

Acts Series #9 - “Simony” Acts 8:9-24

I. INTRODUCTION

A. *The Absurd*

1. There is a bi-monthly magazine for Christians called *The Door*
2. It’s full of satire and has a section toward the back of every issue called “Truth is Stranger Than Fiction”
3. This section pokes fun at some of the more absurd things that pop up from time to time in the church
4. For example:
 - a. Clubs for Christ
 - b. Soak Up the Word Christian sponges
 - c. The Prayer Toaster
 - d. I’ve got more but I’ll share them later

B. *Making A Profit*

1. All these things were devised by people as a way of making a profit off religion
 2. But this isn’t just a recent phenomena
 3. It turns out that people have tried to profit off God for centuries
- In fact, we’re going to see a well known case of that in our study today

II. TEXT

A. *Setting the Scene*

1. Before we get into the text, need to set the scene
2. Following the death of Stephen, which we covered last week, severe persecution broke out against the church
3. It was led by young Saul of Tarsus and just about completely ravished the church in Jerusalem
4. Because the persecution was so intense in the City, believers fled and went into the surrounding regions
5. One of those who fled was Philip, one of the deacons selected by the apostles to take care of the widows in the church
6. Philip went to Samaria and when he arrived there, he preached Christ to them
7. God worked mightily through him and confirmed his message with signs and wonders
8. A genuine revival broke out that swept through the city
9. Satan had held the Samaritans in darkness for a long time
10. And now that the light of the gospel of Christ had broken into that darkness, Satan was not about to take it lying down
11. V. 9 introduces his counter attack . . .

B. *Vs. 9-11*

{9} But — in contrast to the great joy of salvation that swept through the city in v. 8 — 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,

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

{11} And they heeded him because he had astonished them with his sorceries for a long time.

1. Until Philip came, the major religious leader was a guy named Simon
2. He is described here as a sorcerer and as someone able to perform miracles
3. He seemed to possess a power that the average person did not have
4. He had been around for so long, and had so often dazzled the Samaritans that his power and influence dominated the region
5. We don't know if he was merely a magician who practiced tricks and illusions—
6. Or if he was in league with the demonic realm and performed lying signs and wonders
7. Bible scholars are somewhat divided in their opinion, but I don't have a problem with understanding Simon's actions both ways
 - a. he practiced both slight of hand illusions
 - b. and he also was in league with demonic spiritual power
8. As we'll see, Simon didn't care *how* he gained and kept his influence, just so long as he did
 - a. if illusion would suffice, he'd use trickery
 - b. if some would only be swayed by the truly miraculous, he'd turn to the occult
9. Simon was good at his craft and attained a place of real power and influence in Samaria
10. But when Philip showed up, preaching and healing, and casting demons out of people left and right, Simon realized a real challenge to his position had arrived
11. Satan had tried the route of persecution in Jerusalem,. And all it had done was spread the fires of revival to other regions
12. And since Satan is a quick learner, he realized, if you can't beat 'em—join 'em

C. Vs. 12-13

{12} 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.

{13} Then Simon himself also believed; and when he was baptized he continued with Philip, and was amazed, seeing the miracles and signs which were done.

1. Baptism is the public act a person makes to declare their faith in Jesus Christ
2. Baptism doesn't save, but it is an important step of obedience Jesus calls His followers to take
3. It provides people a time and place to officially declare their faith in Christ and their desire to die to their old and life begin again with Jesus

4. So as Philip preached, and people were converted, he called them to take that first step of obedience and be baptized
5. The Samaritans responded in large numbers
6. And with them came Simon the sorcerer
7. Now, v. 13 says that Simon *also believed and was baptized*
8. Does that mean he was genuinely converted?
9. While we can't be 100% sure, I think the evidence points to the conclusion that Simon wasn't *really* converted
10. You see, he may have believed, but his belief wasn't *complete*
 - a. he may have *believed* with his *head*
 - b. but he didn't *trust* with his *heart*
 - c. his body may have been bathed by the waters of baptism
 - d. but his soul wasn't cleansed by the blood of Christ
11. The proof of that is seen by reading on
12. Once Simon made his profession of faith and joined the church, he followed Philip around
13. He was blown away by the apparent ease with which Philip affected the miraculous
14. You see, both magicians and sorcerers have to perform elaborate rituals and procedures in order to do their wonders
 - a. magicians have a lot of setup and preparation to do before they can perform their illusions
 - b. sorcerers have to follow detailed occultic spells and rituals in order to attain the help of demons
15. As Simon followed Philip around he was amazed to see how naturally and simply the power of God flowed through him
16. Simon knew how drained and exhausted he was after being used as a channel for demons
17. But Philip seemed to be empowered the more he ministered under the Holy Spirit's anointing

D. Vs. 14-17

{14} Now when the apostles who were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them,

{15} who, when they had come down, prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit.

{16} For as yet He had fallen upon none of them. They had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

{17} Then they laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

1. Word of the revival in Samaria reached the apostles back in Jerusalem
2. They realized they needed to go and check things out so they sent Peter and John
3. When they arrived, they got a complete report of what had happened, probably by Philip
4. And as Peter and John interacted with these new Samaritan believers they quickly realized that something was missing

- a. they were genuine believers all right
 - b. but there was something lacking in their experience and power
 - c. when Peter and John asked about it, they were told that the only baptism the Samaritans had received was believers or water baptism
 - d. as yet, they had not been baptized with the Holy Spirit
5. Peter and John understood the baptism of the Holy Spirit to be a normal part of the Christian life and so they laid hands on them and immediately, the Holy Spirit came on them
 - a. what the evidence of the Holy Spirit's coming was we aren't told
 - b. but whatever it was, it was evident to all that a new dimension of God's work had begun in them
 6. We'll talk about why it took Peter and John to affect the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Samaritans on Wednesday
 7. What we want to focus on this morning is Simon's reaction to all this . . .

E. Vs. 18- 24

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

{19} saying, "Give me this power also, that anyone on whom I lay hands may receive the Holy Spirit."

{20} But Peter said to him, "Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money!"

{21} "You have neither part nor portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God."

{22} "Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you."

{23} "For I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity."

{24} Then Simon answered and said, "Pray to the Lord for me, that none of the things which you have spoken may come upon me."

1. Here is the proof, I think, that Simon was no true believer
2. He completely misunderstood the grace of God and thought he could buy his way into the things of God's Kingdom
3. And then, when he is rebuked by Peter, rather than asking for his heart to be changed, he only tries to get out of the threat of judgment Peter has declared
4. Peter's verdict on Simon, rendered by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit is that Simon was poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity
5. These do not sound like words Peter would use to describe a child of God

F. Simon's Error

1. Simon's real heart is revealed in his offer to pay Peter for the power to give the Holy Spirit
2. Simon was jealous and bitter of Philip and the apostles because they had become the new focus of attention in Samaria
3. Overnight, he had gone from top dog to underdog and he deeply resented his slide from fame

4. But now he saw a way back into the lime light
5. For days he had followed Philip around trying to figure out his tricks
6. When Peter and John came he saw them as master magicians who might be willing to sell their secrets to him
7. You see, this is the way magicians have always learned new tricks
 - a. they paid each other large sums of money to learn each others illusions
 - b. even today, most of the illusionist you see on TV or in the shows learned their tricks by paying each other
8. In the ancient world, even sorcerers learned new spells and rituals by paying each other
9. Today, in the New Age movement, gurus and teachers put on private seminars in which for a modest fee of anywhere between \$1000 and \$5000, people can learn new ways to tap into the spiritual realm
10. Simon was just following usual pattern of his life and time
11. But when he opened his mouth, Peter saw into his soul
12. And in words of strong rebuke, he confronted Simon's error
13. That error was this: Simon thought he could *buy* what only grace could *give*
14. He have a term for this
15. We call it *simony* and we get it from this passage

G. *Simony*

1. Simony is the buying of religious position and influence
2. And believe it or not it has a long and sorry history in the church
3. Many of the bishops, cardinals, and even popes attained their office by buying their way in
4. But lest anyone think I'm just capping on the Catholics, let me hasten to say that the Protestants have been just as riddled with simony in their history
5. You see, anytime someone tries to attain position, power, or influence by giving special favors they follow in the footsteps of Simon
6. Peter's rebuke of Simon was so intense because he saw the great error of Simon's offer
7. To Peter, nothing was so precious as the grace of God
8. But here was Simon willing to reduce that precious gift down to some market value
9. Truly, Simon and Judas Iscariot were cut of the same cloth
 - a. both men saw the Kingdom of God in terms of market value
 - b. they evaluated everything in terms of dollars or shekels
 - c. Judas saw Mary of Bethany's gift of precious perfume poured on Jesus' feet, not as a tender act of worship
 - d. no, as he watched the perfume pour out of it's alabaster flask, he calculated the cost and decided that 300 denarii, a year's wage, had just been wasted
 - e. Judas was even willing to put a price on Jesus - 30 pieces of silver!
10. As Simon watched Peter and John lay hands on the Samaritans and saw

- them filled with the Holy Spirit, he immediately calculated how much the trick was worth and made his offer to Peter
11. But Peter will hear nothing of it / The thought is utterly appalling to him
 12. How sad that the Church has not stayed true to Peter's example
 13. In our own day simony is rampant
 14. For there are many who are willing to make merchandise of the things of the Kingdom of God
 15. There are many who see the Church and the Christian faith as a way to make money or peddle their influence
 16. Take for instance the sorry parade of Simons on religious TV
 - a. a couple years ago *Primetime Live* did an expose on 3 of these of the worst
 - b. they exposed Simon Lea
 - b. and Simon Grant
 - c. who have both been driven off the air
 - d. but the third - Simon Tilton is back on with a whole new shtick!
 17. But you know what, the sin of simony can be much subtler than this
 18. Today, all around our own city are churches with boards comprised of men who bought their way onto the board
 - a. they may have given special favors to others
 - b. or they may have given large gifts to the church so that the leadership would feel obligated to give them a position
 - c. this happens all the time - AND IT IS UTTERLY WRONG!
 19. But simony can be even more subtle than this
 20. For instance, visit a Christian bookstore some time and take a look at all the brick a brack that clutters the shelves
 - a. now, certainly some of it is cute and may have a place
 - b. but the issue is this: what was in the person's heart who manufactured it
 - c. were they really motivated by a desire to glorify God,
 - d. or were they merely using religion as a means of personal gain?
 21. The same can be said for the Christian book and music industries, the fastest growing segments of their industries, by the way
 22. In fact, they are growing so fast, that secular companies are buying up the Christian labels and publishing houses
 23. Why? Because they, like Simon, see the profit to be made off believers and they, who sat atop the market for so long, do not want to lose their influence to the new kids in town
 24. More goofiness
 - a. Restaurant for the Righteous
 - b. Weather Madonna
 - c. Bible Gum
 - d. End Time Acres
 - e. Christian Mother Goose Children's Skin Care Products
 - f. Jesus Doll Collection
 25. We may laugh at these, and they are pretty funny
 26. But before we too quickly pick up stones of condemnation and start hurling, let's check our own hearts

27. Are we guilty of the sin of simony?
28. Do we make merchandise of the things of God?
29. Do we look at the fellowship of fellow believers as a way to increase our profit?
30. Some years ago a man called and asked to see me
 - a. did not go to our church, but another in town
 - b. heard us on the radio and felt compelled to come and speak to us about something going on in his church
 - c. a group of people who were involved in a multi-level marketing thing were approaching the other members of the congregation and trying to get them signed up
 - d. the pastor and his family got involved and the church services had virtually become meetings for their business
 - e. this man had been saved through the ministry of this church and felt a deep loyalty to it, but he was heart broken that the gospel was being used as a means to the end of making money
31. Some of you are a part of these multi-level marketing businesses and that's fine
 - a. some of them are better than others and actually have marvelous services and products
 - b. just don't use the church directory as a recruitment list
 - c. don't use church services and home groups as motivational meetings
 - d. in short, don't fleece the flock of God!
 - e. because *this* shepherd won't tolerate it!

III. CONCLUSION

A. *Prescriptive Vs. Preventative*

1. You know, some times the word we hear on Sunday mornings is *prescriptive*
 - a. what I mean is it is a lesson which deals with a *current* need
 - b. like a prescription you get from the doctor for medication for an illness
 -
 - c. the Lord gives us some lesson to address some ailing part of our walk
2. The message today wasn't so much prescriptive, as it was *preventative*
 - a. it was more like an inoculation
 - b. like medicine given to ward off illness
3. Thankfully, I don't see a problem with simony in our fellowship
4. But still, we need to be forewarned

B. *The Core Issue*

1. But you know, there is something revealed by this passage that we can use today
2. Simon evaluated the things of God in terms of their market value
3. Peter rebuked him and told him he was all wrong and outside the kingdom
4. How do we evaluate the things of God?
5. Or let me put it this way: Do we consider our obedience to God on the

basis of what it will *cost* us?

6. Do we condition our faithfulness to the Lord on the basis of what we're going to get out of it?
7. Do we, like Simon, place ourselves at the center of everything and make God orbit us?
8. Or do we bow in humble submission and say, "God, You know what's best for me, here is my life, use it as You will?"