

Heart Matters
Acts 8:9-25
Rev. Brian Bill
August 29-30, 2020

Many years ago, I visited someone in the hospital whom I had never met before. He was a member of the church I pastored but had not gathered for a service in years. After introducing myself I looked for a way to have a spiritual conversation with him. From all the cussing he was doing, I was worried he was far from Christ so I decided to walk through the gospel message.

As soon as I got to the necessity of repenting and receiving Christ, I recall him saying something like: *“Don’t worry, preacher. I’m good to go. I did that baptism thing and all that other stuff.”* Well, now I was really worried, so I took another run at him. Sadly, he held up his hand and told me to stop.

I’ll never forget this encounter because it seemed like he was holding on to a religious ritual and not the finished work of Christ on the cross. In his mind, he was *“good to go.”* I’m still not sure what he meant by, *“and all that other stuff.”*

While I can’t say for certain, it certainly didn’t appear he was saved. He was a baptized church member but gave no evidence he was a genuine believer. It’s likely there are people like this in every church.

They act religious but are not regenerated.
They talk about Heaven but don’t demonstrate a walk of holiness.
They claim to have faith but give no evidence of fruit.
They may know the date of their baptism but have not been born again.
They want Christ without the cross.
They speak about a decision but not discipleship.
They like cheap grace, not costly grace.
They may be near the kingdom but are actually far from it.

A.W. Tozer once remarked, *“It is my opinion that tens of thousands, if not millions have been brought into some kind of religious experience...and they have never been saved.”*

In Matthew 13:24-25, Jesus warned that counterfeit Christians, with phony faith, would embed themselves with true believers: ***“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, but while his men were***

sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away.”
Satan loves to sow gross weeds among the good seeds.

Quoting Isaiah, Jesus gave this indictment in Matthew 15:8: ***“This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.”*** Titus 1:16 says, ***“They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works. They are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work.”***

As the early church exploded with growth, Satan unleashed his hatred by stirring up persecution from without and creating problems from within. Warren Wiersbe put it this way: *“The enemy comes as a lion to devour or as a serpent to deceive.”*

Persecution broke out in Acts 4. In Acts 5, Satan filled the hearts of Ananias and Sapphira with hypocrisy, leading them to lie to the Holy Spirit. In Acts 6, the Devil stirred up dissension among church members, which threatened to tear the church apart. In Acts 7, Stephen was martyred and in Acts 8:1 we read: ***“And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria.”*** In our passage for today we’ll see how the evil one influenced a religious racketeer named Simon to exhibit phony faith.

We’re continuing in our verse-by-verse exposition of the Book of Acts. Please turn in your Bibles to Acts 8:9-25. If you’re using our mobile app, I want to show you a new feature. Once you open the app, click on the “Welcome” icon. You can access the online connection card from the next screen. To get to the passage for today, click on the “Read Bible” link on the bottom and it will take you to Acts 8. Simply scroll down to verse 9.

If you don’t have the free Edgewood app, simply go to Google Play or the Apple App Store and search for “edgewoodQC.”

Here’s the main idea of our passage: *Doing Christian things doesn’t make you a Christian.*

Because this passage is long, we’ll break it up into sections. To organize the flow, I’m adapting an outline from another pastor to help us see four characteristics of false faith in this passage:

- **An egotistical view of self** (8:9-11)
- **An external view of salvation** (8:12-17)

- **An economic view of the Spirit** (8:18-20)
- **An evasive view of sin** (8:21-24)

Characteristics of False Faith

1. An egotistical view of self. After the gospel penetrated Judea and Samaria, we pick up the story in Acts 8:9-11: ***“But 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. They all paid attention to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, ‘This man is the power of God that is called Great.’ And they paid attention to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic.”***

Simon was a well-known magician. The Greek word is where we get “*magi*” from. He was not simply doing sleight-of-hand but was actually practicing sorcery. He was involved with the occult, witchcraft, incantations, and spells. This was forbidden in Deuteronomy 18:9-12: ***“Anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens, or a sorcerer or a charmer or a medium or a necromancer or one who inquires of the dead, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord.”*** Leviticus 20:6 is equally strong: ***“If a person turns to mediums and necromancers, whoring after them, I will set my face against that person and will cut him off from among his people.”***

Those who watched him, were “***amazed,***” which means, “*to be bewitched or astonished.*” He duped the people, putting them under his spell. Simon loved all this attention and walked around saying he was somebody great. The word “***great***” in Greek is where we get “*megalomaniac*” from. This megastar magician was self-absorbed, thought he was all-powerful, and loved to be liked by others.

We read twice that everyone “***paid attention to him.***” They were actually over the top in their adulation, which led them to blaspheme: ***“This man is the power of God that is called Great.”*** Simon claimed to impersonate and emanate the very power of God. As a result, he was both proud and popular. He thought of himself as the “Higher Power.”

False faith often exalts the personalities of people. Genuine Christianity does not elevate self as we see in 2 Corinthians 4:5: ***“For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake.”***

It seems to me, one of the common traits among celebrity leaders and pastors who have recently imploded morally is an egotistical view of self, where some appeared to be more committed to building their “brand” than making much of Christ.

Let me be quick to say pride lurks within each of us and it’s easy to take potshots at other people’s sins. Let’s keep 1 Corinthians 10:12 in mind: **“Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.”** Listen to what God says in Psalms 101:5: **“Whoever has a haughty look and an arrogant heart I will not endure.”** James 4:6 says, **“God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”**

When we have an egotistical view of ourselves, we tend to think of God as little, if we think of Him at all. I’m reminded of a quote from C.S. Lewis in his book, *Prince Caspian* in which he describes a conversation between a lion named Aslan, who represents Christ, and a young girl named Lucy.

“Welcome child,” he said.

“Aslan” said Lucy *“you’re bigger.”*

“That is because you are older, little one” answered he.

“Not because you are?”

“I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger.”

Here’s what I wrote after reflecting on this: *“The more we grow, the more we see Christ as great and glorious. When we stop growing, we think we’re great and glorious, and our view of Him shrinks.”*

Doing Christian things doesn’t make you a Christian.

2. An external view of salvation. Instead of focusing on internal heart change, Simon defaulted to external habits. We see this in verses 12-13: **“But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed.”**

After the Samaritans believed the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized. While some churches baptize babies, the biblical order is always *belief* and then *baptism*. Baptism doesn’t save you, but it is a step of obedience after you are saved.

The Greek word translated “**baptize**” is the verb *baptizo*, which means, “to dip, plunge, or immerse.” The secondary meaning is to “bring under the influence.” Interestingly, while there were Greek words for sprinkling or pouring available to the authors of Scripture, they consistently chose *baptizo* to describe the mode of baptism.

If you’ve been saved and you’re ready to publicly identify yourself as a born-again believer of Jesus Christ, our next baptism service will be on Sunday, September 13 at 3pm at an outdoor pool in Moline. Please let us know of your interest by filling out an online Connection Card and marking baptism.

Verse 12 tells us Simon “**believed**” and was baptized but as we will see, he was not saved. James 2:19 indicates even demons believe. Simon’s belief was only on the surface, not deep in his soul. Saving faith involves a decision of the will, not just intellectual assent or external exercises.

One pastor accurately points out: “*The one means by which the church has been rendered weak and ineffective, more than any other, is by unregenerate people coming in and taking on the outer garments of Christianity...but remaining still unchanged in heart and life. That has ruined more churches than anything else possibly could.*”

Becoming a Christian has nothing to do with external acts like walking an aisle or signing a card, being baptized, having a religious experience, or to quote my friend from the hospital: “*and all that other stuff.*” One can go through spiritual ceremonies and religious rituals and still not be saved.

Let’s continue in verses 14-17: “***Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit.***”

The fact so many Samaritans were getting saved caused the apostles Peter and John to go to Samaria in order to verify the authenticity of their faith and lay hands on them so they would receive the Holy Spirit. While this passage can be confusing, it’s important to note this is the only time the Holy Spirit wasn’t immediately received upon confession of faith. Why was that?

As we learned last weekend, the Jews and the Samaritans had a huge schism between them. Up until this point, most Christians came from a Jewish background. Not wanting this separation to continue once the Samaritans were saved, Peter and John gave their blessing to the Samaritans as full members of the body of Christ. There was to be no division or rival factions in the faith community. There's not to be a Jewish church and a Samaritan church, but one body of Christ.

Since the Book of Acts is a transitional book, the withholding of the Spirit was only temporary, until the apostles could investigate and authenticate the Samaritan's conversions. This was a pivotal moment in the history of the church. The coming of the Holy Spirit upon the Samaritans was a public sign they were bona fide believers.

Listen to Ephesians 4:4-6: ***“There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call – one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”*** That's a good reminder for us today. There is not a black church and a white church and an Asian church and a Latino church. There is one body and one Spirit and one faith.

Simon had an egotistical view of himself and an external view of salvation. The third characteristic of his false faith involved an economic view of the Spirit. What we're learning is this: *Doing Christian things doesn't make you a Christian.*

3. An economic view of the Spirit. Simon's motives are revealed in verses 18-20: ***“Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, saying, ‘Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.’ But Peter said to him, ‘May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!’”***

It was common for magicians to buy magic tricks from other magicians so when Simon saw how the apostles demonstrated spiritual power, he wanted that same power. This reveals he had not been regenerated as he simply wanted to add another trick to his trade. His motivation was monetary gain. Incidentally, Simon has a sin named after him – it's called *“the sin of simony,”* which involves using money to purchase church benefits, religious relics, pastoral positions, or indulgences.

Peter has no tolerance for this as seen in verse 20: ***“May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!”*** He’s saying something like this: *“Accursed be you and your money with you”* or more bluntly, *“May you and your silver end up in hell.”* Simon was a phony, a fake, and a fraud.

To Simon, Jesus was simply a genie who could give him what he wanted. This still goes on today in the world of prosperity theology. The prosperity gospel is a perversion of the gospel of Jesus because God doesn’t reward our faith with increases in health and/or wealth. Prosperity theology sees the Holy Spirit as a power to be put to use for whatever the believer wills.

Costi Hinn, nephew of prosperity preacher Benny Hinn, has rejected the prosperity gospel. This is what he said in an article in Christianity Today called, “Benny Hinn is My Uncle, but Prosperity Preaching is Not for Me.”

Our lifestyle was lavish, our loyalty was enforced, and our version of the gospel was big business. Though Jesus Christ was still a part of our gospel, he was more of a magic genie than the King of Kings. Rubbing him the right way—by giving money and having enough faith—would unlock your spiritual inheritance. God’s goal was not his glory but our gain. His grace was not to set us free from sin but to make us rich. The abundant life he offered wasn’t eternal, it was now. We lived the prosperity gospel.

We need to make sure this kind of theology is not creeping into our beliefs. It’s easy to think we should get what we want from God simply because we give money or serve in some way or try to be good. But that’s simply not true.

Doing Christian things doesn’t make you a Christian.

A fourth characteristic of false faith is an evasive view of sin.

4. An evasive view of sin. Simon refused to repent, even after given the chance in verses 21-24: ***“You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity.’ And Simon answered, ‘Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me.’”***

The main issue for Simon was his heart was not right before God. The heart of the matter is always the matter of the heart. 1 Samuel 16:7 says, ***“For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.”*** Psalm 78:37: ***“Their heart was not steadfast toward him; they were not faithful to his covenant.”*** Because his heart was not right, he had no part of a saving relationship with Christ. His only hope was to ***“repent”*** of his moral evil and pray for God to forgive him.

I’m afraid we don’t speak enough about repentance today. The word literally means, *“to change one’s mind about the direction you’re going and go in a new direction.”* It’s in the aorist imperative, which conveys the sense of *“Do it today! Do not delay!”* Because Simon had not repented, he remained religious but not regenerated.

At its core, repentance is a change of mind, which leads to a change of heart resulting in a change in actions. Or, we could say it like this: repentance is a change of *attitude* and *affections*, which results in *action*.

Repentance gets a bad rap in our culture and in the church, but we must come back to its central importance. John the Baptist’s message was one of repentance as seen in Matthew 3:2: ***“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”*** The first sermon of Jesus contained a command to repent in Mark 1:15: ***“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”***

John adds in Matthew 3:8 that repentance must affect our behavior: ***“Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.”*** We also see this in Acts 26:20: ***“...they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance.”***

Peter presses in verse 23, letting Simon know he is in the ***“gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity.”*** Peter was not a prosperity preacher for sure. The word ***“gall”*** refers to bile. The bile of bitterness was rising in his throat like acid reflux and spewing out on those around him.

It’s possible Peter had Deuteronomy 29:18 in his mind: ***“Beware lest there be among you a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit.”*** Not only was Simon filled with the bile of bitterness, he was also enslaved to iniquity.

Let me remind you Peter was addressing someone who claimed to believe and had been baptized. He did all the outward things but when faced with his sin, he was evasive. Instead of repenting and begging for forgiveness, according to verse 24,

he just wanted his punishment averted: ***“Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me.”*** Simon wanted Peter to pray for him but refused to act personally.

He’s frightened about what might happen to him but gives no evidence of repentance like we see from those who practiced sorcery in Acts 19:19-20: ***“And a number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted the value of them and found it came to fifty thousand pieces of silver.”*** Bible commentators estimate these sorcery manuals had a value of over \$10,000. This was strong proof they had repented and left their life of sorcery.

Simon is not mentioned in the Bible again, but tradition tells us he became the father of Gnostic heresy and violently opposed the gospel. A statue in Rome was erected in his honor with this inscription: *“Simoni Sancto Deo,”* which means, *“To Simon, Holy God.”* What a tragedy! He *“did that baptism thing and all that stuff”* but was still lost in his sins.

Simon serves as a warning to us.

- Do you have an egotistical view of yourself?
- Do you have an external view of salvation?
- Do you have an economic view of the Spirit?
- Do you have an evasive view of sin?

Doing Christian things doesn’t make you a Christian.

Let’s drill down a bit more because the false doctrine that good works somehow saves has saturated churches today.

This month the American Worldview Inventory 2020 discovered a majority of people who describe themselves as Christians (52%) accept a “works-oriented” means to God’s acceptance. Len Munsil, president of Arizona Christian University, which commissioned the study, made these remarks this week:

“The lack of understanding of basic Christian theology is stunning with potentially devastating consequences for individual souls...it’s a wakeup call for the church...to speak, teach and work to restore biblical truth. Many souls will be lost if people are misled by the false notion we can earn

our way to heaven, rather than recognizing the truth that Christ alone and His righteousness are the basis of our salvation.”

This week I read an update from Alex and Laura Logan, our Go Team partners in Japan. Alex described an encounter he had with a woman they have been sharing the gospel with. I have permission to share it with you.

*She said, ‘I feel like if I read the Bible, I can’t perfectly do everything it commands.’ I told her in Japanese that this is one of the main themes of the Bible: we **cannot** live every part of our life perfectly and all have done bad things to different degrees. We all have done things we regret. I went on to explain that only Jesus lived perfectly and was capable to pay the punishment of our sins. The Bible says that for all who ask for forgiveness, God can and will forgive them. But that’s only because of Jesus.*

As I was explaining, she kept saying, “すごい! 知らなかった! 初めて教えてくれた!” Which means, “Wow! I didn’t know that! That’s the first time someone has explained that to me!”

Would you lean in and listen carefully? You may have been baptized and may be a member of a church but 2 Corinthians 13:5, which was written to Christians, gives us this challenge: **“Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? – unless indeed you fail to meet the test!”**

God made human beings to reflect His glory and to have a relationship with Him. But when Adam and Eve sinned, they plunged the whole human race into depravity and death. As a result, we are separated from God and in desperate need of forgiveness. Out of love for us, God the Father sent His Son Jesus to become the substitutionary sacrifice for our sins by dying on the cross in our place. His death was full payment for all our sins and the shedding of His blood satisfied God’s righteous and holy wrath. Jesus took the punishment we deserved, and He was raised on the third day for our justification.

We can’t do enough good to outweigh the bad. Ephesians 2:8-9 says, **“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”** The only way to be saved from your sins and rescued from Hell, is not by doing good works, but by trusting in Christ alone as your Savior. The Bible is clear about the importance of

repenting of sin before you can receive the Savior. Are you ready right now to turn from your selfishness sinfulness and trust Christ as your Savior and Lord?

It's easy to look at religion as a series of lists made up of "do this" or "don't do that." Christianity is not spelled D-O, it's spelled, D-O-N-E. Jesus has already done what you cannot do. Repent and receive Him now.

Life is short. Hell is hot. And eternity is a long time.

It would be tragic if, at the judgment seat of Christ, you heard these words from Jesus recorded in Matthew 7:22-23: ***"On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'"***

Listen. Until you have repented and received Jesus Christ, you are not "good to go." The good news is you don't have "to do all that other stuff" because Jesus has already done all that needs to be done.

If you're ready to trust Christ right now, pray this prayer with me.

Jesus, I admit I'm a sinner. I repent by turning from how I've been living and trust what You did on the Cross when You died in my place, shedding Your blood to pay the price for all that I've done. I want to be at peace with You. I believe You died on the Cross and rose again on the third day, showing Your victory over sin, Satan, death and fear. Now I receive You into my life. I open the door to You. Save me from my sins. I want to be born again. Now give me resurrection power to live the rest of my life for You and under Your leadership. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.