

## Counterfeit Religion

Acts 8:9-25

Let me tell you an embarrassing story that happened to me on this last trip to China. I needed a cheap carry-on suitcase to bring some souvenirs back for supporters and bargained a guy down to 110 Yuan (which is about \$13.75 US); and it was a nice Samsonite case. Well, I left and when I got to the bottom of the escalator, this guy comes running after me holding out a 100 Yuan bill and telling me that I had given him a counterfeit. Well, I think this is a scam. I know I didn't give him a counterfeit since I got the bills from the bank, especially something as poor of a counterfeit as he handed me. And besides, why hadn't he noticed it earlier? Like an idiot, I took the bill in my hand, and when I realized what had happened, he wouldn't take it back. And he made such a fuss, that I gave him another 100 Yuan. It was still a good price, but it was my first education into the presence of counterfeits all over China. You had to really watch out. It's a big problem. Almost every hotel had counterfeit detectors.

And I hadn't realized that counterfeits are as big a problem in America. But apparently it is a big problem. In March of this year a Congressional Report was published that shows that North Korea has been engaging in a massive printing and distribution of counterfeit American money – various reports are guessing at anywhere from \$15 million to \$100 million a year in counterfeit bills are being printed in North Korea. That's a lot of counterfeit \$100 bills. And apparently China has been complicit in that as well.

In May of this year, CNN said, "The fake \$100 bills are of such high quality it is almost impossible to distinguish them from the real thing." It takes a lot of careful examination by experts. These are called supernotes, and it is a major headache for the administration. They are going to be coming out with new \$100 bills next year, but they still have to honor the old ones. There have always been counterfeits: counterfeit pearls, counterfeit diamonds. And this chapter shows counterfeit religion.

### I. A contrast in powers (vv. 9-13)

#### A. The Power of Satan

Now at the beginning, the counterfeiting didn't have to look very good. When Philip comes on the scene, Satan has to make the counterfeit a supernote – something so good that even Philip is fooled. But before Simon's so-called conversion, his counterfeiting of Biblical religion seems pretty crude from our perspective. It was like that counterfeit that was

pawned off on me in China. And the reason that it didn't need to be that good was that for the past 750 years the Samaritans had mixed the religion of the Bible with paganism and many superstitions, and so were not very discerning. Satan was able to be much more bold prior to verse 13. Verse 9 says, **But** [and he is deliberately bringing a contrast to the ministry of Philip – “But”] **there was a certain man called Simon, who previously practiced sorcery in the city and astonished the people of Samaria; claiming that he was someone great; to whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, “This man is the great power of God.” And they heeded him because he had astonished them with his sorceries for a long time.** If anyone said that he was “the great power of God” *today*, which is equivalent to saying you are God, or at least a Gnostic emanation from God, you would be treated like a *nutcase*. But in superstitious communities like Samaria, all it took was for him to produce a few good miracles, and these people thought he was the real stuff. Commentators point out that he didn't dare disagree with the monotheism of the Samaritans, but his self-centered brashness didn't seem to faze them that much. So let's look first of all at the power of Satan as it was manifested in Simon.

1. Sorcery is a real threat. He didn't just claim to practice sorcery – he actually did it (vv. 9,11).

First, Simon didn't just fake sorcery. Verses 9 and 11 say that he actually **practiced sorcery**. The Bible treats sorcery as being real – as being demonic powers that are working through the sorcerer. It's not simply a sleight of hand magic show. These sorcerers were able to do supernatural miracles. If you paid them, they would give demonic curses against people – of course, they would do it in the name of God just like Coptic priests in Ethiopia could be hired to pin a curse against someone on the church door. In fact, when verse 10 says that everyone in Samaria gave heed to Simon, it may explain why there was so much demonism in verse 7. Verse 7 says, **For unclean spirits, crying with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed...** People were under the power of his sorcery.

The early church father, Justin Martyr, said that Simon lived six miles west of Justin Martyr's home, and that he knew all about this Simon. He said that he was empowered by demons to perform all kinds of magical arts. In fact, this Simon is talked about over and over again by the early church fathers. They point out that after this encounter he continued to practice sorcery, and became more and more bold in his opposition to the apostles. Some of the sorceries that amazed the Samaritans here were listed by the church fathers as: birds being stopped in mid-flight, turning clay figures into birds and beasts much like the ancient magicians at the time of Moses turned

their rods into serpents. A picture of Simon starting to bleed when it was cut by the Jews. You see, the Roman Catholics don't have a monopoly on bleeding pictures, nor were they the first to make claims to bleeding pictures. Some of these may have been trickery, but some of the miracles the church fathers say that he did were clearly demonic miracles.

Don't ever think that sorcery is a myth that can be safely dismissed. Luke took the sorcery seriously. Unfortunately not all Christians do. I have known Christians who have gone to séances out of curiosity, or have had their hands read (by a palm reader), or their future told in a crystal ball. And when rebuked, they have said, "Oh there's nothing to it. It's just a game. It's fun. There's nothing to be afraid of." In fact, at a church that I attended as a kid up in Canada there were some young people who were actually levitating things off the ground and calling it science until the elders put a stop to it. We must not underestimate the power of Satan. Exodus 22:18 says, "**You shall not permit a sorceress to live.** *It was such a serious problem,* that God put the *death* penalty on it. We are on dangerous ground when we trivialize or make light of what God has taken seriously. Don't demythologize Satan. He and his demons are real. Leviticus 19:31 says, **Give no regard to mediums and familiar spirits; do not seek after them, to be defiled by them: I am the LORD your God.** He is saying that even believers can be defiled by these mediums. Leviticus 20:6 says, "**And the person who turns to mediums and familiar spirits, to prostitute himself with them, I will set My face against that person and cut him off from his people.**" So in God's eyes, sorcery is a real thing. There is a power of Satan that these people wield. So it's no wonder that the Samaritans were amazed. Witchdoctors out in Ethiopia could do some amazing things. Coptic priests and Roman Catholic priests have done some amazing miracles by the power of Satan.

2. These people were under his influence (Gk of "amazed" v 9 and "astonished" with verse 7)

The second thing that we see is that these people were under Simon's influence. We have already hinted at that, but there is a further hint of it. When verse 9 says that Simon **astonished the people of Samaria**, it uses a term that means to be out of your mind and is sometimes translated bewitched. KJV has "bewitched," Rieu has "under the spell of his magic," Wickliffe has "he madded them with his witchcrafts." One dictionary says of this word, "Exceptional states of soul, whether due to supernatural power or neurotic disturbance, are widespread in antiquity. In detail, experiences vary, and there is a fluid line between ecstasy and illusion and ecstasy and possession. In the narrower sense ecstasy denotes beneficial infilling by a

substance or person, either by entry or by breathing. [and so this word could be used of entry of the Holy Spirit or entry of a demonic spirit. The dictionary goes on.] Early attempts are made to induce it by narcotics, music, dancing, rhythmic cries, and self-mutilation. In mysticism the goal is an absorption associated with visions and auditions... Dionysus is a union of both the hidden god and the manifested god who shares with his worshippers in a combination of creative desire and destructive frenzy. Wine and dancing and Bacchic cries express this, but also become a means to induce it. The dancing women show vividly how the world is bewitched for ecstasies. Since ecstasy brings vision, a prophetic element is involved which is most clearly reflected in the Delphic cult.” And it goes on to talk more about how this word could convey a strong power influencing the people. It may be simply that they were amazed, but some translations take it in a stronger sense of under his influence.

3. Claimed greatness and demonstrated “power,” and both the people (vv. 9-11) and Simon (vv. 13,18-19) are preoccupied with power rather than God’s Word or God’s grace.

Thirdly, verse 9 says that Simon was **claiming that he was someone great**. In fact, greatness and power are something that he is very much preoccupied with. It is a desire for power that sometimes gets people into the supernatural and the paranormal.

4. The people agreed with this claim and thought that he was “the great power of God” (v. 10).

Verse 10 says that the people agreed with his claim to greatness and thought that he was **the great power of God**. Notice how they reinterpret this demonic power within their religion. It’s a fascinating thing how they can embrace the demonic while thinking they are worshipping the God of the first five books of the Bible. You see, they believed in the first five books of the Bible, but they had added all kinds of non-Biblical things into their religion. So they had some of the speech of true religion, and the power of Satan. And we can find the same thing today. Much of what goes on as authentic Christianity in America is fake. But you know, some of it is demonic. Some healings are clearly demonic, and some prophecies are clearly demonic; some tongues are clearly demonic. D James Kennedy tells about a Memory and Speed-reading consultant who worked with the Fortune 500 companies who taught people how to read a book without opening it, and how to develop phenomenal memory. He was also able to walk on coals. But here was an America so-called Christian who claimed that all of this was simply scientific powers that were being unleashed – that it wasn’t even religious. The weird thing is that when he became a true believer, he

completely and instantaneously lost his powers. He couldn't teach his seminars any more. They were demonic powers. Mark Bubeck in Iowa has had numerous cases of people who lost their power of tongues when demons were cast out. You see, Satan imitates and counterfeits everything God does. Just because a person uses religious language and calls himself a Christian does not mean that his miracles are miracles of God. We need to look at the characteristics of the person's ministry and see if they are more like Simon or more like Philip. Some counterfeits are extremely good.

5. The whole city was under his bondage and deception (v. 10)

Verse 10 indicates that the whole city was under Simon's bondage and deception. **To whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, "This man is the great power of God."** And notice in verse 11 why they believed. It wasn't his use of Scripture (even though the church fathers say that he used the Scriptures). It says, **And they heeded him because he had astonished them with his sorceries a long time.** They were impressed with the wrong things.

6. Simon himself was poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity (v. 23)

If you look at verse 23 you will see that Simon himself was in bondage. Even though he thought he was in control, he was not. He was in bondage. Peter said, **for I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity.** The demonic is a scary thing. It can poison the hearts of men, women and children and it can hold them in complete bondage to sin. Never underestimate the power of Satan.

## B. The Power of God

1. Philip too has power, but instead of preaching himself, he preached Christ (v. 5) and His Word (v. 4).

But praise the Lord, the power of God is greater. Amen? And this contrast is not simply a contrast about power, but about where it all points to. Philip too had power, but instead of preaching himself like Simon pompously did, Philip preaches Christ. He points away from himself. Verse 5 says, **Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them.** Simon is so busy preaching himself, and his power and how great he is, that he doesn't even think to point to God. But Philip's passion is to point to Jesus and to His Word. Verse 4 says, **Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word.** According to the book of Jude, this is one of the ways that we can distinguish between the true ministry of a believer and the ministry of a cult leader. He says, **These are spots in your love feasts, while they feast with you without fear, serving**

**only themselves.** (v. 12 – is this leader in it for the money – serving only himself. Jude goes on) **they mouth great swelling words, flattering people to gain advantage.** (v. 16). Is the minister self-serving and self-centered? Is he pompous or does he point to Jesus?

2. Philip too does amazing deeds, but he does them in the name of Jesus (v. 12).

Philip too does amazing deeds, but he does them in the name of Jesus, not in his own name. Verse 12 mentions that the message of the kingdom and the name of Jesus Christ are central to his ministry.

3. Philip is humble with his use of power.

Third, Philip is humble with his use of power.

4. But God's power astonishes even Simon

Fourth, God's power that was at work in Philip astonished even Simon. Verse 13 says, **Then Simon himself also believed, and when he was baptized he continued with Philip, and was amazed, seeking the miracles and signs which were done.** This implies that Philip has access to power far greater than what Simon had.

5. We need not fear Satanic power. The Holy Spirit is more powerful.

And each of these points indicate, that while we should never mess around with Satanic power, we need not fear it. Have a healthy respect, yes, but don't fear it. The Holy Spirit in this chapter is far more powerful. From verse 7 (where demons leave with a loud shriek), and on through to Simon's recognition that Philip had something that he did not have, it is clear that the power of the Holy Spirit is far greater. He is greater than witchcraft. He is greater than sorcery. He is greater than anything that Satan may throw at us. Perhaps you have loved ones who are held in absolute bondage by Satan. It may not be sorcery. Their bondage may be pornography, drunkenness or covetousness. Yet the Holy Spirit can free people from whatever power is presently binding them. You do not need to be afraid of demons. Athanasius and many other church fathers in the first few centuries point out how the cross of Jesus Christ cast out demons in their own day, and made demons flee and tremble with fear. What a contrast that this chapter presents in powers.

I found it interesting when I was reading in the church fathers about Simon the sorcerer, that Peter had two more confrontations with this man that showed the superiority of God over Satan. The last one is so cool that I thought I would share it with you. People were leaving Simon, and he claimed to have the same power as Jesus. But any time Peter was around, his miracles got messed up. Finally he decided to have a showdown. He actually

had his disciples dig a grave for him, he got in, told them to bury him, and that he would rise in three days. And that was the last they saw of Simon. What a great contrast. Only Jesus has power over death. Amen?

## II. A contrast in professions (vv. 12-13)

A. What kind of faith did Simon have (v. 13)? Was it a saving faith, or a dead faith?

But a second contrast that we see in this chapter is a contrast in professions of faith. It was not just the *power* that was counterfeit; his *faith* was counterfeit as well. And because some people do not recognize that there can be counterfeit faith, they have stumbled over verse 13. Verse 13 makes it clear that Simon believed. He did. So they conclude that Simon lost his salvation, or just as wrongly, they conclude that true believers can be in total bondage to Satan. Verse 13 says, **Then Simon himself also believed; and when he was baptized he continued with Philip...**

The question is: “What kind of faith did Simon have? Was it a saving faith or a dead faith?” James chapter 2 talks about people who do believe God, but they have a dead faith; a non-saving faith. James says, the demons believe there is one God, and they tremble. That’s how strong their belief in God is – it makes them tremble. But it is not a saving faith. Turn to John 2:23-25. I want to give a few Scriptures that show that it is possible for people to believe in Jesus, yet not believe savingly. These people are convinced that He is the Messiah. John 2 beginning at verse 23. **Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed [that’s the Greek word pisteuo. “Many believed”] in His name when they saw the signs which He did. But Jesus did not commit Himself to them. [that’s the same Greek word pisteuo. Jesus did not believe in them. And He gives the reason He didn’t believe or trust them:] because He knew all men, and had no need that anyone should testify of man, for He knew what was in man.** Philip couldn’t read men’s hearts, so he took profession of faith at face value. That’s all that we can do. And that means that this church will have people who profess faith, but whom Jesus will not commit Himself to, because He knows their hearts. There will always be tares among the wheat. Tares look very much like wheat, but according to Jesus Satan sows them. They are counterfeit.

Turn to Luke 8:13. This is Christ’s explanation of the parable of the sower. There are various types of people that are described in this parable, but verse 13 describes people who believe certain facts, but the faith has not changed them. It says, **But the ones on the rock are those who, when they**

**hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, who believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away.** Notice that phrase, “who believe for a while.” They do have a kind of faith, but it is not a saving faith. 1 John 2:19 says, **“They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but *they went out* that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us.”** In other words, John is saying that those who do not persevere were never truly changed in the first place; they were not of us.

Turn to Matthew 7:21-23. This is a passage where people are willing to even call Jesus Lord, but who are not saved. It says, **Not everyone who says to Me, “Lord, Lord,” shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.’** Notice that He didn’t say that He knew once, but now He doesn’t know them anymore. He says, “I *never* knew you.” This means that they did not lose their salvation. Though they believed in Jesus, their faith was a dead faith that did not produce any fruit.

A. W Pink, in his book, *Studies on Saving Faith*, wrote,

“It is impossible to say how far a non-saving faith may go, and how very closely it may resemble that faith which is saving. Saving faith has Christ for its object; so has non-saving faith (John 2:23,24). Saving faith is wrought by the Holy Spirit; so also is a non-saving faith (Heb. 6:4). Saving faith is produced by the Word of God; so also is a non-saving (Matt. 13:20,21). Saving faith will make a man prepare for the coming of the Lord, so also will a non-saving: of both the foolish and wise virgins it is written. “then *all* those virgins arose, and *trimmed* their lamps” (Matt 25:7). Saving faith is accompanied with joy; so also is a non-saving (Matt. 13:20).

Perhaps some readers are ready to say, all of this is very unsettling, and if really heeded, most distressing. May God in His mercy grant that this article may have these very effects on many who read it. O if you value your soul, dismiss it not lightly.”

And I would say “Amen.” This is why Paul told the Corinthians, **Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves.** (2 Cor. 13:5). There are many who profess faith within churches who do not have the life of God within them. They have a counterfeit faith. O, certainly, they believe that Jesus died, was raised and is seated at the right hand of God, but all they have is a mental assent without a heart dependence upon God. The



devil believes that doctrine too. And this historical belief has no more effect upon their lives than their belief that George Washington crossed the Delaware does. They may pray to Him for their finances when things are going bad, much like I put this wallet on this chair, but they do not lean on God for all that they do. They may pray that God would protect their house and their vehicle, much like I put my keys on this chair. And that is good, but they are not stewards of their house or vehicle, nor is God their trust during 98% of the times that they use house and car. They pray at meals, but do not really have this deep-seated sense of dependence on God for life, breath and for all things. It is quite different to put parts of your life upon Jesus Christ, and to commit your entire life upon the Lord. [*sit*] Just as two keys can look very much alike, there are many forms of faith that look like saving faith, but are not. And some of these people are able to convince other believers that they are truly a believer just like Judas convinced the other eleven apostles that he was a true blue disciple, and like Simon convinced Philip that he was the real thing. In Mark 10:27 Jesus said that it is impossible for man to savingly believe on his own. *Impossible*. But praise God, he went on to say, “**with men it is impossible, but not with God; for with God all things are possible.** We can test the reality of our faith by the fruit that this faith produces. The passages we read from Matthew 7 and James indicate that saving faith always produces good works. There is a world of difference between faith-works and religionist-works. Religionists works seeks to earn God’s favor by our works whereas faith works obeys out of a confidence in God’s favor. True faith is willing to be tested by trials, whereas non-saving faith falls away under trials. Saving faith continues to grow in its victory over sin and the world whereas counterfeit faith is content to remain the same. Saving faith drives us ever deeper in our dependence upon the Lord whereas non-saving faith is content to avoid God’s judgment if it can. Saving faith is able to find joy in adversity whereas non-saving faith withers under adversity. True saving faith looks more to the giver than the gift, whereas non-saving faith is more concerned about the gift that God gives than he is about the Giver. True saving faith is ever more humbled with our own unworthiness whereas non-saving faith is proud and satisfied.

Let’s look at the contrast in professions of faith. At the time of the Reformation, all Reformers agreed that saving faith has at least three elements: *notitia* (which is knowledge or belief in the facts), *assensus* (which is whole hearted assent to and agreement with the Word; it’s an endorsement of the word) and *fiducia* (which is trust and a willingness to follow the Word).

B. The multitudes had a genuine spiritual conversion (v. 6,12,14)

1. The multitudes had all three dimensions of saving faith

a) **Notitia** (knowledge or belief in the facts – “believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ” v 12)

The multitudes had all three dimensions of faith. Let’s look at them. Verse 12 says, **But when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ.** They had facts that they believed to be facts. In fact, you are not treating it be a fact unless you treat it as true. But I want you to notice that Simon had notitia too. Verse 13 says, **Then Simon himself *also* believed...** The word “also” implies that Simon had this notitia. He believed the same facts. I don’t think that we can question that.

b) **Assensus** (assent to or agreement with the Word “were baptized” v 12; “received the Word” v 14)

A second component of saving faith that the crowds had was assensus. In other words, they were in agreement with the facts, or they endorsed the facts. And you might wonder, “What is the difference between notitia and assensus then?” Well, let me explain it this way: You could know the facts to be true and believe them to be true, but hate the facts and fight against them. The demons have notitia – they believe that there is one God, but they sure don’t assent to that fact. They sure don’t receive it with joy. Yet verse 14 says that the multitudes **received the word of God.** They welcomed it; they agreed with it; they endorsed it. And baptism was a sign of their assent; it was a sign of their endorsement. So verse 12 describes not only notitia – believing the facts, but also receiving the word and receiving baptism as a result of that assent. Notice that Simon is also baptized in verse 13 and that he continues in this agreement with the Word for at least a period of time. It says, **and when he was baptized he continued with Philip...** So even Simon has assensus.

c) **Fiducia** (trust and willingness to follow – “heeded the things spoken” [or “devoted themselves to the things spoken” v. 6)

The third element of saving faith that we see in the crowds is fiducia. Fiducia is a trust and a willingness to follow. Verse 6 says **And the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken...** The word for “to heed” is a strong word. It means to devote yourself to; to be completely committed to. And so this speaks of trust. And there was a contrast in what they trusted before and after their conversion. Verse 10 describes where their trust was before their conversion. It says **they heeded *him*** [that is, Simon]

because *he* had astonished them with *his* sorceries for a long time. Their trust was in a person. But now, their trust is not in Philip or any other person. Their trust is in the Word of God. They heeded the things spoken.

Simon was not that way. In verse 18 we see that he put far too much trust in what money could buy. IN verse 19 we see his trust in power. In verse 24, he puts a temporary trust in Peter to keep harm away from him. He could have gone directly to the Lord in repentance and faith, but he turns to the most tangible and powerful thing that he can see, and he sees Peter. But Peter knows he has no power in himself, and so even Simon's so-called prayer of repentance shows a lack of trust in God in verse 24. He is trusting Peter to pray for him and to bail him out. What makes Simon's profession such a clever counterfeit is that it has the first two elements of saving faith, and only lacks fiducia.

2. They received the Word of God (v. 14)

C. Simon appears to have had a temporary counterfeit conversion (vv. 13,18-23)

1. Simon lacked elements of saving faith

a) **He had notitia** (knowledge or belief in the facts – “Simon himself *also* believed” v 12)

b) **He may have even had assensus** (assent to or agreement with the Word “was baptized” v 13)

c) **But he lacked fiducia** (trust and willingness to follow – vv. 23-24)

2. Peter said that he would perish (v. 20) because he had no part or portion (v. 21a), nor was his heart right (v. 21b)

A second indication that Simon's conversion was what Martyn Lloyd Jones calls a psychological conversion rather than a spiritual conversion is Peter's curse in verse 20. **But Peter said to him, “Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money!** The grammar shows that Peter is calling upon both Simon and his money to perish. Some interpret this that Peter was simply condemning Simon to physical death, but that his soul was saved. Others say that the word is equivalent to consigning him to hell – eternal perishing. In fact, there are a couple of versions that translate it as “may you and your money be sent to hell.” One has, “to hell with you and your money.” It is kind of an irreverent translation, but they are trying to capture the meaning of this word. The UBS dictionary defines this word as “*utter ruin* [or] *hell*.” Either definition seems to be more than simply the loving discipline of the Lord. Utter ruin or hell. It's not a solid proof that Simon was not saved, but it is strong enough that it has convinced me. If Peter were simply consigning

Simon to physical death, then you would expect that Simon would have died immediately like Ananias and Sapphira did. Yet Justyn Martyr and others who knew Simon and his followers well, said that he lived for many years after this and produced a cult that was in vehement opposition to the apostles.

This conclusion is strengthened by the next verse that says **You have neither part nor portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God.** What matter is it that he has neither part nor portion in? Some say that he simply hadn't received the Spirit yet. But neither had the others, and he didn't condemn them. We will be looking in a moment for the reason why the Baptism of the Spirit was delayed for all, but for now it is enough to realize that Peter does not condemn the others because they had not received the Spirit. No. There is something more that condemns Simon to utter destruction and is explained by a heart that is not right in the sight of God. Peter is giving the reason for why he has condemned Simon to utter destruction. It wasn't because he is in the same condition as the other believers. Instead, it appears that Peter by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit knew that Simon had no portion in salvation and that his heart was not regenerate. These reasons may not convince others, but they are quite convincing to me.

3. By his fruit he can be known.

- a) He wanted additional power (v. 18-19), no doubt believing that it would advance his status in the community.

The third line of reasoning that I would use to show that Simon was not saved is that he did not show the fruits of repentance or faith. His continued search for power in verses 18-19 shows that his heart was not yet realigned from dependence on power to dependence on grace. And there are many in Christianity today who do not recognize that their preoccupation with miracles is not a preoccupation with God, but with selfishness.

- b) His heart had not been changed (v. 21)

Verse 21 says, **your heart is not right in the sight of God.** Yet Scripture indicates that a broken and a contrite heart – these O God you will not despise. If his conversion was a genuine conversion, there should have been a broken and a contrite heart that was right with God – not sinless, but cleansed, right, realigned to God.

- c) He had no evangelical repentance (v. 22)

Third, verse 22 implies that he had no evangelical repentance. **Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you.** I am not saying that believers do not

need to repeatedly repent. They do. But 1 John makes it clear that when believers confess their sins God is faithful and just to forgive them their sins and to cleanse them from all unrighteousness. There wouldn't be any perhaps. Forgiveness is guaranteed. Scripture assures us that believers will indeed persevere until the end. In contrast, Peter here says, "*if perhaps* the thought of your heart may be forgiven you," or as some translate it: "if possible." This implies that he is not in a state of grace, and repentance and forgiveness are not a foregone conclusion.

d) He continued to be in poisoned by bitterness (v. 23)

Verse 23 is further evidence that his heart had not been washed in the water of regeneration. Peter says, **For I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity.** Though Christians too can be defiled by bitterness and find themselves once again in the snare of the evil one, this description seems to characterize the whole of Simon. You – your person is poisoned and bound. That does not seem consistent with a regenerate state.

e) He continued to be in bondage to sin (v. 23)

f) He was more concerned about punishment than he was about salvation from sin (v. 24)

Sixth, the supposed repentance of Simon in verse 24 does not even remotely resemble true repentance. **Then Simon answered and said, "Pray to the Lord for me, that none of the things which you have spoken may come upon me."** I hear these kinds of prayers frequently from people who have no intention of leaving their sin. Their concern is not with the horribleness of the poison and the bondage of sin. Their concern is to escape from hell and to escape from punishment and to escape from the consequences of sin. Genuine conversion is focused on God's glory and the heinousness of our sin. Nobody wants to burn in hell. That doesn't show that your heart has been changed. What shows regeneration is a new sensitivity to sin and to God and a desire to be holy. They aren't perfect, but Jesus says that they hunger and thirst after righteousness. They hate sin. And they don't just hate sin in general, but hate each specific sin in particular as God's spirit convicts them. But the main points that I am making in verse 24 are that it isn't a prayer made to God – it is made to Peter; it isn't a prayer of repentance. It is simply a prayer that is seeking to avoid a curse.

g) He continued to admire power (vv. 13,18-19) and/or to fear power (and punishment) than he was to fear sin (v. 24)

The seventh fruit that I would judge is his continued preoccupation with power. And for all of these reasons I see a major contrast in professions of faith. It is no wonder to me that early church fathers record that Simon

went away from this experience hating Peter and resisting apostolic ministry. Luke does not contain that information – probably because God wants us to focus on the contrast of professions, not the end result. But, let me ask you: “Which profession of faith does yours look like?” Paul said, **Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves.** It’s important that we not deceive our own hearts with our own clever counterfeits. We need to desire the real thing.

### III.A contrast in possessions (vv. 14-25)

#### A. Believers

##### 1. Possessed the Word (v. 14)

The last contrast that I want to highlight is a contrast in possessions. Both of these kinds of Christians did have some spiritual possessions. Hebrews 6:4-5 speaks of people who are unsaved and going to hell, and yet it says that they were in the church. It says they **were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come...** They experienced miracles, Holy Communion, they have been enjoying the word, and yet they were not true believers. They were clever, clever counterfeits. And so let’s look at the contrast of possessions.

Both the true believers and Simon possessed the Word of God, but the possession transformed the true believers; it did nothing for Simon. The Word of God is an incredible treasure, but not all people treasure the Word of God as they should. To treasure the word you need to believe it, receive it and heed it (that’s notitia, assensus and fiducia). Do you simply possess the Word, or do you treasure it. This is one of many differences between true and counterfeit religion. 1 Peter 2:2 says that just as newborn babies hunger for mother’s milk, those who are regenerate should hunger for the Word of God. You are either sick or dead if you don’t hunger for it. It’s not enough to have it as a possession. The question is, What do you do with the possession of the Word of God? The true believers heeded it. They were devoted to it.

##### 2. Possessed baptism (v. 16)

Secondly, they both possessed water baptism. And I think that the word “only” in verse 16 is significant. **They had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.** That is not minimizing the importance of baptism. Baptism is a wonderful possession. But false believers can possess baptism too. It takes more than baptism to distinguish a Simon from a true believer. The larger catechism says that it is not enough to trust your possession of baptism. Larger Catechism 165 says that baptism not only admits to the church but “into an open and professed engagement to be wholly and only

the Lord's." Are we living out our baptism? Catechism 167 says, "The needful but much neglected duty of improving our baptism, is to be performed by us all our life long, especially in the time of temptation, and when we are present at the administration of it to others; [and it goes on to explain how we improve on our baptism] by serious and thankful consideration of the nature of it, and of the ends for which Christ instituted it, the privileges and benefits conferred and sealed thereby, and our solemn vow made therein; by being humbled for our sinful defilement, our falling short of, and walking contrary to, the grace of baptism, and our engagements; by growing up to assurance of pardon of sin, and of all other blessings sealed to us in that sacrament; by drawing strength from the death and resurrection of Christ, into whom we are baptized, for the mortifying of sin, and quickening grace; and by endeavoring to live by faith, to have our conversation in holiness and righteousness, as those that have therein given up their names to Christ; and to walk in brotherly love, as being baptized by the same Spirit into one body." Now that's a mouthful. But the question is: "Have you improved your baptism?" If not, it is only a possession that will condemn you.

### 3. Possessed the Spirit (v. 15-17) as the "gift of God" (v. 20)

But now comes some indications of where the differences really begin to come out between these two kinds of Christian. The saints get baptized by the Holy Spirit. And the fact that Simon was watching this happen may imply that he was not so baptized. Look at verses 15-17

**Acts 8:15 who, when they had come down, prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit.**

**Acts 8:16 For as yet He had fallen upon none of them. They had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.**

**Acts 8:17 Then they laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.**

Contrast this with verse 20.

**Acts 8:20 ¶ But Peter said to him, "Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money!"**

This gift of God is perhaps the greatest gift of God that we could receive, because through the Holy Spirit we have the power we need to live the Christian life. But this passage has confused many people. If they believed, why hadn't they received the Holy Spirit yet? Is it a paradigm that Christians always receive the Spirit as a second work of grace much later? Can only apostles or other officers confer the Holy Spirit? What's going on here? I agree with most commentators in saying that this is not God's normal

pattern. Instead, God was doing something unusual in order to include Samaritans in the church. When you understand the division that existed between Jews and Samaritans you quickly realize that the church would not have accepted the Samaritans under any circumstances unless the apostles admitted them and unless the Lord Jesus made it clear.

We have already seen that the Lord ordained that the church would be built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone. Whom they admitted would be admitted and whom they bound would be bound. The only way that Samaritans (and later, the Gentiles) could be included in the church is if the apostles admitted them, there was prophetic confirmation and Jesus Himself gave a sign of His acceptance. So God has everyone wait until the apostles can come to admit them. Both Peter and John come as a double witness. The Spirit is visibly poured out as a sign that Jesus has expanded the boundaries of the church. And when I say that it was visible, verse 18 says that Simon *saw* that the Spirit was given. It was probably something similar to Pentecost. And this outward manifestation of the giving of the Spirit happens four times under the authority of the apostles. Acts 2 at Pentecost; Acts 8 at Samaria – the half-breeds. Acts 10 with Cornelius the Roman and his Gentile relatives; Acts 19, with Old Testament saints who were disciples through the baptism of John.

But other than those four groups who needed special approval to be added to the church, ordinarily the Spirit is given the moment people are converted. And you can see that in Peter's promise in Acts 2. That's God's ordinary paradigm. Now, can God give the baptism of the Holy Spirit to people at a later time? I guess He can do anything He wants to do. But the ordinary pattern in the New Testament is to receive the Spirit when we come to Christ. So the believers possessed the Spirit. Simon did not.

4. Possessed liberty from sin and Satan (v. 7)

5. Possessed joy (v. 8)

The fourth and fifth things they possessed were liberty and joy. Verses 7-8.

**Acts 8:7 For unclean spirits, crying with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed; and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed.**

**Acts 8:8 And there was great joy in that city.**

Contrast this liberty and joy with the bondage, bitterness and fear of Simon. Verse 23 says, “**For I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity.**” Verse 24 shows fear of Peter. Again, this is an enormous contrast. And it is no wonder to me that Peter says, “**You have**



**neither part nor portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God.**” Membership in the church does not guarantee you liberty, joy and power. Only God can provide such, and we need to turn to the Lord for those refreshing streams of water. And so, what you possess is an important question, but even more important are the indicators of how you are using your possessions.

#### B. Simon

1. Possessed the Word (vv. 13,14)
2. Possessed baptism (v. 13)
3. Witnessed the possession of the Spirit by others (v. 18 – “saw”)
4. Had no part in salvation, Spirit or membership (v. 21)
5. Had no repentance or forgiveness (v. 22)
6. Possessed poison, bitterness, bondage and iniquity (v. 23)
7. Possessed fear of judgment, not hatred for sin (v. 24)

#### IV. The Spread of God’s power and grace (v. 25)

Nothing more is said about Simon in this book because God’s focus is on the real thing, not on the counterfeit. If you handle real money long enough, you can recognize it. I learned how to recognize counterfeit Chinese money pretty quickly after that scene. And so the apostle’s ministry is on the positive, and the account abruptly ends and goes on to describe their ongoing ministry beyond the Jews. Verse 25: **“So when they had testified and preached the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many villages of the Samaritans.”** And I would encourage us to not get hung up on whether we are true believers by looking at the negative. Instead, focus on Christ’s grace and ministering to Him, and you will find that your assurance of salvation will grow more and more. One of the big mistakes that I made in my younger years when I doubted my salvation was to examine my faith and repentance in the past and wonder if I had really believed rightly back then, rather than looking to Christ right now. And Satan loves it when you do this because he is subtly taking your eyes off of Christ and placing your eyes on your past. It is making you have faith in your faith rather than faith in Christ. And so, after a sermon like this, let the sermon drive you to the Lord Jesus rather than driving you to look at your past faith. Constantly focus on Christ. Faith is an ongoing virtue that depends upon Christ right now for security, for strength, for joy, for ministry for everything that we do. And so look to Jesus who is the author and the finisher of your faith. Commit your life to Him and serve Him out of joy. Amen.