

Alderwood Community Church
February 28, 2010

Genuine or Counterfeit?

Acts 8:9-25

Intro:

“The great economic meltdown of 2008-2009 has laid bare what is now being called ‘the culture of greed.’ Long ago, Saint Paul wrote that greed was not just bad behavior. ‘Greed is idolatry,’ he wrote. (Colossians 3:5) Money, he advised, can take on divine attributes, and our relationship to it then approximates worship.

“Money can become a spiritual addiction, and like all addictions it hides its true proportions from its victims. We take more and greater risks to get an ever diminishing satisfaction from the thing we crave, until a breakdown occurs. When we begin to recover, we ask, ‘What were we thinking? How could we have been so blind?’ We wake up like people with a hangover who can hardly remember the night before. But why? Why did we act so irrationally. Why did we completely lose sight of what is right?

“The Bible’s answer is that the human heart is an ‘idol factory.’

“When most people think of ‘idols’ they have in mind literal statues—or the next pop star anointed by Simon Cowell. Yet while traditional idol worship still occurs in many places of the world, internal idol worship, within the heart, is universal. In Ezekiel 14:3, God says about elders of Israel, ‘These men have set up their idols in their *hearts*.’ Like us, the elders must have responded to this charge, ‘Idols What idols? I don’t see any idols.’ God was saying that the human heart takes good things like a successful career, love, material possessions, even family, and turns them into ultimate things. Our hearts deify them as the center of our lives, because, we think, they can give us significance and security, safety and fulfillment, if we attain them.

“What is an idol? It is anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give.

“A counterfeit god is anything so central and essential to your life that, should you lose it, your life would feel hardly worth living. An idol has such a controlling position in your heart that you can spend most of your passion and energy, your emotional and financial resources, on it without a second thought. It can be family and children, or career and making money,...your beauty or your brains,...or even success in the Christian ministry.

“Paul summarized the history of the human race in one sentence: ‘They worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator’ (Romans 1:25). Every human being must live for something. Something must capture our imaginations, our heart’s most fundamental allegiance and hope. But, the Bible tells us, without the intervention of the Holy Spirit, that object will never be God himself.

“Pop legend Madonna describes the seduction of success in her own words.

“I have an iron will, and all of my will has always been to conquer some horrible feeling of inadequacy. . . .I push past one spell of it and discover myself as a special human being and then I get to another stage and think I’m mediocre and uninteresting. . . .Again and again. My drive in life is from this horrible fear of being mediocre. And that’s always pushing me, pushing me. Because even though I’ve become Somebody, I still have to prove that I’m *Somebody*. My struggle has never ended and it probably never will.’

“For Madonna, success is like drug that gives her a sense of consequence and worth, but the high quickly wears off and she needs a repeat dose. She must prove herself again and again. The driving force behind this is not joy but fear.”__Timothy Keller, Counterfeit Gods

In our passage this morning, we will be looking into the life of a man who made an idol out of power. (Acts. 8:9-25)

Context: Philip went into a city in Samaria to preach the gospel. It is hard for us to conceive the boldness of the step Philip took in preaching the gospel to Samaritans. For the hostility between Jews and Samaritans had lasted a thousand years. It began with the break-up of the monarchy in the tenth century BC when ten tribes defected, making Samaria their capital, and only two tribes remained loyal to Jerusalem. It became steadily worse when Samaria was captured by Assyria in 722 BC, thousands of its inhabitants were deported, and the country was re-populated by foreigners. In the sixth century BC, when the Jews returned to their land, they refused the help of the Samaritans in the rebuilding of the temple. Not till the fourth century BC, however, did the Samaritan schism harden, with the building of their rival temple on Mount Gerizim and their repudiation of all Old Testament Scripture except the Pentateuch. The Samaritans were despised by the Jews as hybrids in both race and religion, as both heretics and schismatics. John summed up the situation in his simple statement that ‘Jews do not associate with Samaritans’ Jesus’ sympathy for them, however, is already apparent in Luke’s Gospel. Now in Acts 8 Luke is obviously excited by the evangelization of the Samaritans and their incorporation in the Messianic community.

Read Text: Acts 8:9-25 (pg. 1,086)

1. The Power of the Gospel. (8:9-13)

Vrs. 9 “*Now for some time a man named Simon had practiced sorcery (magic)...*”

This is the ability to exercise control over nature and/or people by means of demonic power.

Vrs. 9 “He boasted that he was someone great...”

Pride is a universal and deadly sin. It is the most characteristic and controlling sin in all human fallenness. Sinful pride often masquerades under seemingly upright motives.

In Luke 18:9–14, the Lord Jesus Christ told a parable teaching that the proud cannot be saved: “*And He also told this parable to certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, and the other a tax-gatherer. The Pharisee stood and was praying thus to himself,*

‘God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-gatherer. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.’ But the taxgatherer, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, but he who humbles himself shall be exalted.”

Vrs. 10 *“This man is the divine power known as the Great Power.”*

That title shows that Simon claimed deity for himself. That Simon viewed himself as God betrays the most heretical view of self imaginable. The early church Fathers reported that Simon was one of the founders of Gnosticism and that he viewed himself as God incarnate.

Vrs. 13 *“Simon followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles...”* Simon recognizes God’s greater power. It is ironic that this word “great” is used in light of what Simon calls himself. This points to the superior power Philip has, so superior that Simon wishes to buy it. (18-19)

“For I am not ashamed of the Gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.” Romans 1:16

2. The Universal Offer of the Gospel. (8:14-17)

Vrs. 14 *“When the Apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the Word of God...”*

This seems to be a technical expression by which Luke signals an important new stage in the advance of the gospel. He has used it in reference to the Day of Pentecost when three thousand Jews ‘*accepted his [Peter’s] message*’ (2:41). He uses it here of the first Samaritans who ‘*accepted the word of God*’. And he will use it again after the conversion of Cornelius, when the apostles heard that ‘*the Gentiles also had received the word of God*’ (11:1).

The Apostles send Peter and John to Samaria to investigate what had been reported. It was particularly appropriate that one of them was John, since Luke describes him in his gospel as wanting on one occasion to call fire down from heaven to consume a Samaritan city. Now his desire is to see the Samaritans saved, not destroyed.

No doubt they were there to endorse the work there and to legitimize Philip’s mission.

The prayer of the Apostles allows God to show his acceptance of the Samaritans so that the entire church can see it. Because of the social and theological controversies between the Jews and the Samaritans, it required special evidence that God was directing the matters there in Samaria. So the granting of the Holy Spirit was God’s confirmation of his acceptance of the faith of the Samaritans and their inclusion in the body of Christ. The Samaritans are clearly now part of the fellowship and identified with the believers in Jerusalem as one body in Christ emphasizing the importance of unity.

Many who teach that Christians receive the Spirit subsequent to salvation appeal to this and similar passages for support. Here is a clear example, they argue, of people who were saved, yet did not have the Holy Spirit. Such teaching ignores the transitional nature of Acts. There is no set pattern to dispensing the Spirit in Acts. At various junctures God acts in different ways for different purposes.

It also flies in the face of the plain teaching of Scripture that *“if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him”* (Rom. 8:9). There is no such thing as a Christian who does not yet have the Holy Spirit, since *“by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body”* at conversion (1 Cor. 12:13).

The significance of this “acceptance” of the Samaritans by God and the apostles sends a clear message to both the believers in Jerusalem and to the rest of the world that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is offered to all peoples. It is a universal offer.

“Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.” Mark 16:15

“For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile – the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’”
Romans 10:12-13

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” John 3:16

3. The Responses to the Gospel. (8:12, 18-25)

A. The Samaritans- *“They believed...the good news...they were baptized.”* (8:12)

Baptism- a very public statement, it doesn’t allow for any “secret disciples.” Baptism would mark a public break with Judaism or with their former religious associations and identify them with Jesus Christ. For some, it meant being ostracized by their families and friends. The Bible calls believers to prove the genuineness of their repentance by submitting to public baptism.

The order is clear. Repentance is for forgiveness. Baptism follows that forgiveness; it does not cause it. It is the public sign or symbol of what has taken place on the inside. It is an important step of obedience for all believers, and should closely follow conversion. In fact, in the early church it was inseparable from salvation, so that Paul referred to salvation as being related to *“one Lord, one faith, one baptism”* (Eph. 4:5).

Being “baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus” (vrs. 16) denotes incorporation into the Lord and his community declaring one’s allegiance and implying the Lord’s ownership.

B. Simon- *“Simon himself believed and was baptized...but...”* (8:13, 18-24)

Improper view of Self- *He boasted that he was someone great.* (Pride)

Improper view of Sin- he didn't repent and acknowledge his sin.

Improper view of Salvation- Simon viewed salvation as a purely ritualistic, external matter, an additional act in his life instead of the total transformation of his whole person on the inside. He didn't understand grace, the free nature of God's salvation and blessings.

Vrs. 20 *"May your money perish with you..."*

Peter was irate, as his inflammatory prose indicates. The literal meaning of the Greek text has been softened by most translations. J. B. Phillips's rendering, "To hell with you and your money!" conveys the actual sense of Peter's words. Simon's view of the Spirit as a commodity to be bought and added to his repertoire was utterly and blasphemously wrong, and betrayed his lost condition.

Vrs. 22 *"Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord."*

He challenges Simon to have a correct view of his heinous sin—one that sees it for what is and turns from it. Although Simon feared God's judgment, true repentance involves more than fear of consequences. Commentator Albert Barnes rightly notes that "false repentance dreads the *consequences* of sin; true repentance dreads *sin itself*."

True repentance hates sin for what it is—an affront to God. Knowing that sin is evil and that God hates it motivates the truly repentant person to forsake it. Genuine repentance thus forsakes sin and turns in total commitment to Jesus Christ. If Simon did so, the intention of his heart to do evil would be forgiven him.

Vrs. 23 *I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin.*

The phrase full of bitterness is very strong. *Cholē* (gall) refers to a bitter ingredient or bile. Coupled with *pikria* (bitterness), it conveys an extremely bitter, harsh, and distasteful condition. It vividly pictures the reality of one captive to sin. Sin is a harsh taskmaster.

Simon, however, was not persuaded. Although shaken and afraid, he refused to ask the Lord for forgiveness. Instead, he said to the apostles, *"Pray to the Lord for me..."*

C. The Apostles- *"they testified and proclaimed the word of the Lord...preaching the gospel in many Samaritan villages."* (8:25)

The Apostles not only approve and affirm the ministry to the Samaritans and their inclusion into the community of faith, but they join in by preaching to them.

4. A Reason to Evaluate Our Own Faith.

One of the most fearful realities in all of Scripture is that some who think they are saved are eternally lost! It lulls its victims into a false sense of security, causing them to think that God applauds their good deeds. In reality, He views the supposed good works with which they clothe themselves as “*a filthy garment*” (Isa. 64:6). Any view of man as basically good and capable of earning acceptance with God deadens people to the reality of God’s impending judgment and blinds them to their need of a Savior. Those who fail to see themselves as sinners will see no need for a Savior.

“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. 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?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers.’”

Matthew 7:21-23

“Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you – unless, of course, you fail the test?” 2 Corinthians 13:5

“What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, ‘Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.”

James 2:14-17

Conclusion:

Genuine or Counterfeit? Your God: Are you worshiping God alone or have you created idols that have taken His place?

Genuine or Counterfeit? Your faith in the one true God?