

SERMON THOUGHTS ABRIDGED

SERMON: ACTS 8:9-24

THE "LETTER" KILLS, BUT THE SPIRIT GIVES LIFE

Simon the Sorcerer

But 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, to whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, "This man is the great power of God." And they heeded him because he had astonished them with his sorceries for a long time. 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, and was amazed, seeing the miracles and signs which were done.

Now when the apostles who were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them, who, when they had come down, prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. For as yet He had fallen upon none of them. They had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

And when Simon saw that through the laying on of the apostles' hands the Holy Spirit was given, he offered them money, saying, "Give me this power also, that anyone on whom I lay hands may receive the Holy Spirit." But Peter said to him, "Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money! You have neither part nor portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity." Then Simon answered and said, "Pray to the Lord for me, that none of the things which you have spoken may come upon me."

In the Epistle reading this morning, we heard the phrase "the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (II Corinthians 3:6). The "letter" of the God's Law is "every exact detail." The letter of the Law spells trouble for sinners. The Law demands with threats, and demands more with more threats! Obedience given is a faulty, imperfect, slave-like obedience, built on fear. "Do this, or else!" To have a relationship with God based on "the letter of the law" only defeats and kills helpless sinners like us. On the other hand, a relationship with God built by and on "the Spirit"—the Holy Spirit—gives life! Through Christ in His love, the laws and rules of God have been kept for us. Through Christ in His love the consequences that you should suffer for your sins have already been suffered in full. In love the Holy Spirit of God points you to that Savior and leads your heart simply to trust Him for full forgiveness, life, and God's blessings forever. The Spirit gives life.

We see in our sermon text that very Truth unfold in the life of Simon of Samaria, whom we call Simon the Sorcerer. A great persecution against the Christians had broken out in Jerusalem. Christians scattered. Philip the deacon (not Philip the apostle) went to a city of the Samaritans. Perhaps it was the capital city by the same name, Samaria. The Samaritans were an oppressed people. They were ruled by the Romans, as were the Jews. They were despised by the Jews, their neighbors and also distant relatives. They were oppressed by sickness, sin, death, and the devil, as all men are. Philip went there preaching the Good News of forgiveness and life with God through Christ, the crucified and risen Savior! Their hopeless, helpless efforts to please God suddenly changed. In Christ they were free before Him. With Spirit-worked faith, they trusted Philip's words with joy. And with just as great of joy they saw how in the name of Jesus, Philip healed the lame and paralyzed (think how many lame people there must have been without modern medicine). Philip also drove out demons from the demon possessed! They trusted and clutched onto such Good News and were baptized. Baptism "The washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5). Baptism: "Arise and be baptized and wash away your sins" (Acts 22:16). They certainly knew now and could see that "the Letter kills (trying to make-it before God based on God's requirements and their own conduct), but the Spirit gives life! (trust in Christ gives new life)." The same truth applies to you and me.

We see that truth unfold specifically in the life and heart of one Simon (this was not Simon the disciple). Simon had lived in this city for some time, and was (or thought he was) achieving his own greatness in his own way and overcoming the oppression and ruin of life. He was "in cahoots with" the devil. He was a sorcerer. By the power of the devil, he could perform acts that no ordinary person could perform. The magicians of Pharaoh had also been able to mimic the first three of Moses' miraculous signs (but, remember, then were helpless). Sorcery, witchcraft, black magic, is for real. The devil is always seeking ways to get people to trust his limited power rather than the Lord. It is not something for play. His goal is your heart and soul—forever. Simon found security, he thought, in sorcery.

Simon had long convinced the people that he was someone Great and that he was their way to security in this world and before God. However, sorcery does not operate on the help and love of God leading souls to eternal mercy in Christ. Sorcery operates on fear and harm. Fear and harm for the individual or for the person who is against the individual. It is an attempt to short-circuit the ways of God. It is a power of the “letter.” It never is fulfilling. It kills. Even Simon could see and sense that the preaching of Philip was something different. It did not revolve around fear, or meeting the expectations of God with one’s own force or with the force of the devil. Here was love at work. Here was life and assurance freely given in the name of Jesus. *Then Simon himself also believed; and when he was baptized he continued with Philip.* This was special.

However, Simon’s weakness for “power and control and special ability” was not too far buried. *He continued with Philip, and was amazed, seeing the miracles and signs which were done.* Simon’s penchant came roaring to the surface again. (The devil never gives up easily. He always seeks to lure one back into his courts.) When the Apostles Peter and John arrived from Jerusalem, they brought further blessings for these new Christians. With the laying on of their hands, the Samaritans received the Holy Spirit, that is, special gifts of the Holy Spirit. The gifts are not enumerated, but likely the ability to understand and grasp Scripture, to be filled with joy and zeal, to speak boldly and clearly salvation in Jesus, to speak other languages for spreading Christ even to others. It was a little day of Pentecost, like the disciples had experienced on Pentecost, fifty days after the resurrection of Jesus.

Simon fell again into thinking that by his own power and ability he could hold status before God. He brought valuables to Peter and John, money, and asked to buy this power! Simon was stuck in thinking that his efforts, his deeds, his earthly maneuvering would put him in good stead before the Lord. He was again trying to live by the letter, by the performance of rules and requirements, not by God’s grace in Jesus. Peter was very harsh and direct with Simon, as he needed to be. *Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money! You have neither part nor portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God. I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity.* Peter was saying, “Simon, you’re out! Such a request is not in keeping with the grace and forgiveness of Christ freely given to you in baptism. You are caught again in the bitterness and desperate clutches of sin and Satan, relying on your own efforts, not the Spirit. You cannot buy God’s grace for yourself or buy it to share it with others.”

Relying on one’s own efforts, separates one from God. It’s living by the letter, not by the Spirit. Why do you come to church? Because it’s your part of the agreement between you and God? In other words, if you do, then God does? That’s living by the letter. Why do you strive to keep the commandments? If I keep the commandments, then I will go to heaven? That’s thinking by the letter. Why do you help support St. Luke’s? Somebody has to pay the bills? Note, “has to.” In all these things, where is the Spirit? The willing love for God? When Christ is excluded, the Holy Spirit is being excluded. Instead of “We love Him because He first loved us” (1 John 4:19), it becomes. “We do for Him, in order to get Him to do for us.” That’s living by the letter, not the Spirit.

Peter said to Simon, *Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you.* Simon needed to learn that his problem was not just his actions but was rooted deep in his heart. A relationship with God is not built on outward actions. Repenting is a change of heart and mind, sorrow for sin and clinging to Jesus for forgiveness. *Pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you.* Forgiveness is a gift of God. He grants forgiveness in the name of Jesus. What about the word “perhaps” here? Was Peter not sure that God would forgive Simon? Was Peter making Simon think that forgiveness of such a sin might not be possible? All sin is forgivable in Christ. Peter wanted Simon to realize that God does not “owe” forgiveness to anyone. Peter wanted Simon to know that we cannot “demand” forgiveness from God. We go to God in Jesus’ name and ask that He would please forgive us as He has promised, although it is undeserved. Good news for Simon! Simon asked if Peter and John would pray for his forgiveness as well. In Jesus there was forgiveness and a new life.

The Spirit gives life. Not only ultimate eternal life, but new life already now. Serving and obeying God, not out of compulsion, like “I have to make my car payment again this month.” Rather, gladly, joyfully and willfully serving and obeying the Lord who forgives and saves. A privilege!

For we ourselves were also once foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another. But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy, He saved us through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life!