

It's been a little while since we've been in the book of Acts. So it's worth briefly reviewing where we are in the book. Because in the first part of Acts, we see the church in and around the city of Jerusalem. And they're preaching the gospel even despite great opposition. And eventually we find out Stephen is put on trial for talking about Jesus and the Jews end up putting him to death. And because of his death, a great persecution breaks out against the church and many Christians are forced to flee. They were hoping that they would bring an end to all of this, that they would finally stop talking about Jesus. But the very opposite happened. As the Christians went out around Jerusalem, they continued to talk about Jesus and we meet men like Philip who goes to Samaria and talks about Jesus to the Samaritans. And many come to believe in Jesus because of it. The apostles then come down from Jerusalem and they lay their hands on the heads of these new Samaritan believers because God in this way wanted to show that there is only one church no matter who they were before.

But at the same time we meet a man named Simon. And all of this stuff that's going on in Samaria catches his attention. And we're told just before our reading in verse nine, "There was a man named Simon who had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria saying that he himself was somebody great." Now, magic in those days is not the same thing as what we think of as magic. Magic to us is just smoke and mirrors, something that we know is fake, but we might still watch anyway because we want to be entertained. We're willing to put up with it because we think it's fun. Magic in those days is more of something like power, an ability to actually change things. Think of like the magicians in Egypt in the Book of Exodus. They were able to mimic some of the miracles of Moses. They were able to change the water into blood. They were able to bring up frogs out of the river. And the Bible often warns us against magicians and sorcerers and necromancers and the like. Warns us to not be deceived by them. The Bible treats them as something that can lead us away from God. So Simon, for his part, was probably able to do some very powerful things, though Luke doesn't tell us exactly what those things were. But it was to the point that he was able to impress many of the Samaritans, and many of them listened to him for a very long time.

But when Philip came and spoke about Jesus, the Samaritans stopped listening to Simon and they turned instead to the Lord. Because the Bible does not say that magic is always fake the way that we say it is, but rather it says that God is greater than all of these things. Even if these men are able to call down fire from heaven, even if they are able to conjure frogs, even if they're able to turn water into blood, they cannot stand before the power of the living God. God is greater than all things, no matter how powerful they may seem to be, and all of them will bend the knee to him because he alone is God. And even Simon, for his part, came to believe. He too repented and bent the knee so that when he heard Philip preaching, he came to believe in Jesus. And he started to follow after Philip and to listen more to what he said. Simon was also there when the apostles came down from Jerusalem. He saw them laying their hands on the heads of the Samaritans. He saw the power of the spirit at work, something far greater than his magic had come because God was overcoming all the powers of this world.

But Simon is really not all that different from us Christians, because he too struggled with sin. Being a Christian does not mean that we're never going to sin again. Rather, it means that now our new nature, our believing nature, fights with the old. Our sinful flesh continues to drag us down, and we continue to fall into sin until the day when we are finally free from this sinful flesh in heaven. Until that day, we will stumble and fall. And if we're not careful, we can stumble and fall very seriously. Because some habits are harder to break than others. And that's what happened sadly to Simon in our reading. He sees what the apostles are doing. He sees them lay

their hands on the heads of the Samaritans. He sees the spirit at work and he's impressed. He comes to think of it as a kind of magic and even asked them in verse 19, "Give me this power also so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." Now I can do something really great, he thinks. Now I can do something even better than I did before. I will have the power of the Holy Spirit and I will do all of the same things. His sin led him to say that. And Peter rightly rebukes him for it, calls on him to repent. What God is doing, Peter says, is not something that can be bought and sold. It is not a power to wield however you want. It is his gift. And to think otherwise is a very great sin. Simon has to repent of what he has done. And whether he actually truly repents or not, I'm going to have to leave up to you. Luke, for his part, leaves it little ambiguous. He doesn't really tell us exactly what happens. I personally think that Simon does repent, that when he says what he says, asking for forgiveness, he actually means it. But either way, it shows just how serious his sin really is.

And Christians, no matter what we think about Simon in the end, we shouldn't be too hard on him either way, because his sin is actually a very common one, and one that we too can fall into if we are not careful in a lot of different ways. One way that we can fall into the same trap as Simon is an old sin that the church in the past called simony. Simony was the buying and the selling of church offices, that if you paid enough money, if you greased the right palms, you could become a pastor, you could become a bishop, you could become whoever you wanted. You could buy your way into becoming a representative of God, whether you were doing it for power, for glory, or whatever it may be. That was a real sin that happened many times in church history. And it was obviously a very serious kind of corruption, because it treats the pastoral office as a kind of right, as something that I can get for myself that I can take on whenever I want to, regardless of what God says or what God chooses. In reality, Christians, it is God who raises up pastors. And if a man stands in the pastoral office, it's not because he deserves to be there, but because it is a gift of God.

Or another way that this might happen is still connected to money, that we end up connecting God's mercy to how much we're able to pay. Like insisting, for example, that you have to be paid before you're going to get baptized, or insisting that you're going to get paid before you do a funeral or anything like that. Now, I'm not saying that it's wrong to be paid in those situations. mean, a worker deserves his wages. But there's a difference between deserving your wages and insisting on them, refusing to do anything without them. Or thinking that God's grace can somehow be bought. I mean, think about the time of the Reformation, for example. You might remember from church history what were called indulgences. This idea that if you just paid enough money, if you bought an indulgence, you could take away the penalties of somebody after death. That by paying enough money, you would help move them along on the way to heaven. Obviously, that's a very serious abuse. And it's the whole reason why the Reformation started. Something that we should not do. Or even today, the practice of the Roman Catholic Church still to have someone pay to have a Mass said, that if you give some money to the priest, he will say a Mass on behalf of someone, whether living or dead, often for some kind of spiritual benefit. But if you don't have the money, it can't happen. Again, tying God's mercy to money. Or even just a pastor who's only in it for the money, who's only interested in you because of what you can give him. Give me enough money, he says, and you can unlock God's blessings. The more you give, the bigger the blessing will be. So hand it over. All of this is obviously a great problem. God's blessings are not something to be bought and sold. His mercy is His gift alone.

But even if we don't have money connected to it, Christians, it's still a danger. We can still think that God's mercy is something that we deserve, that God has to answer to us, that God is at

our beck and call. I said I was sorry, so God has to forgive me. I prayed so God has to bless me. I deserve to go to heaven because of the kind of life that I have lived. Yes, Christians, that danger is always there, to think that we simply deserve these things. And we can end up like Simon before we even realize what has happened.

But the only thing that I really deserve is God's judgment. God doesn't give me judgment. He freely gives us mercy instead. God has sent us His Son to deliver us, even though we didn't deserve it. God has given us Jesus, even though we deserved damnation instead. While we were still His enemies, Jesus died for us. All of this is his gift alone. And now just as freely, the Spirit comes to us to make us into something new because God in love brings us to himself out of pure mercy. He doesn't do this because we deserve it, but because he loves us.

So let us never take his mercy for granted. Let us never see it as our right. But let us always give thanks that God raises us up again and again and again and shows us an everlasting mercy. God forgives us because he wants to forgive us in Jesus Christ, his Son.

Let us pray.

Merciful Father, who saves us from our sins not because we deserve it, but because you love us. Lead us always to give thanks for that undeserved mercy, both now and forever. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.