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**Simon Says..."Phony faith yields no joy"  
Acts 8:9-25**

When we were living in Dallas, Texas I had occasion to visit the offices of a huge church in North Dallas. The guy I was meeting with hoping to sell him my Subaru, was one of the over 800 on staff who worked at a 6000 member church in north Dallas called Word of Faith Family Church. His Success and Life TV show brought in 80 to 100 million ever year. He used terrible out of context bible passages to bilk people out of their money as he bullied people into making vows of faith, typically \$1000 to get their miracle. As I walked into the office foyer, I immediately recognized the church from the highway billboards and TV commercials that invited people to the church. It was filled with opulence and visual wealth. In the middle of the foyer, on a pedestal with mini-spotlights illuminating it, was a 3' by 5' foot oil painting of the pastor Bob Tilton. It was a slightly smaller picture of the man out on the billboard. There he was in all his glory. There were flowers surrounding it and mementos, declaring how great a guy he was, and I was struck at how much it looked like a shrine. He was wealthy. He was powerful with great charisma that drew thousands to his services. But it was obvious he was so phony...I wondered how long it would last. It turned out just a couple months later you may remember seeing ABC's Prime Time Live expose' on him and his world tumbled down on top of him. A visit to the Crystal Tabernacle reveals the wind whistling through the broken stain glass windows. In the years after his tumble, his second wife was quoted by the Dallas times as saying Tilton would drink himself into oblivion and wake up in a blind rage declaring he was the pope and scream about the rats eating his brains. The Leopard eventually shows his spots.

As I studied this mornings text, I immediately thought of Bob Tilton and others who seemed to me a lot like a guy named Simon from Acts chapter 8. I look at some of the preachers on TV and it seems they just exude Christian phoniness and are in it just to pad their own pocketbooks and pump up their own egos. I read of their list of misdeeds and I get disgusted with their words and manners and fluffy hairdos. Then I start to wonder about myself. Maybe I don't go to that extreme. Maybe I'm not that obvious. Maybe I'm not bilking millions out of people and running off in wild sin. But in what ways do I try to use the Christian religion to pump up my ego? I wonder how many sermons are preached in order to impress others? How many songs have been sung in our church in order to showcase our own talent? How many conversations are designed simply to impress others with our knowledge of the Bible? How many times have we done something simply to convince people of how Godly we are? Religion becomes corrupt whenever humans attempt to use God's power to make themselves powerful or look great in humans eyes...and really its all under the guise of God's power, because none of that comes from God anyway.

We continue our study of the book of Acts. In Acts 1:8 Jesus has declared mission critical is for his disciples to share the good news with the entire world. Starting in Jerusalem and then rippling out into Judea, Samaria and into the remotest parts of the earth. Jesus sends the Holy Spirit down to empower and help the believers accomplish this God sized task. The results are infectious and powerful as this small group of believers multiplies and grows in their love for each other and their passion to tell the good news truth that God has provided forgiveness and a Savior in Jesus Christ. But the mission does not proceed unchallenged. There are external and internal forces that threaten to snuff out and kill the message. The Religious Jewish leaders see their own positions in danger and persecute and imprison and kill the early Christians. There are threats that come from the inside. Threats of

favoritism and prejudice and greed and materialism and righteous hypocrisy, all things that could weaken and pour cancer into the mission of cross. They all threaten to undo the work of God and God's people, but the preaching of the truth continues on.

In chapter 8 of Acts, Phillip has taken the good news to the city of Samaria. A revival filled with joy breaks out. Many people respond to the good news. In fact wherever Christ, there is joy...but Christ isn't in all the ministries that claim the name of Christ. Indeed some are phony and need to be exposed. For phony faith yields no joy. This morning we are going to look at the threat that Simon posed to the spreading of the gospel and we will learn how to spot a phony faith; in ourselves and in others. I believe the author of Acts inserted this story here about Simon as a warning to watch out when your ministry may be successful that there will be those who see power and money and people and fame and prominence and care little about a heart of repentant humility before God.

Lets read together Acts 8:9-25 (READ) Simon Magnus they called him. Simon the great had power and practiced magic in the city of Samaria. He astonished people with what he was able to do. He himself claimed to be great. He probably had a herald calling out before him; Here comes Simon the magnificent. Make way for the great Simon. V.10 tells us that everyone from the slaves and paupers to the rich, wealthy and influential all great and small paid attention when Simon stood up to do his thing. They all assumed it was some great power of God. And they all had made Simon a rich and famous celebrity and hero for a long time.

But then Phillip showed up in town with his message of the good news about Jesus. Phillip performed great miracles and healings and many people that were controlled by demons were freed. They were believing and were baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. And even Simon can recognize true power when he sees it and v.13 it says that Simon also believed and was baptized and even spent time hanging out with

Phillip amazed at the signs and wonders he saw being performed. But Simons belief was not in the word of God and its life changing power to forgive sin. Simons belief was in the power itself and the miracles he saw Philip perform James 2:19 tells us that “even the demons believe in God and shudder. “ but they do not humbly submit to his lordship and authority. They in rebellion have linked arms with Lucifer.

At this point I’m sure Phillip must have thought his profession of faith was genuine. He didn’t deny him when Simon got in the line to be baptized. He didn’t seem to mind that Simon hung out with him to watch. I wonder how much it helped to have a famous local celebrity to attract a crowd and that this celebrity had joined the cause. It all looks like a great thing to advance the kingdom of God.

V.14 The leadership in Jerusalem heard the great news that a revival was breaking out in Samaria and so they sent Peter and John to check it out. Peter and John came down to confirm that they had indeed received the word of God and then they also prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit...for the Holy Spirit had not yet fallen upon them.

Why the delay of the Holy Spirit coming upon these believers? The point is not that a laying on of hands is needed before one can receive the Holy Spirit. No in several other instances the Spirit comes without any hands laying. I think God withheld the Holy Spirit indwelling in this unique case so that the apostles could be there and be a part of the start of this Samaritan church and confirm that they were too a part of the whole church of Jesus Christ. There had been in the past such a history of tension and religious separation between the Samaritans and Jews in Jerusalem that they had their own temple on Mt. Gerizim. Jews walked clear around Samaria just to avoid going there. Jesus came and broke down that dividing wall that separates. I think God delayed the Spirit indwelling to avoid an early split in the church. It is the Spirit that unifies. We are one in the Spirit and the Jewish leaders and the believers

in Jerusalem needed to see clearly that they were on the same team, they were of one faith, one spirit, one baptism. They were unified and one together.

So in v.17 we see that the apostles came and laid their hands on the people and they received the Holy Spirit. It doesn't say how they could tell the Spirit came. It may have simply come and they just knew it or could tell the difference. They may have spoken in tongues. There may have been rushing wind and little flames of fire. They may have simply begun to exercise their gifts that the Holy Spirit gives. But in some way they could tell the spirit had showed up in power and Simon was watching. He thought it was pretty cool thing to be able to lay your hands on someone and have they receive the Spirit. He liked the idea of being an intermediary for God's power. He liked the idea of being the one who could transmit God's power to others. Now that...he said to himself is a very marketable commodity. Simon had been hanging out with Phillip looking for the catch, the trick, the magic words to get the action and now Simon zeros in on what he sees. The laying on of hands. He pulls Peter off to the side and whispers. "Hey...how much for the trick? I've got about 50,000 here if you'll just show me how you do that. I'll pay you anything to be able to lay hands on people in order to give them the God power. Give me that power. I'm a rich man and I will pay you very well. Come on deputize me. Let me in on the trick.

Peter sees right through his phony faith. Peter is not at all going to kiss up to this celebrity rich and famous guy who jumps on the religious band wagon simply to make a buck and expand his power. Peter uses the harshest of words in the Greek language to express himself. Most of the translations tame down his words. Some of the older translations say, "Go to perdition with you and your money" But literally Peter tells Simon, "To hell with you and your money" Do you think this is what following Christ is all about? Do you think this is just another business opportunity to bilk the poor out of their money? I hope you get buried by

all your money. You have missed the entire point. Get right with God. Repent of your sinful attitudes. You are in the bondage of sin and bitterness.

Simon reply in v.24 is telling. He won't even pray in repentance to God. His reply "Oh pray for me yourselves" is a cop out. Pastors hear it all the time. Oh I'm not ready to pray. I can't do that. You pray for me. Peter wanted Simon to get down on his knees and repent and confess before Almighty God. There is nothing wrong with praying for people, but Simon was refusing to do what he challenged to do and wanted to pass the buck onto others. He was more concerned with avoiding judgment from God than he was in getting right with God. He was one of Satan's clever counterfeits that needed to be exposed so that the gospel could continue to go out in power and in joy. For phony faith yields no joy. In reading the early church fathers they mention that Simon never gave up. He became an arch enemy of the true church and father of the messed up belief of Gnosticism. Heretics that peddled special knowledge to gain powers.

Simon wasn't as great as he claimed to be to the people of Samaria...he knew it. But he certainly could when the real thing showed up in town. Like a Cubic Zirconia ring may sparkle some and it may fool many people, but when held up and compared next to the real thing diamond, its flaws are exposed. In the same way Simon's glaring defects are easily seen when matched up against the true faith. Simon knew Philip had the real power from God and wanted it...but he thought he could buy it. Simon thought that he could earn, buy or barter to get the power of God. Wrong.

There are several things we can learn from the story of Simon? Whenever God sows his seed, he will get true believers growing up but Satan will try to sow bad seed in there and mix in his counterfeits. One is reminded of the parable of the different soils. Some soils the seed is planted in is deep and rich and the life of Christ grows rich and strong.

In others the soil is thin and rocky and it spring up fast with a lot of enthusiasm and excitement, but when that all dies away...it wilts because it was based on the emotional show rather than the real heart stuff. The wheat and the tares will grow up in the same field. The sheep and the goats hang out in the same field. We need to be able to tell the real from the fake.

This passage warns us of how to spot a phony faith and counterfeit Christian. First. If a person exalts himself rather than Christ he is a phony. Ask yourself when you are evaluating a preacher or teacher. Who is getting the glory here is it God or them? If some person other than Christ is exalted then it is a false ministry and will yield no long term joy or fruit and will cause great havoc for the true kingdom of God. Second, Is the crowd that is being drawn because God has showed up and the life of the spirit is evident and fruit of the spirit is being displayed? Or are they drawing a crowd based on fleshly attraction? Third. Are they exercising counterfeit power? Is what they are doing from God or from themselves? Fourth, are they simply going through the religious motions but doing it for the wrong motives? Fifth. Are they preoccupied with the material rather than the spiritual? When they talk it all about increasing personal wealth and material stuff? or do they challenge and model a heart that is for Jesus?

Not only can we learn how to better spot the phony faiths. Second thing we can learn from this passage is that we simply cannot and should not even try to buy power from God. When the early church was only several hundred years old and it became the "in" religion under Roman emperor Constantine. If you had enough money you could buy yourself into a bishops role. The Cardinals hat went to the highest bidder and they badly exploited their positions for further gain and power. Later in church history segments became so messed up the current pope started to sell something called indulgences. They were preforgiven sins. If you knew you wanted to lie next week you could by an indulgence to lie

and it would already be forgiven. You could get a stamped certificate from the pope that proved it. Of course if you wanted to commit murder or adultery that was a much more expensive. That is the way they raised the money to build St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican in Rome. Right hand man of the pope, Theodore Tezel travels from village to village in Europe and told the people whose loved ones had died that they better pay money to make sure their dead loved ones would be going to heaven and not stuck in purgatory. He even made up a little song about it." As soon as your coin in the coffer does ring, your relative soul into heaven will spring." Martin Luther and the reformation reacted strongly against this gross wrongdoing and thus came about the reformation of the church that salvation is based not on works or money but man and women and boys and girls are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone.

When we seek spiritual power or abilities or put ourselves forward...we too face the same sin of Simon. When we are preaching simply to gain status. When we teach classes just so people will say, "Wow you are a great teacher and godly person." We are facing the sin of Simon. When we lead worship or sing a solo simply so people will look at us and say wow, talented and godly. What a package! We are facing the sin of Simon. When we want to get into a leadership position to pump up our ego or satisfy our needs for significance, we face the sin of Simon. Certainly none of our motives will be 100 percent pure this side of heaven. I didn't go into ministry for several years simply because I didn't want significance and looking good to be the motivation. But we need to be aware of it. We need to check ourselves. We need to ask each other. How's your heart? Is it right before God? Are you ready to minister. Are you ready before God to sing that song? Lead that group? Preach that sermon? If not...then get right with God or step back. For if we are trying to buy or build up and trying to minister to gain significance we will be terribly disappointed. We will have no joy...because phony faith yield no

joy. In fact, it's a threat to ministry. Phony ministry can yield surface results for a time. Even big time numbers of people might be showing up. But it won't last if it has no foundation. Look at the last line of v.25 that tells us this threat of Simon was dealt with and it didn't stop the good news. "and they were preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans." No matter how cleverly Satan tries to knock the gospel off track...the train of truth keeps on rolling. For truth will stand when all else falls.