

Sermon outline and notes © Dr. Stephen Felker, Pastor  
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18510 Branders Bridge Rd., Colonial Heights, VA 23834  
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## Acts 8:9-24 “Self-serving Religion”

Intro. In our last message we learned about the great awakening that took place in a city of Samaria. Philip was used of God to take the gospel to that city. As he was faithful to share the good news about Jesus Christ, God blessed by convicting many men and women of their sins and need to believe in Jesus as the Messiah God sent to save us. It seemed that the whole city was turning to Christ. What a great working of the Spirit that was! Wouldn't it be great if that happened in our city?

But in the midst of such a positive working of God's grace, we find a sad occurrence. Up to this time a man named Simon had been the spiritual leader of Samaria. He used sorcery or magic to convince the people that he was some great one, who could use the great power of God to benefit people. He had the people of Samaria eating out of his hand, so to speak. But Philip came along, and worked even greater miracles by the power of the true God, and the people turned to Philip, and to the Messiah Philip preached about. Simon did not have much choice but to join the crowd and profess to become a Christian as well. I use the word “profess” deliberately, because as we shall see, that's all it was, a profession. So once again, Satan sought to do his destructive work *from within* the church. Persecution from without was not hurting the church. It was only causing the church to grow and expand to new areas.

Now I believe that this story has been included in Acts by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to serve as a warning to us. So my main purpose this morning is to see how Simon provides for us a negative example of what we should avoid in our own lives. God does not want you and I to make the same mistakes that Simon made. I hope you will examine your own faith and commitment to the Lord in light of what we learn from Simon.

Now let me share with you a few problems that we should avoid based on Simon's bad example:

### I. BEWARE OF AN INADEQUATE FAITH

In vv.12-13 we read, “But when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized. Then Simon himself also believed; and when he was baptized he continued with Philip....” V.13 says that Simon believed also. But what kind of faith did he have? After all, the Bible talks about different kinds of faith. For example, James 2:20 says that “faith without works is dead....” Well the context makes it clear that Simon's faith was not saving faith. In v.20 we see that Peter implied that Simon was still on his way to hell (lit. to destruction). Clearly there was something seriously lacking in Simon's faith. He is an example of the fact that not all who profess faith in Christ are true believers. So his profession of faith illustrates two aspects of inadequate faith:

A. A Faith that Is Void of Repentance – The Bible teaches that one condition of salvation is repentance, which is a change of mind that leads to a change of life in conformity to the will of God. The Bible is abundantly clear regarding the necessity of repentance. John the Baptist preached repentance (Mt. 3:2, 8). Jesus preached repentance (Mt. 4:17; 9:13; Luke 13:3, 5). Peter had

preached repentance (Acts 2:38; 3:19). Paul preached repentance (Acts 17:30; 20:21, etc.). You can't be saved on your terms. You must come to God on *His* terms. And He requires that you be willing to turn from your sins as a condition of receiving His forgiveness. So after Peter realized that Simon was probably not saved, we see in v.22 that he commanded him to repent. And as we can see from v.23, Peter perceived that Simon was still in the bondage of sin. That is the nature of the unbeliever. Paul said in Rom. 6:17 that they were "slaves of sin" before they came to Christ. Until Christ sets you free, you will find that it is impossible to overcome certain sins in your life.

Simon was still plagued with the sins of the old life. Here in the text we see that he had not changed; he was the same old Simon. So after he had committed a great sin, and after Peter had advised him to repent (v.22), what did he do? He *still* showed no sense of sin or repentance. All that he wished was "that none of the things which you have spoken may come upon me" (v.24b).

There are many people like Simon who don't want to suffer the consequences of their sin. No one wants to go to hell, and many hope that a profession of faith or some outward religious ritual will keep them out. But they do not want to repent of their sins. So as far as we know, Simon never truly repented. According to church tradition, he became a bitter enemy of the church.

Have you repented of your sins? You can't be saved apart from true repentance. Peter said in Acts 3:19, "Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out...." Too many want salvation without repentance. Yet that is impossible.

Let's see if this will help you. If you were doomed to live the same life over and over again for eternity, would you choose the life you are living now? If the answer is no, then why are you living the life you are living now? Stop making excuses, and do something about it.<sup>1</sup> A new life begins with repentance!

Another characteristic of inadequate faith is:

B. A Faith that Involves the Head, not the Heart - One can believe a great deal about Jesus Christ and God and yet not be saved. James 2:19 says, "You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble!" So we can see that there are different kinds of faith. In v.13 we see that Simon's faith was largely due to the miracles which Philip did. He no doubt believed in the power of Jesus Christ as he saw the miracles Philip was performing. He knew they were superior to his own tricks and so-called miracles. No doubt Philip attributed the miracles to the power of Jesus. But in Jn. 2:23-24 we see that Jesus did not put much confidence in those who professed faith just because they saw His miracles. Of course, miracles were meant to lead to faith; but if they did not lead on to a deeper sense of one's own sin and need, and also to a spiritual understanding of who Jesus really is, then they were of no use.

But in contrast with that kind of faith, we see from v.12 that many of the Samaritans "believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ...." Rom. 10:17 says, "So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God." They heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and believed the message of salvation. They placed their faith in Jesus Christ, relying wholly upon Him for the forgiveness of sin. They understood that Christ had come to establish the kingdom of God in the hearts of men. So they surrendered to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. That's real faith. This is the kind of faith which cleanses the heart. So if your faith does not lead to love and self-surrender, and thus to good works, then your faith is a mere head knowledge, and not true faith.

I am afraid there are many people like Simon, who have given intellectual assent to the truths of God's Word, but have never truly been saved. They have prayed a prayer, signed a card,

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<sup>1</sup> William Alexander, *The \$64 Tomato in Christianity Today*, October 2008, p. 96 [Illus.#C-1937]

and even been baptized, but have not been born again. What about you? Are you sure that you have truly repented of your sins and believed in Christ with all your heart? After all, Paul wrote in 2 Cor. 13:5, “Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves....” Have you truly repented of your sins? Have you truly believed? Has saving faith manifested itself in your life with a change of life, including good works? We see in v.17 that one evidence of true conversion is some indication of the presence of the Holy Spirit (vv.14-17; Rom. 8:9). He causes us to be born again and experience a changed life (Rom. 8:4; 2 Cor. 5:17). He bears spiritual fruit in our lives, such as love, joy, and peace (Gal. 5:22-23). He leads us (Rom. 8:14) and gives assurance of salvation (Rom. 8:16). So if you cannot identify evidence of the Holy Spirit in your life, you need to make sure of your repentance and faith, because it is probably lacking.

## II. WATCH OUT FOR WRONG MOTIVES

I have entitled my message, “Self-serving Religion.” People often get involved in religions for the wrong reasons. Simon was certainly an example of this. So I want you to examine your motives regarding your faith and religious practices.

A. You Can Have Wrong Motives for Being Baptized – In v.13 we read, “Then Simon himself also believed; and when he was baptized....” How exciting it must have been to see *even Simon* get baptized! That would be like some local cult leader being baptized and joining our church.

But why did Simon receive baptism? Being baptized was the “in” thing at the time and Simon did not want to be left out. And as we shall see, he had his own selfish plans for his new-found religion. He wasn’t being baptized because it was a step of obedience to God, or because it was an expression of his death to his old way of life. He had other reasons for being baptized.

Even so, some business men today unite with large, prominent churches and hobnob with well-known church members—not because they love Jesus or know His saving power, but for the social and business advantages. Some husbands get baptized and join the church just to make the wife happy and obtain some peace in the home. Some are baptized just because their brother, or sister, or friend has been baptized. Some children want to be baptized just so they can take the Lord’s Supper! Some even think that baptism in and of itself will wash away their sins and lead to eternal life. But baptism is for true believers only. It is a very important step of obedience, giving evidence that a person has accepted Jesus as Lord as well as Savior.

Simon also teaches us that:

B. You Can Have Wrong Motives for Discipleship – The last of v.13 says that Simon “continued with Philip.” The Greek (*proskartereo*) indicates that he devoted himself to following Philip, and learning from him. It was the same word used of devoted discipleship in Acts 2:42. He stayed close by Philip as much as he could.

But why did he become a disciple of Philip? It was not to become more Christ-like, but to improve His abilities in performing miracles and magic. The word translated “seeing” (*theoreo*) in v.13 refers to a careful examination. Simon wanted to learn the “secret” of these miracles.

You’ve probably seen a magic show. After he does a good trick, you wonder, “How did he do that?” You know it’s not real magic, but a slight of hand trick. Well Simon was a magician of sorts. As we see from v.11, he practiced the age-old art of sorcery. The sorcerer either learned how to have special powers and abilities by demonic power, or by sheer trickery. The key is to know the

secret incantation or trick. So Simon believed that Philip was an even better sorcerer, and so he wanted to become Philip's disciple, and learn how to do similar miracles.

Most of you are active church members. Many of you could be considered practicing disciples. I ask you, "Why? What are you after? What is your motivation?" Are you just looking for social contacts? Are you looking for entertainment? Are you hoping to obtain health, wealth, and prosperity? Or are you primarily wanting to please God, and become more and more like Christ?

C. You Can Have Wrong Motives for Desiring Christian Leadership – Up to this time, Simon had been the most prominent spiritual leader in Samaria. As v.10 says of him, "to whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, 'This man is the great power of God.'" Well after his so-called conversion, I'm sure he expected to make a quick transition to spiritual leadership in the new Christian church. He became Philip's devoted disciple, and he assumed that he would take over as soon as Philip moved on.

But something happened that changed that. Peter and John arrived on the scene to help out the new believers in Samaria and confirm them in the faith. They found out that they had not yet received the Holy Spirit, which was unusual. There was a special reason for this. God wanted the Church in Samaria and the Church in Jerusalem to overcome past animosity and be in fellowship with one another, so He withheld His Spirit on this occasion so that the apostles would see for themselves that He had received the Samaritans, and therefore *they* should receive the Samaritans. Today we need to overcome cultural, monetary, generational and ethnic differences and become a united body of believers in Christ.

Now when Simon saw them lay their hands on the believers with such marvelous results, he felt he was getting near to the heart of this new religion. The latest phenomenon was obviously associated with the imposition of hands. So Luke says in the last of v.18 that "he offered them money, saying, 'Give me this power also, that anyone on whom I lay hands may receive the Holy Spirit.'" In v.19 "power" is more correctly translated "authority." The main thing he was after was to become the human channel through whom the blessing of the Spirit would be received. This would clearly make him one of the main spiritual leaders in Samaria, and could lead to his enrichment.

We also should apply this to the majority in the church who are not leaders but who are led. You need to be careful about following self-appointed spiritual leaders like Simon. He had two underlying motives for desiring to become a Christian leader that should raise red flags about such leaders:

1. The Love of Money - Up to this point Simon used sorcery to bring him great wealth. He was the leading religious leader in Samaria, and he had become quite wealthy as a result. But he was losing a big following when many turned to Christ. His offerings were way down. So he joined up with the Christian movement. And he must have felt that with the power of this new religion, he could become even wealthier. So again, notice what we read in vv.18-19, "when Simon saw that through the laying on of the apostles' hands the Holy Spirit was given, he offered them money [or riches-*chrema*], saying, 'Give me this power also....'" He was willing to pay dearly, not only for the ability to grant the Spirit, but also for the authority to sell this ability to others. After all, what can be bought for money can also be sold for money!

Simon was one of the first so-called Christian leaders who wanted to become a Christian leader for the wrong reasons. A few of these modern-day preachers have been exposed with fraudulent miracles, and with living in great wealth. You need to be careful about who you listen to and follow.

2. The Love of Prestige and Power – Notice that Simon wanted that “anyone on whom I lay hands may receive the Holy Spirit.” He wanted the people to look to *him* for such blessings. Simon regards what is sacred and spiritual purely as part of his stock-in-trade, contributing to his prestige.

Are you a Christian leader? If so, why are you a leader? Are you a leader because you want to please God, and help lead the church to fulfill our mission? I suppose that only paid staff could be doing it for the money. But you lay leaders, are you interested in the prestige, the position, and the power of leadership? What is your motivation? I hope you are not like Simon.

### III. AVOID HAVING A WRONG UNDERSTANDING

Simon demonstrated that he had a wrong understanding about several things. Notice in v.20 that Peter said to him, “You thought....” It is clear that he thought wrong! And you need to know that right thinking leads to right living, and wrong thinking leads to wrong living. It is very important that you learn the truth about God, and the teachings of His Word. Paul said in Rom. 12:2 that you should be “transformed by the renewing of your mind.” Now Simon had some wrong thinking about several things:

A. Spiritual Blessings Cannot be Bought – In v.20 Peter said to him, “Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money!” He was talking here about the gift of the Holy Spirit but that statement applies to other gifts of God. So Simon betrays a total ignorance of what Christianity is all about. Money can buy diamonds, but not salvation. Romans 6:23 says, “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Eph. 2:8-9 says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.” Wisdom is also a gift from God, available to those who ask (James 1:5). Other spiritual blessings such as spiritual gifts are given by God’s gracious hand and according to His own sovereign purpose (1 Cor. 12:11). They certainly can’t be bought.

We appreciate your offerings to the church. You are supporting a good work. But don’t think that by giving hundreds or even thousands of dollars to the church you will buy any special favors with God!

B. Spiritual Blessings Cannot be Manipulated by Man – Keep in mind that Simon was a sorcerer. And the underlying belief of sorcery is that everything, including God Himself, is subject to certain spiritual laws. Anyone who knows how to manipulate the laws of the universe can get what he wants. And so Simon approached Christianity the same way. He supposed that the blessings of God could be received just by knowing the right formula, or having the right connections. But Peter understood that he could not manipulate the power of God. The giving of the Spirit by the laying on of hands was the gift of God. He knew that there was no ritual, formula, recited prayer, or demand that anyone could use to bring about a miracle; it must be by grace, and by the sovereign will of God.

And then, when Simon needed forgiveness for his sin, Peter advised him in v.22 to ask the Lord for forgiveness. And what did Simon do? In v.24 we see that he accredited Peter with power, and asked *him* to pray for him, as if the Apostle’s prayer would have some special access to God which his, though he were penitent, could not have. He still just doesn’t get it!

There are some people who think that holding prayer beads will somehow make your prayers more effective. There is no Scriptural authority for that practice. Or certain TV evangelists will offer to send prayer cloths or holy water if you send in a donation. These practices are closer to the practices of sorcery than Christianity. Don't fall for such things.

C. Spiritual Leadership Cannot Be Bought – Beginning the last of v.18 we read that “he offered them money, saying, ‘Give me this power also, that anyone on whom I lay hands may receive the Holy Spirit.’” Then in v.20 Peter said to him, “Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money!” He wanted to have the same authority and standing as the apostles, yet Peter perceived by his actions that he was not even a true believer! Simony is said to be the securing of ecclesiastical promotion by purchase. When this is practiced, priesthood is exalted; the universal Christian prerogative of individual access to God is obscured; and Christianity is turned into a kind of magic.

One lesson we need to draw from this story is this: Just because you are a leader in one realm of life does not qualify you to be a leader in the Christian church. For example, just because you are a leader in a business, or a leader in a secular club, that does not mean that you should be a leader in a church. Why? It is because leadership in the Christian church first requires a true salvation experience. It also requires Christian maturity and proven character (1 Timothy 3:1-12). A right heart in the sight of God is the indispensable qualification for all spiritual power or leadership. Pastoral leadership also requires a recognition of a special call from God and certain gifts for ministry, including the gift of teaching (1 Tim. 3:2; 2 Tim. 2:24).

D. Don't Mix Christianity and Pagan Religion - Simon was probably a Samaritan<sup>2</sup>, or perhaps a Jew, who prostituted his religious heritage for personal ends, having tacked on to it some theosophical rubbish which he learned from Alexandria, or mysticism or magic arts which had filtered in from the East. And after professing faith in Christ, he wanted to keep what he thought was the best of his old religion, and add to it whatever was useful of Christianity.

Throughout the history of Christianity, this abominable practice has been repeated. The Church became corrupt through the Middle Ages because they tried to mix pagan religion and Christianity. And don't try to mix Christianity with modern day philosophies and viewpoints. I see too much of this, even among modern evangelicals. Trust wholly in the Lord, and follow His Word.

Conclusion: Once again, 2 Cor. 13:5 says, “Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves....” Are you sure that your faith is genuine? Are you sure you have truly repented of your sin? Were your motives for baptism and church membership right? If not, why not make things right with God this morning?

Sources: F.F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1954); H. Leo Eddleman, *An Exegetical and Practical Commentary on Acts* (Dallas: Books of Life Publishers, 1974); Ajith Fernando, *The NIV Application Commentary: Acts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998); Oliver B. Greene, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Vol. 1 (Greenville, SC: The Gospel Hour, Inc., 1968); Everett F. Harrison, *Acts: The Expanding Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975); Dave Hunt & T.A. McMahon, *The Seduction of Christianity* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House, 1985), 105-121; H.A. Ironside, *Acts* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers 1943); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 11 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 4 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible [CD-ROM]* (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); W.H. Griffith Thomas, *Outline Studies in Acts* (Grand Rapids:

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<sup>2</sup> According to the Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions and Homilies* Simon was a Samaritan, and a native of Gitta.

Eerdman's Publishing Co., 1956); Curtis Vaughan, *Acts: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977); Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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