

"The Gracious Warnings of God"

Acts 8:9-25

One of the greatest internal proofs to the validity of the Bible is its telling us God's story with all its problems and even blotches on the church. In the Bible we encounter a number of unusual and even strange encounters that the people of God experience. Our passage this morning affirms this. Who is this Simon the sorcerer fellow? Was he genuinely saved? He made a decision for Jesus, was even baptized but seemed to be more interested in power and miracles and signs to the point where he wanted to buy the this power so he could use it for personal gain. So the most important question we should ask when we come to these passages is 'Why is this in the Bible? What is the point of telling us this strange part of the church's history? If the Bible is inspired by God, how do I apply this to my life?'

And those are always the right questions to ask. And sometimes the answer is God is warning us. He's warnings us about dangers that we may encounter in our Christian experience. He's also warning us about the dangers within our own heart. If God said in Jer. 17:9 that the heart is deceitful, who can understand it, and you and I still have a heart marred by our sin nature, then we need to guard our hearts against certain things. So I think this is why this passage is here. It's a warning. And I see 3 warnings for the people of God to be aware of at all times.

One of the things we have pointed out in the book of Acts are the problems the disciples encountered along the way. Whenever God is working, the enemy will try and interfere. So the Jewish leaders arrest Peter & John after the miracle of healing the lame man (Ch. 3-4). They were ordered not to teach in Jesus' Name. But they continued. Next we had the internal threat of deception slipping into the church when Annias and Saphira lied about the money they made selling their property. God dealt swiftly with that. Later all the disciples were arrested in Ch. 5 and were warned again not to teach Jesus was alive and this time they were flogged as Jesus was. They persevered.

Next was another internal threat of division between Greek speaking Jewish believers and Hebrew speaking Jewish believers when the distribution of food was imbalanced. They made good decisions and chose godly leaders to sort that out.

Next Stephen was arrested, stood trial and was stoned to death for talking about Jesus, resulting in the church scattering to Samaria, being hounded by Saul from Tarsus. Yet the gospel continues to spread through the ministry of Philip, who is performing signs and wonders.

So there's a pattern here. Gospel spreads, opposition is encountered. Sometimes externally, sometimes internally. So even though the gospel is spreading and the church is growing we should not encounter problems, correct? Our minds keep telling us that lie but reality is Satan doesn't like gospel success. So he has a new trick up his sleeve – literally – he throws in a magician. A magician in the Bible is rarely portrayed positively. It is usually associated with idolatry or demonic activity. Remember, when Moses and Aaron first appeared before Pharaoh, Pharaoh's magicians repeated most of Moses' signs.

Magicians like Simon were paid to tell people what the will of the gods was. Many people believed sicknesses and diseases were a result of demon possession so they paid the Simon's to cast out the demons so they could be healed. He obviously had some success (with Satan's help who

is out to deceive people) which is why people were continually following him. They thought so much of Simon they said he was basically God's spokesperson (v.10). A messiah type.

"But" v.12 begins, Philip comes along and what does he do? He preaches the gospel of Jesus and performs signs and miracles which would have included healings. Now we understand why Simon is so interested. A rival magician. People are now 'continually following Stephen' instead of continually following Simon. Philip is doing a better job. Simon wants part of this so says 'Yes, I'm in. I'll follow your message. I'll believe in Jesus. I'll get baptized too'. I think he was so impressed by what he saw that his decision would have shocked the people and they would have thought it was genuine. But it wasn't as we'll see. And that's the first warning:

Everyone Who Calls on the Name of the Lord Isn't Necessarily Known by the Lord (8:9-13)

And Jesus told His disciples this Himself in Matt. 7:15

¹⁵ "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. ¹⁶ By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

²¹ "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²² Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' ²³ Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'

When Jesus told the parable of the sower and the soils in Matt. 13, He explained it to His disciples that the seed is the Word of God and many people claim to accept it but many people end up turning their backs on Jesus because they don't want to count the cost or the worries of life deter them and the pursuit of things is more attractive. Only those who show over time by the fruit of their changed life are Jesus' followers, not just people who at one time made a decision for Jesus. In Luke's account of this parable he says of the rocky soil,

Those on the rock are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away.

There's an interesting parallel to Simon's 'belief' here and John 2:25. In John 2:23 we read,

²³ Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many people saw the miraculous signs he was doing and believed in his name. ²⁴ But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men. ²⁵ He did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man.

Some people's belief is head knowledge that is looking for the supernatural. Jesus seems to know the difference. Here, Simon was pursuing Philip because of the signs and miracles. Luke is very clear on this. He uses the same word 3 times to emphasize what it was that Simon was focusing on.

⁹ Now for some time a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in the city and **amazed** all the people of Samaria.

¹¹ They followed him because he had **amazed** them for a long time with his magic.

¹³ *Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, **astonished** by the great signs and miracles he saw.*

Simon amazed people with his own signs. Then saw Philip's miracles and started following him because he was amazed by these things. But he was baptized? Many people were being baptized shortly after they were saved. There's an excitement, a rush, a 'join-the-excitement mentality' and Simon was definitely excited and when some one makes a profession of faith and it seems genuine and they want to be baptized and you have no reason not to baptize them, you baptize them.

I wish every person I baptized, who claimed to have made a decision for Jesus at that time and it seemed genuine, was still following Jesus today. But a few are not. They may repent and turn around. But the question from Scripture is, 'Is there fruit?' That's the biblical way to answer the question how do we know if people are saved?' Not, did he/she make a decision for Jesus 10, 20, 40 years ago but is there evidence of spiritual fruit based on a desire to be more like Jesus over time.

Simon the magician made a decision for Jesus, even got baptized, but the fruit of his life was still selfish ambition as we'll see. This is God's warning to us. What are you trusting for eternity? A decision you made many years ago that never resulted in any noticeable change in you life, or a decision to follow Jesus and believe the things He says in God's Word that slowly produces visible fruit of a changed life? On Wednesday we listened to the apostle Paul share part of his testimony to the Philippian church in Phil. 3. After mentioning all the things he use to put confidence in – his Jewish legalism – he says its all rubbish compared to knowing Christ. But he didn't stop there. He says I want to continue to know Christ more and the power of His resurrection and to press on toward the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus because he had not obtained it yet. That should be our testimony too. Yes, I accepted Christ years ago, but I've been growing in knowing Jesus more and I want to know Him even more until the work God begun in you and me is finished and we are like Christ.

We shift temporarily away from Simon to the apostles. The gospel is getting to the Samaritans now. This is new. The Samaritans did not have the same biblical foundation the Jews had. They only believed the Law (Gen-Deut) and they were looking for Moses to return. Peter and John come to make sure this is of God. Somehow they sensed the coming of the Spirit on them had been delayed by God.

¹⁵ *When they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, ¹⁶ because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them; they had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. ¹⁷ Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.*

I believe and will try and show that this was an unusual experience and not normative for the church today. Only in Acts do we see a couple of situations where the Spirit's coming was delayed after salvation. Nowhere else in the New Testament as the church grew do we see any kind of delay in the Spirit's coming on new believers. Paul seems to declare that the Spirit comes upon believers at their salvation when he said in Eph. 1,

¹³ *And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.*

So lets be aware of another warning here; that,

Everything that Happens to Believers in the Bible is not Meant to be Normative for All Times **(8:14-17)**

For example; how come we don't use a staff to part the Rideau Lake and take a short cut to Newboro? Or put your foot in the water at Ellet so God will part the waters and you can walk to lawah? How come we don't march around a city of rebellious sinners expecting the walls of the city to be destroyed? How come we don't touch coffins at funerals and tell our deceased loved one to come back to life? Or, how come we don't sell our land and house and give it to the work of God?

Because we understand that many times God works in a unique way at a specific time in the life of his people to accomplish a specific task for that time. Here, in the book of Acts we have 3 delays of the Spirit. The first is here when the gospel first came to the Samaritans and the apostles John and Peter came specifically to verify that this was of God. God was doing something new and unique and the Spirit's discernible evidence was required to affirm this was of God.

The next time the Spirit is delayed is when the gospel reaches the Gentiles for the first time, in Acts 10 when Cornelius and Peter both have visions from God to meet each other and Peter shares the message of Jesus and these men receive the Holy Spirit and that is affirmed as they speak in tongues praising God.

The last time the Spirit has a possible delayed coming is when Paul meets some followers of John the Baptist in Ephesus whose knowledge about Jesus seems limited and the Spirit non-existence. Explaining to them the gospel, they receive the message and 12 of them prophesy and speak in tongues. And this may not have been a delay.

So to use these passages to argue that all believers are to look for a second outpouring of the Spirit is I believe incorrect. The New Testament teaches that we have already been baptized with (or received or outpoured on us) the Spirit at salvation (1 Cor. 12:13). Jesus promised us in John 14 that the Holy Spirit will live in us period. Not partly come here and then there. He told us that when the Spirit comes we will receive His power.

And yet, the one thing we do need to affirm for ourselves in Acts regarding the Holy Spirit is how has the presence of the Spirit in our life made a discernible/visible/experiential presence in our life? Again, Jesus said when we receive the Holy Spirit we will receive power, His power. And that power is discernible in the book of Acts. In what ways?

Sometimes it is accompanied with tongues and prophesy – which by the way were used to evangelize or build up the body – but we also see the coming of the Holy Spirit followed by a lack of fear of man; an incredible boldness to share the gospel and even suffer for the gospel. Joy. Prayer. Praise. Peace. We'll develop this more in Acts 19 but for now let's make sure we don't affirm the reality of the Spirit's presence by the fact that we are saved but rather, the discernible difference the Spirit is making in our lives validates that we have been saved.

Luke brings us back to Simon once more. Apparently Simon's obsession with power is discerned by the apostle Peter who confronts him with his twisted heart. Simon moves from following Philip to figure out how he can do these miracles to Peter as to how he too can give people this power. His focus is all about himself. He was already known as 'The Great One' (with apologies to Wayne Gretzky) and wanted to impress people more. There was no heart for God and Peter called him on it.

And this is a warning even believers need to be aware of:

Even Spiritual Service Can Be Used to Glorify Self and Not God (8:18-25)

Whether Simon actually thought he could buy this power or, more likely, bribe Peter to showing Him how to do this magic trick, either way its about himself.

Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit."

Peter sees through this misguided desire to follow Jesus for personal gain. Simon never repented. Simon followed Philip not Jesus. Simon the Great Power had aspirations to be Simon the Greatest! How many more people could he wow and amaze. So Peter says right to his face,

- May you and your money go somewhere!
- You are not part of this ministry
- Your heart is crooked (not right=not straight)
- Repent of this wickedness
- You are full of bitterness and captive to sin

I think Peter's statements indicate Simon never followed Jesus. He only wanted to add this Holy Spirit power to his magic show. And while we may not be Simon, our hearts are sometimes not straight either and we could be doing ministry for self-glory or we have the tendency to be impressed by the people doing ministry more than letting what is said or sung speak to our hearts. Many times I've quoted James 1:22

²² *Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.*

Last week we heard a great concert. 'Great' concert? What does that mean? Were we impressed more by the quality of the music or the talents of the musicians or did we hear some challenging words that we need to apply?

Sometimes we get the children to recite some verses or sing a song they learned from VBS or they do a Christmas program. 'Oh weren't those kids cute!' 'didn't the leader do a great job of organizing them?' 'That was a great program!' And all true but did we not hear from God? Or if we were the ones involved were we looking more for the personal affirmation that we did a good job rather than praying we encouraged people with God's truths or shared the gospel to some unbelievers? Let's remind ourselves about the purpose of ministry and the role of the Spirit in our lives.

Why do we have spiritual gifts?

^{1 Cor. 12:7} *Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. ¹² The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. ^{14:12} So it is with you. Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church.*

Peter said of serving God with our gifts in 1 Pet. 4:10-11

¹⁰ *Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. ¹¹ If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he*

should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.

And lastly from Paul, one who was accused of trying to impress people with his ministry, he wrote in 2 Cor. 5

¹¹ Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men. What we are is plain to God, and I hope it is also plain to your conscience. ¹² We are not trying to commend ourselves to you again, but are giving you an opportunity to take pride in us, so that you can answer those who take pride in what is seen rather than in what is in the heart. ¹³ If we are out of our mind, it is for the sake of God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. ¹⁴ For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. ¹⁵ And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

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If you have any comments or questions about this message please contact us at oliviet@rideau.net