritans had not received the Holy Ghost? In light of Acts 2:38, how could the Samaritans have believed and been baptized and not received the Spirit? There are two general approaches to these questions. One is that here, as in Acts 2:41 and Acts 10:44–48, it was a new departure in line with what Jesus said in Acts 1:8. Thus, we should see it as an abnormal rather than a normal experience of the Christian life. Another view is that the Samaritan Christians’ experience is a typical experience of the Christian life. Becoming a Christian is a two-stage process consisting first of conversion and water baptism, and second of the gift or baptism of the Spirit. The Apostle Paul argues against the latter view in Romans 8:9, NLT . He states, “those who do not have the Spirit of Christ living in them do not belong to him at all.” In other words, any person who is saved has the Holy Spirit.

17 Then laid they their hands on them, and they received the Holy Ghost.

In addition to praying for them, Acts 8:17 says that the apostles “laid” (Gk. epitithemi, ep-ee-TITH-ay-mee) their hands on them. This identifies the people for whom they prayed as the rest of the church, particularly the mother church in Jerusalem. In answer to their prayers, the believers received the Holy Ghost.

18 And when Simon saw that through laying on of the apostles’ hands the Holy Ghost was given, he offered them money,

19 Saying, Give me also this power, that on whomsoever I lay hands, he may receive the Holy Ghost.

The “Ghost” in “Holy Ghost” is pneuma (PNYOO-mah) and means “a breath of air.” While the KJV uses the term “Holy Ghost,” all subsequent English translations use Holy Spirit instead because of the modern connotations with the word ghost.

When Simon saw the apostles laying their hands on people as they received the Holy Spirit, it seemed like some very powerful religious magic. We read in verse 9 that Simon had proclaimed himself “the great one.” Now he desired the power that he saw in the apostles so that he could continue to be the main practitioner of wonders. It’s no doubt that he expected money when he performed his magic deeds, and he thought that he could buy the powerful “magic” that he saw in the apostles.

20 But Peter said unto him, Thy money perish with thee, because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money.

21 Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter: for thy heart is not right in the sight of God.

Simon completely misunderstood the power of God. It is not something that can be purchased like the magic of the sorcerer. Because of his attempt, the term “simony” has come to mean trying to buy spiritual gifts or purchase an ecclesiastical office. We may think at first that this was just a misunderstanding, but it was showing what was in Simon’s heart. The reason he wanted the gift that the apostles had was because he still wanted to be the one who could perform great miracles, the one everyone looked up to. He wanted to maintain his magical power over the people.

In verse 20, the Greek word for “purchased” is ktaomai (KTAH-om-ahee) and it is defined as “got, acquired, obtained, possessed, provided, or purchased.” Everything we have is a gift from God and nothing is available through purchase. That Simon thought he could buy this spiritual gift revealed that he was still thinking that the gift of salvation was not truly a gift from God.

22 Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee.

23 For I perceive that thou art in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity.

Peter could see that the thoughts in Simon’s heart were wrong. What is “gall”? The Greek is chole (khol-AY), and it means bile or poison. The English word has come to mean arrogance, but Peter is talking about something much worse. Bitterness is the opposite of sweetness; it is an attitude of anger, hurt, or resentment. All wrong actions are rooted in the attitudes of the heart. So Simon’s request was not an innocent misunderstanding. Inside he was feeling bitterness because he would no longer be the big, important sorcerer. Now that people had the message of redemption, they would no longer be fooled by the spiritual void that the sorcerer used to his advantage.

To be bound up is literally to have shackles on. To be “in the bond of iniquity” is to be handcuffed to sin (v. 23). Simon was still not spiritually free. Peter commanded Simon to repent of the sin in his heart, but the next verse will show that he did not.

24 Then answered Simon, and said, Pray ye to the LORD for me, that none of these things which ye have spoken come upon me.

Although Simon was afraid of the judgment that Peter alluded to, he was not ready to repent. In fact, he was not even ready to pray. Instead, Simon asked Peter to pray for him—not for repentance and forgiveness but simply to pray for him that the bad things Peter talked about would not happen to him.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Who Can Understand God's Power?
(Job 26)

TUESDAY

Using the Name of the Lord
(Acts 19:11-20)

WEDNESDAY

Christ, the Power of God
(1 Corinthians 1:18-25)

THURSDAY

Faith Resting on God's Power
(1 Corinthians 1:26-2:5)

FRIDAY

The Works of the Flesh
(Galatians 5:16-21)

SATURDAY

The Fruit of the Spirit
(Galatians 5:22-26)

SUNDAY

What Money Cannot Buy
(Acts 8:9-24)