

SIMON THE SORCERER

**Acts 8:4-24
(focus 8:9-20)**

**Dr. Howard Batson
First Baptist Church
Amarillo, Texas
September 24, 2023**

Everything has its price.

We live in such a materialistic society that, indeed, we think that we can grasp, gain, or clasp anything if we simply have enough money – that in the end, while some things are posted “not for sale,” everything, in reality, eventually has a price at which it can truly be had.

But that’s not altogether true, is it?

There is one thing that can’t be bought. That is, you cannot pay anyone to exercise for you. Did you realize that? The rich, perhaps, can purchase better health care, but they cannot purchase better health. Could you imagine a world in which the rich could pay somebody to go jogging for them? Be great work, wouldn’t it? I’ll jog your two miles a day for a charge of \$80. I’ll go to the gym and push the poundage and you’ll experience the growth and gains in your macho muscles.

But it doesn’t work like that. Health is something that really cannot be purchased. Health care, yes. But vigor and exercise – those things you and I must absolutely do for ourselves. While we might hire a trainer to coach us through, in reality we have to pick up the pounds ourselves.

Perhaps there is something in your life. You think about everything that you own. I imagine there is a price at which you would sell me your car. Maybe it’s four times the market value. Maybe it’s a million dollars. I don’t know. But I dare say that no one within the sound of my voice has a car that they wouldn’t sell at some price. We are sentimental only to an extent.

But perhaps there is something in your life that really wouldn’t be for sale. Your grandfather’s Bible. Is there a price for that? The old home place that you inherited. Is there a price for that? Perhaps there is a price for those things, but then think about your children. Would anyone dare sell or market their child for a million – yes, even a billion dollars? There we have it. None of us would sell our children, no matter what the price. (Now, some of you would rent your kids anytime, real cheap, but you want them back in three weeks – guaranteed!)

Some things in life cannot ever be purchased. There is no price for which they can be had.

While that may be frustrating to people who are accustomed to getting their way with money, there is a real irony in the fact that the greatest things in life really cannot be bought. True friendship.

A loving relationship with our husband or our wife. The wonderful relationship with our children, our parents, our friends, our family.

But most importantly, as we will see in our passage today in the story of Philip and the story of Simon the Sorcerer, a relationship with God never has a price tag. That which is holy cannot be had for money.

There are, indeed, some who try to buy the power of God, try to buy things that are spiritual and holy. There are some in antiquity who did that, and there are some today who do that.

In Acts, we have a new phase in the history of the church as God prepared her to take the gospel to the whole world. Turn to Acts 1:8. Here we have the thematic verse of the entire book. “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you...” (That happens in Acts 2 on the Day of Pentecost, and it will happen in our passage today to the Samaritans in Acts 8.) “And you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and (notice particularly for today’s passage) Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.”

We have the early passages dealing with the evangelization, the spreading of the gospel in Jerusalem and Judea. And now, in Acts 8, we have the spreading of the gospel to Samaria. The rest of the book, finally in the end, has the Apostle Paul in Rome, the very capital of the empire – that’s the remotest part of the earth – spreading the gospel. The book is outlined and patterned by this thematic, controlling verse.

In Acts 8 we have the story of Philip. Philip is not one of the Twelve. Philip is one of the seven – one of the seven, usually called deacons, selected to serve the church, a Greek man, to help take care of the widows so the Apostles, the Twelve, can study the word of God.

Turn back to Acts 6:5. “The statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip....” There he is. Philip is what we call a second generation believer. Stephen is put to death in chapter 7. In chapter 8, Saul begins to persecute the church. The church, by this persecution, scatters and spreads, even as it goes, the seeds of the gospel for the kingdom of God.

Look at 8:4.

Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word.

There are different descriptions in of this passage for that which Philip was preaching. It’s called “the word” in verse 4. It’s called “Christ” in verse 5. “Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them.” He preached Christ to them. In verse 12, notice Philip was preaching the “good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ.”

There is no mistake about what Philip was preaching. He was preaching the gospel of the Twelve, the gospel of the Apostles – that God had worked in human history through the death and the resurrection of Jesus. And it was under the name and by the name of Jesus that the people of God received the power of God and have salvation and relationship with the God of creation and the God of salvation.

Now he goes to Samaria. Samaritans were not best friends with the Jews. They were half-Jews, half-breeds. The Jews and Samaritans detested each other. You remember Jesus, in John 4, encounters the woman at the well. His disciples are perplexed that he wants to go through Samaria because a proper Jew avoided the area of Samaria altogether, even though it was the quicker route to Jerusalem from Galilee.

Philip is performing signs, miracles. Often in the Acts of the Apostles, we have these signs, these miraculous events that point to the power of God and the message of Jesus. They are called “signs,” because like a sign they point to something beyond themselves. “This way to God,” the miracles are saying.

In verse 7, there were those who had demons who were being cleansed. There were those who were paralyzed who were being healed. In verse 8, notice there was much rejoicing in the city.

In verse 9, notice the words that draw the reader’s attention. “Now there was a certain man named Simon.”

Simon’s religion can be described three ways. Simon was seeking a religion that made him great. Look again at verse 9. “There was a certain man named Simon.” It was Simon *magos*, Simon the magician. Notice, his was a religion that was for power. He was astonishing the people of Samaria. He was a charlatan with a bag of tricks. He claimed to have spiritual and magical powers, and the people were signing up to see Simon.

In verse 10, they even said, “This man is what is called the Great Power of God.” His was a religion for power. Simon claimed through his smoke and mirrors sideshow to have obtained even the power of God.

His was a religion of attention (verse 10). They were all giving attention to him, from the small people to the great people. All – look at the word in verse 10 – were giving him attention. Simon’s religion was a religion that not only empowered him, but it also turned people’s attention not to God, but to Simon.

Third, it was a religion that was intended to astonish and amaze. They were astonished (verse 9), they were astonished (verse 11). Simon the Sorcerer’s magic sideshow was a sellout, a hit. He was the hottest thing in Samaria – until Philip came along.

Philip, one of the seven, a second generation believer, was preaching the Christ and performing signs and wonders and healings. Even Simon the Sorcerer had to admit – even if he dug deep down in his bag of tricks – he didn’t have anything that could make the lame leap.

I want you to notice the “but” in verse 12. It’s subtle, the adversative conjunction. “They were giving Simon attention (verse 11) because he had for a long time astonished them with his magic arts. But...” But, enter Philip. “But when they believed Philip,” they heard the good news (that is, God’s good news) about His kingdom coming and the name of Jesus, they turn away from

Simon the Sorcerer and his sideshow magic and begin to believe in Jesus. The miracles take place. And now they are baptized – men, notice, and women (verse 12).

And Simon, himself, believed. Little “b”. He believed, but he didn’t really believe. He was baptized on the outside. He got a bath. But he wasn’t baptized in the heart.

He stayed around Philip, watching as one magician might watch another, pondering the power, mulling over the great miracles. And notice at the end of verse 13, Simon, the one who amazes – Simon is amazed. Simon saw Philip as nothing but a magician competitor who had shown up with a better bag of baloney.

It’s monumental that the gospel has gone to Samaria. Jesus had proclaimed in the first chapter of Acts that “the Holy Spirit will come and you will witness in Jerusalem and you will witness in Judea, and you will witness in Samaria.” Even though Jesus had said it, for the Jerusalem apostles it was hard to believe that God was going to do miraculous things among the much maligned Samaritans.

The spotlight on the stage shifted from Philip, even shifted from Simon the Sorcerer. Now it shines on Peter and John – the pillar apostles of Jerusalem. The mother church checks out the upstart mission. In fact, even the Holy Spirit has not descended upon the Samaritans, even though in Acts it normally does upon the profession of faith and baptism. That’s the case with Paul’s conversion in chapter 9 and Cornelius’s conversion in chapter 10. But here, we have a Samaritan Pentecost. We have profession in Christ. We have water baptism. We have no presence of the Spirit in the lives of the believers because it is important for the Samaritans to receive the warm welcome of the Jerusalem apostles. It is necessary for Peter and John, the pillar apostles, to see that yes, God’s Spirit descends upon even the Samaritans.

Notice verse 17.

Then they began laying their hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit.

Wow! In verse 18, that’s the best trick that Simon the Sorcerer has ever seen – that Peter and John actually have the power to dispense the divine, the give out the grace of God. Notice in verse 18 he offered them money. “Give me that trick. I need to add the ability to bestow the Holy Spirit into my bag of tricks. Give me the authority to do what you’re doing, and I’ll give you some money.”

At that, Simon betrayed himself as he displayed his own rotten heart.

His relationship with God was superficial, based upon power and attention and money. His relationship with the church was the same. He was trying to purchase and peddle what was holy and divine.

Peter is so shocked at what he hears. The literal translation of verse 20 is, and I quote bluntly, “To hell with you and your silver because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money.... Your heart (verse 21) is not right before God. Repent (verse 22) and pray the Lord will forgive you, for you are in the gall of bitterness and the bondage of sin.”

“Pray for me,” says Simon. “Pray for me yourselves, so that what you said about me will not come true.”

You’ve probably never heard a sermon on Simon. And yet, what Simon does is so appalling to the apostles, so repulsive to Peter, that Peter says, “To hell with you and your silver. Get on your knees and repent and pray that terrible things will not happen to you because of what you’ve done.”

Congregation, there are certainly those today who peddle what is holy. You can buy water from the Jordan River. One advertisement claimed that they retrieved the water out of the very location where John the Baptist baptized Jesus – as if, somehow, that made it more holy and more powerful. That’s a blatant peddling of what is holy.

Or, there is the Full Gospel Ministry of Sister Marilyn, a prophetess and evangelist, who claims to have nine gifts of the Holy Spirit. She claims to heal people from cancer and tumors and sickle cell anemia and AIDS. You name it – she can heal you. Heart disease. If you’d like a prayer, just send \$10 to Sister Marilyn, 141 Ebenezer Road, Kings Mountain, North Carolina 28086. Ten dollars a pop, and Sister Marilyn will pray for you.

Now, I’m repulsed and you’re repulsed at those who offer God for gain. And I could very quickly point my finger at Sister Marilyn. But I want to ask questions about who we are in relationship to the gospel of God.

What does it mean when, as a Christian businessman, I put the symbol of the fish in the phone book? Am I trying to sell what is holy for my financial gain? I’m not saying that is necessarily so, but I think it is a question we must ask ourselves. What does it mean? And I hoping that somehow the fact that I have the symbol of a disciple of Christ other Christians will do business with me? Is that my purpose? Do I select a church to join based upon community and business relationships? If so, I think all these things are simony – acting like Simon.

Am I in church seeking power? Attention? Offices? Do I want them to say “Howie, the Great.” Do you want them to say, “David, the Great?” “Frances, the Fantastic?” What do you want from this community of believers? Is yours, is mine, like the religion of Simon, a religion of power? A religion to receive attention and recognition? A religion to astonish others?

When Simon saw God and when Simon saw church, he was a marketing master. He began, subtly in his mind and not so subtly with his mouth, to be impressed with the commercial possibilities of Christ. Is there anything that more profanes what is holy than to commercialize Christ – so much so that the Apostle Peter says, “Away with you and your money.”

I’m asking myself today, and I’m asking you today, to do something very important. Perhaps today might be the most important sermon you’ve ever heard. It’s one that calls you to look at your heart.

Look at verse 21.

You have no part or portion in the matter of God, the matter of the gospel, for your heart is not right before God.

God looks past the sorcery of Simon and looks all the way to his heart. When God looks at our heart, there is no place to hide. There is nothing that can cover up the penetrating gaze of the eyes of the holy and righteous God who knows all, sees all, and judges all. He looks past what we do and looks all the way to our heart.

Why are you here today in church? Why have you come? Have you come in simony, coming for gain? Coming for attention? Or have you come with a heart that is desirous and thirsty for contact and relationship with a holy and righteous God?

The gospel is the great equalizer. You see, you can't buy a relationship with God any more than you can buy the exercise. You can't pay anyone else to do your praying for you. You can't pay anyone else to do your missions for you. God has people with whom you will come in contact – people with whom He wants you to share the gospel. No, you can't buy the things that are holy. You can't pay someone else to do it for you. It is you, and it is I who must hunger and thirst after the righteousness of the kingdom of God. It is we who must pursue the things of God with all of our might, our heart, our soul, our body.

Simon goes down in church history as a terrible character – a father of heresy. Simon was at church for all the wrong reasons.

Oh God, examine our hearts. Make us pure in our desire for You.