

Simon vs the Spirit

- Acts 8:9-25
- It's February, 1964. Cassius Clay, AKA Muhammad Ali, said this before his championship fight with Sonny Liston: "16 times I've told the clown what round he's going down, and this chump ain't no different. He'll fall in 8 to prove I'm great, and if he keeps talking jive, I'm going to cut it to five." When Sonny Liston sat on his stool when the bell rang for round seven, Ali won by technical knockout. Ali then ran around the ring shouting, "I'm the greatest!"
- The heavyweight champion in Samaria in the first century was a man named Simon. There were no other contenders. He was the only show in town before Philip came on the scene. Simon had captured everyone's attention. He was a magician, but don't think "sleight of hand" here. Think sorcery, witchcraft, powers of demons. Simon was into supernatural power. He believed in it and was using it for his own fame and fortune. Twice Luke tells us (vs 9 and 11) that Philip's magic "amazed" the people of Samaria. That word means, "to be transported beyond oneself with astonishment." Simon was a rock star. He said so himself, calling himself great. The people believed it: from the least to the greatest in Samaria, *they* called Simon great. Even worse, we're told that Simon was treated like a god. (vs. 10) "This man is the power of God that is called Great." You know how God feels about sharing His glory with anyone, right? Go back to Exodus and read about the showdown between Pharaoh's magicians and Moses, who was the servant of God. Demons vs. God=No contest. We see the same thing here. Philip comes to town, begins preaching Jesus (vs. 5) and the kingdom of God (vs. 12) and doing working signs and wonders (6-7). And God brings revival. **Spirit vs. Simon=no contest.** The people believed Philip as he preached about the good news, and they were baptized. So, what about Simon? How can we learn from him? Let's take a look this morning at Simon's conversion. Which was false. And at Simon's perversion. Which was his heart. Then we will look at the reason Peter and John came down to Samaria.
- **Simon's "conversion"** Not to be left out, even Simon believed and was baptized. On the surface, it looks like Simon is a believer. Philip apparently didn't question it. But several things point to the fact that Simon was a false convert, someone who **professed** to believe, but did not **believe**. The reasons we can be sure that Simon was not saved are these: 1-Simon's request to purchase the power of the Spirit, 2-The fact that when Peter and John prayed that the believing Samaritans would receive the Spirit, there is no indication that Simon received the Spirit! 3-Peter's indictment of Simon, which seems to be indisputable evidence: (vs 21) "You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God." And vs 23: "For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity." What is the fatal flaw that Simon has committed and is holding onto?
- I want to adapt and change an illustration I heard from John Piper that I think will help us see what is going on here with Simon. Every parent and grandparent has seen this with your child or grandchild who is one-year-old or so. You are sitting at the kitchen table with your child in your lap and you see something in the backyard. A squirrel, maybe, trying to get into your bird feeder. And you point out the window and say, "Look at the squirrel!" And the little boy looks at your hand. You know? It takes a while to get the child to understand that your hand is not what you want them to see. It's what your hand is directing them to. What your finger is pointing at. They can't make the connection. Just like when our children first learn to wave goodbye, how do they do it? Right, like this, with their fingers curling back towards them, because that's what they see when YOU wave goodbye to them. They can't easily transfer their attention from the symbol to the reality behind it. An extreme example would be the person who sees the sign on the interstate that says "Rest Area" beside the exit ramp and they pull in under the sign. The sign is pointing to the reality. But instead of a nice warm building with bathrooms and vending machines, they are parked under a green sign on the side of the road while everybody else rushes past them on the way to the rest area. (and waves, backwards). That's what Simon is

doing. The signs Philip is performing point to Jesus, the One who enabled Philip to perform them... but Simon can't get past the signs. He has faith, don't get me wrong. But it's in the wrong thing. **Everybody has faith.** In something. Or someone. But the old saying is just as true today as ever: **faith is only as valid as the object in which it is placed.** Simon's faith was in the supernatural. Signs. Wonders. He was a sorcerer and a very successful one at that. And then someone comes to town whose magic, if you will, is stronger than his! And now HE is the one who is amazed. (vs. 13) Do you see the fatal flaw? Philip is pointing to Jesus, but all Simon can see is the hand. "I want hands that can do that," Simon says. "Give me some of this magic," Simon says. He is even willing to pay for it. By the way, the word "simony" in the dictionary comes from this biblical story, and means, "the buying or selling of a church office or ecclesiastical preferment." So, we can see that Simon was not converted at all. He just saw a higher power than the one he had, and he wanted to trade for it. His was a spirit of acquisition, not a spirit of repentance.

- **Simon's "perversion"** What's wrong is his heart. Peter tells him it is not right. That he is filled with bitterness and bound by sin. We see it clearly in Simon's desire for power at any cost. And we see it most clearly when Peter confronts Simon and commands that he repent. Peter says, "Pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you." How does Simon respond to this admonition from the man of God? Not with repentance but with remorse. He says, in effect, *Don't let that happen to me!* "Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me." Simon was not concerned about God's forgiveness. He just wanted to escape God's punishment. The problem was a perverted heart that craved money and power. When confronted by the Lord, Simon did not fall forward, to use Woody's analogy from the men's retreat. He fell backward. He fell away. Think about the parable of the sower that Jesus gave us as a warning and an encouragement. An encouragement because the seed of the Word does fall on good soil, and we know it is good soil when we see the evidence of a changed life and fruitfulness for the Kingdom. But this parable which Jesus referred to as the foundation for ALL the parables is a warning because there are three types of heart soils that will reject the truth, even though two of them LOOK like they receive it! The first seeds fall on the path and Satan comes and snatches away the Word. No root, no fruit. But then there are two groups of people who will receive the Word gladly and even make a "profession of faith" but are never born again. Remember those? The second type of soil receives the Word on rocky ground, but persecution comes, the sun gets hot, and what had sprung up quickly now withers away. No root, no fruit. The third soil is thorny ground, and again there is the appearance of life there until the thorns, "the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desire for other things enter in and choke the word." No root, no fruit. (Mark 4) Simon is never heard from again in Scripture. Church fathers in the second and third centuries wrote about him, and never in a good light. The superhero of Samaria, who had everything going for him and then was exposed to the Gospel and his heart was exposed by the Gospel, was given a moment in time, an opportunity to repent. But he didn't. He fell away. What about your heart?
- **A Second Blessing?** Finally this morning, I want to briefly address the controversy surrounding Peter and John's visit to Samaria. (READ vs. 14-17). This text is often used by people who want to teach that the normative experience, that which we should all strive for, is two-staged. First, we receive the Lord Jesus and are saved. Then later, we receive the gift of the baptism in the Spirit. That's the way it appears to be here, just like with the first believers who received the Spirit after they had believed, on the day of Pentecost. But we have to be careful making this example, or the Pentecost example normative. Because if we believe the two-stage theory, then we are pitting two texts in the book of Acts against the rest of the New Testament. Here is how we can understand it. There was a delay in the Spirit coming upon the Samaritans. There's no question about that. He came when Peter and John laid hands on them and prayed for them. Why did God do it this way with the Samaritans? You might say this was the Samaritan Pentecost. **This was the beginning of the Gospel reaching not only outside of**

Jerusalem but into Samaria. It is believed that God was confirming to the Samaritans that they really had been grafted in, that God had accepted them into the body of His Son. John Stott writes, "This seems to be the only explanation which takes account of all the data of Acts 8, reads the story in its historical context of the developing Christian mission, and is consistent with the rest of the New Testament." Paul's writings, for example, which were foundational apostolic teaching, are consistent. Born again believers receive the Spirit and His baptism upon conversion. Romans 8:9, "You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him." 1 Cor. 6:19, Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, you were bought with a price. Galatians 4:6, "And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"

- **One final encouragement:** When it comes to signs and wonders, here is my caution. Let's not follow after them. But let's not dismiss them, either. This response (dismissive) has been adopted by many in the church today because they see the abuses and the excesses and all of the division that can surround the gifts of the Spirit. They say, "That's just trouble we don't need, and besides, it was for another time and another place. Let's just stick to the plain truth of the Bible!" To that group I would say this: Samaria of the first century sounds a lot like America today. People are fascinated with the occult, with signs and wonders, with doctrines of demons, with being amazed at what man could produce through sleight of hand, whether through magic or (today) through the media and film. Into that culture walked Philip, who went there to preach the plain truth of the Bible, Jesus and Him crucified. And GOD performed signs and wonders through Philip as well.
- Signs and wonders are simply hands, pointing to Jesus. They are signs, not to be exalted or to even fixate on like a child. Signs simply POINT us to the Lord! They are the means to an end, but they are not the end! What are some signs we can hold up that point people to Jesus. How about music? That's a sign, isn't it? When Jesse and I went to hear Phil Keaggy in concert at The Cove last Saturday night, we had 90 minutes of signs and wonders going on on stage in front of us. Every song he sang, every word Phil spoke pointed us to Jesus and His grace. You like to act? Use it as a sign that can point to Jesus. You like to dance? Preach? Write? Cook? Play a sport? They are all signs that can point to Jesus. They must. John Piper wrote, "Whether we preach or sing or act or write or heal, we are utterly and desperately dependent on the work of the Holy Spirit to straighten crooked hearts and cause people to look away from us to Jesus who alone can save."
- We are not the greatest. He is. Get that straight and then watch what God will do with you and through you for His glory!