

Main Idea: In Acts 8:9-25 we meet a man who said he was saved—and most people thought he was saved, at least for awhile. We’re going to consider three phases of Simon’s life, and then take personal inventory as we consider the danger of easy-believism.

- I. Simon’s past (9-11)
 - A. He was powerful (9a).
 - B. He was proud (9b).
 - C. He was persuasive (10-11).
- II. Simon’s profession (12-13)
 - A. He heard the right message (12).
 1. Philip preached the kingdom of God.
 2. Philip preached Christ.
 - B. He gave the right response (13).
 1. He believed.
 2. He was baptized.
 3. He followed.
- III. Simon’s problem (14-25)
 - A. He received good follow-up (14-17).
 - B. He showed his true colors (18-19).
 1. He had a wrong view of God.
 2. He had a wrong view of himself.
 3. He had a wrong view of ministry.
 - C. He was exposed (20-23).
 - D. He refused to change (24).
 1. Though he asked for prayer, he didn’t pray.
 2. Though he seemed sorry, he didn’t repent.

Take Inventory: Three things to consider...

1. It’s one thing to profess Christ.
2. It’s another thing to possess Christ.
3. Only God knows the difference.

Scripture Reading: 1 Timothy 6:3-10

You bring home a melon from the store. You’re looking forward to the juicy refreshment that’s coming. But when you cut into it, lo and behold it is...you guessed it...*rotten*.

Ever had that experience? What you see isn’t always what you get. That’s true of products you buy. That’s also true of people.

Looks can be misleading. We find a vivid illustration of this in Acts 8. I’ve entitled this message, “*Simon Says...But Can You Believe Him?*”

I loved playing Simon Says as a kid.² Simon says, “Raise your right hand.” Simon says, “Jump up and down.” Simon says, “Touch your nose.” And everybody is supposed to do what Simon says.

In Acts 8 we meet a man named Simon who gave commands, and people did what he said. But then he told Peter and John what to do, and they didn’t do what he said. In fact, they told him what to do.

**Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For an earlier development of this text, see the Acts series preached at WBC in 2001.

² Who is Simon? And why do we have to do what he says? Daily Muse says this game is centuries-old and was originally called “**Cicero** dicit fac hoc”—Latin for “**Cicero** says do this.” Back in the times of Rome, when revered statesman **Marcus Tullius Cicero** said to do something, you did it. Jan 23, 2017

[Simon who? The Story Behind A Playground Favorite Simon Says](http://kool1017.com/simon-who-the-story-behind-a-playground-favorite-simon-says/)
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Simon is an intriguing character. Simon was a sorcerer who used his power to tell people what to do. Then he got saved, or at least *looked like* he did, but in time resorted to old tactics and started telling people what to do again.

The Lord wants us to know about Simon. That's why His Spirit guided Luke to tell us about him in Acts 8. We're going to see three phases of Simon's life in Acts 8:9-25, and then take personal inventory as we consider the danger of easy-believism.

At the beginning of Acts 8 God in essence told His church, "It's time to go to Samaria." You may recall from our last study that He used persecution to accomplish this task. Following the death of Stephen, Saul of Tarsus began to attack the believers in Jerusalem. Consequently, the Christians fled for their lives. Some ended up in Samaria.

Remember, before the Lord left the earth He told His followers they were to be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (1:8). And the Sovereign Lord used the hostility of Saul to open up a fruitful door of ministry in Samaria.

Philip spearheaded the effort. Twenty-five years later, this same Philip was living in the city of Caesarea, where Luke and Paul visited him. On that occasion, Luke called him "Philip the Evangelist, one of the Seven (Acts 21:8)." That's quite a commendation. Philip served *in* the church—as one of the Seven. And he served to *extend* the church—as an Evangelist.

Here's a man who had a heart to reach lost people. In fact, he was willing to cross the tracks to do it. To the Jews, the Samaritans were second class, half-breeds. But to Philip, they were people loved by God who needed to know of the Savior. So he went to them.

My hunch is that though Luke put the spotlight on Philip in Acts 8, Philip was merely representative of a host of unnamed ambassadors of Christ. The church was full of "Philips," Christians who took the great commission seriously. Philip was a pioneer, a trail-blazer, yet there were many who walked the trail he opened. Verse 4 makes it clear, "Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went."

Know this. When a church takes its mission seriously, when its members take the good news of Christ to lost people around them, things will happen. There will be fruit. There will also be imitation fruit. We see both in Acts 8.

In Acts 8:9-40, Luke records two incidents to show what the church faced as its mission expanded. We meet Simon the sorcerer in verses 9-25, and we meet the Ethiopian eunuch in verses 26-40. With Simon, we see the gospel confronting a charlatan. With the Ethiopian, we see the gospel reaching a true convert. The church reaped fruit *and* imitation fruit. It's no different today, as we'll see.

This morning, we're going to take a close look at Simon. This is a crucial study for we live in a nation where, according to a 2017 Gallup poll, three-quarters of Americans identify with a Christian faith.³ A Barna study gives the same percentage.⁴ There are 325 million people in the United States. That means 240 million people identify themselves at least in some measure with the term Christian.

Yes, we need to look carefully at Simon.

I. Simon's past (9-11)

"Now for some time a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria. He boasted that he was someone great,¹⁰ and all the

³ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/224642/2017-update-americans-religion.aspx>

⁴ <https://www.barna.com/research/state-church-2016/>

people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, ‘This man is the divine power known as the Great Power.’¹¹ They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his magic.”

When you play “Simon Says,” the leader tries to talk fast and convincingly in order to trick people. The Simon of Acts 8 was good at both. He was a fast talker, and he was convincing. Luke informs us of three characteristics of Simon prior to his exposure to Christianity.

A. He was powerful (9a). The text says he practiced sorcery. He’d done it for some time, too, and according to the KJV, he “bewitched the people of Samaria.” Whether he utilized trickery or demonic power, we’re not told. Perhaps both.

B. He was proud (9b). Luke says he “boasted that he was someone great.” Many believe this Simon is the same man referred to in later Christian writings as Simon Magnus, the father of Gnostic heresy. The early church fathers reported that he viewed himself as God incarnate.

Our text says that Simon himself boasted that he was someone great. Verse 10 indicates the people called him “The Great Power.” And Simon soaked in the adoration.

Pride is deadly. “Pride goes before the fall,” says Proverbs 16:18. “When pride comes, then comes disgrace,” explains Proverbs 11:2. Pride cost Lucifer his home in heaven. Pride cost Adam and Eve their home with God in the garden. Paul says in Galatians 6:3, “If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself.”

The truth is, the proud cannot be saved. Only the humble can, those who acknowledge their spiritual bankruptcy before God. God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble (James 4:6).

I see little evidence of genuine humility in the case of Simon anywhere in this story, only a pseudo-sorrow when his apparent cover is blown. Powerful, proud, and...

C. He was persuasive (10-11). The people of Samaria gave him their attention, applauded him as a deity, and actually followed him. Luke says he “amazed” them, such was his power of persuasion.

President Calvin Coolidge invited some people from his hometown to dinner at the White House. Since they did not know how to behave at such an occasion, they thought the best policy would be just to do what the President did. The time came for serving coffee. The President poured his coffee into a saucer. As soon as the home folk saw it, they did the same. The next step for the President was to pour some milk and add a little sugar to the coffee in the saucer. The home folks did the same. They thought for sure that the next step would be for the President to take the saucer with the coffee and begin sipping it. But the President didn’t do so. He leaned over, placed the saucer on the floor and called the cat.⁵

I get the sense that this Simon was a very charismatic, magnetic character. He hypnotized the people. He did it for a long time. And the people blindly followed him. He was, indeed, powerful, proud, and persuasive. Such was Simon’s past.

That all changed, however, the day Philip came to town. Notice verses 12-13, “But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw.”

⁵ Source unknown

Wow! Talk about a vivid demonstration of the power of the gospel! How can you penetrate a community that is enslaved to the evil one? How can you rescue people who are blindly devoted to a dominant, charismatic leader? How do you go about breaking Satan's fierce grip on individuals for whom Christ died?

Some say we need to "bind Satan" by marching around city blocks, exorcising the demons, and claiming the territory for Christ. But God didn't tell us to engage in a "binding" ministry, but a "preaching" ministry. Christ already defeated Satan at the Cross. We don't need to bind him. We need to "preach" Christ, just like Philip did.

Paul later underscored the vital role of preaching in 1 Corinthians 2:1-4, "When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. ²For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. ⁴My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, ⁵so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power."

Paul elaborates in 2 Corinthians 4:4-6, "⁴The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. ⁵For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. ⁶For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."

When Philip preached Christ, the results were staggering. An entire city was set free from demonic control. Even Simon himself was affected.

II. Simon's profession (12-13)

It must have been quite a day. No doubt there was rejoicing, with quite a few tears shed. Luke says the Samaritans believed Philip as he preached the good news. And lo and behold, even Simon the ringleader made a profession of faith!

Or did he? Let's take a close look at his profession. He certainly had two things in his favor.

A. He heard the right message (12). He heard it from Philip, a man commended by the apostles in Acts 6. Realize this. Not just *any* message can save a person. It must be the *right* message. Philip's message involved two ingredients.

1. *Philip preached the kingdom of God.* And...

2. *Philip preached Christ.* In reality, those two ingredients comprise one and the same message.

What does it mean to preach the good news of "the kingdom of God?" Sadly, most modern evangelistic presentations seldom mention anything about God's *kingdom*. Yet the kingdom of God is the theme that unites the whole Bible.

Perhaps Philip's message went something like this:

"Men and women, the God who rules heaven and earth has a message for you. He is the King. This is His world. He made it, and He created man to take care of it.

But the first man committed treason and went his own way rather than God's way. He tried to establish his own kingdom in God's world, but in effect he became a slave in the kingdom of darkness. He brought upon himself God's wrath.

God had every right to destroy mankind, but in His grace He purposed to rescue a people for His glory. He chose to send His own Son into the world to reconcile sinners to Himself. And so, almost forty years ago, King Jesus came.

King Jesus lived a perfect life. Just a few years ago, He died on a Roman Cross to pay sin's penalty. Three days later He arose from the dead, thereby conquering the enemies of God's kingdom. Now God promises to rescue from the kingdom of darkness all who will submit to Him through repentance and belief in His Son."

Simon heard that message, or something like it, the right message, the *only* message that can save men. Just like you, my friend, are hearing it today.

But merely *hearing* about Jesus Christ isn't enough. We must offer the right response. As Simon did...

B. He gave the right response (13). Luke says, "Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw." Notice that Simon responded in three ways.

1. *He believed.* Apparently, just like the other Samaritans did. Verse 12 says they believed. Verse 13 says Simon believed.

2. *He was baptized.* If you have believed in Jesus, God commands you to make your faith public through believer's baptism (Matt 28:19-20). Baptism is the first step of obedience a follower of Jesus must take. It's how we make known in a public way what has happened in the privacy of our hearts. We let witnesses know that we have put our trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. Simon did so.

3. *He followed.* A disciple, by definition, is a *follower*. But wait. There seems to be a yellow caution flag in verse 13. Whom did Simon follow? Was it Christ? Actually, Luke says he followed *Philip*. There's nothing inherently wrong with saying he followed Philip, for Paul later told the Corinthians, "Follow me as I follow Christ (1 Cor 11:1)." We need models to follow.

But *why* did Simon follow Philip? What motivated him? Was it a desire to know Christ better? What did Luke say captivated Simon? Verse 13—"the great signs and miracles he saw." Keep that in mind as we consider the third phase of Simon's life.

III. Simon's problem (14-25)

Before we get to his problem, we find out what it wasn't. A lot of young "converts" today fizzle out due to a lack of good follow-up. You don't bring a baby home from the hospital and tell him the steaks are in the freezer. Nor do you do that with a baby Christian. But that didn't happen to Simon.

A. He received good follow-up (14-17). From Philip, for starters. And then from the apostles themselves. Notice verses 14-17, "When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. ¹⁵ When they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, ¹⁶ because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them; they had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. ¹⁷ Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit."

Some point to this account as proof for a so-called "second work of grace." They say that receiving Jesus as Savior isn't enough. You must also receive the Holy Spirit, an event that occurs later, and which, they often say, is accompanied by phenomenon such as tongues-speaking.

But that position fails to take into account the transitional nature of God's work in the book of Acts. Why did God make the Samaritans wait to receive the Holy Spirit until the apostles came? The answer, really, is quite simple. He waited because He wanted *one* church, not two.

Remember, the Jews and Samaritans had been bitter rivals for centuries. By making the Samaritans wait until the Jewish apostles came, God was healing the rift. He made it clear to both parties that in Christ there is no “Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female (Gal 3:28).”

God did the same thing when the gospel reached the Gentiles in Acts 10:44. He made sure the apostles were represented when the Gentiles received the Holy Spirit, not to establish a pattern for us, but to prevent a fragmented church.

The Lord doesn't want a *Jewish* church, nor a *Samaritan* church, nor a *Gentile* church, nor an American church, nor a white church, or black church, or Hispanic church. Indeed, in the book of Acts He formed *one* church, made up first of Jews, then Samaritans, and finally Gentiles, which refers to the people groups of the world.

That's the reason for the delay we're seeing in Acts when it comes to the reception of the Holy Spirit. Today, there is no delay, nor was there in the New Testament after Acts 20. From Acts 20 to this very moment, the very moment a person receives Christ, he receives the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:13).

At any rate, Simon received good follow-up. From Philip and two apostles no less. But in time...

B. He showed his true colors (18-19). Here's how. Notice verses 18-19, “When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money ¹⁹ and said, ‘Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.’”

I see at least three problems surfacing from Simon.

1. *He had a wrong view of God.* Luke says he offered the apostles money. He thought he could buy the “rights” to the Holy Spirit. Talk about a distorted view of the Almighty and the way He works. Mechanical. Do *this*, to get *that*. That's the way it worked with the demonic world, and now he tries the same with God.

2. *He had a wrong view of himself.* In fact, Simon seems to be as full of himself now as he was before his so-called conversion. Just listen to his request, “Give *me* also this ability so that everyone on whom *I* lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.” Simon wants power. Simon wants to be in control again. And Simon thinks he has the right to make such a request. It's back to *Simon says*.

It's been well said, “You cannot at the same time show that you are clever and that Christ is wonderful.”

3. *He had a wrong view of ministry.* To put it simply, Simon thought he could do gospel ministry the same way he did things when he practiced sorcery. In his old life, it was all about power, money, and control. Now he has added Jesus to his arsenal.

Simon left an indelible mark on the world. The English word “simony” today refers to the unworthy buying and selling of ecclesiastical offices. Simony is based on the notion that you can buy or earn God's blessings.

And though Simon is gone, simony is alive and well in today's world. It occurs any time a person turns God into a means for personal gain. When a businessman comes to church hoping to make connections, that's simony. So is teaching a Sunday School class to gain a following. Or serving in a ministry so people will think you're godly. Or ministering in music because you love men's applause. Or spending time as a camp counselor because you love the feeling of being needed.

I'll do this for you, God, so You'll give me what I want.

What does God think of simony? What happened next to Simon makes it very clear.

C. He was exposed (20-23). “Peter answered: “May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! ²¹ You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. ²² Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. ²³ For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin.”

J. B. Phillips translates Peter’s opening words, “To hell with you and your money!” That may shock our ears, but it’s pretty much what the Greek text says. As I. H. Marshall explains, “It is the utterance of a curse against Simon, consigning him and his money with him to destruction. It is thus tantamount to excommunication from the church, or, perhaps more accurately, it is in the nature of a solemn warning to Simon regarding what will surely happen to him if he does not change his attitude.”⁶

Fundamentally, though Simon had gone through the right external motions, he had a heart problem. Peter said, “Your *heart* is not right before God.” The literal rendering is, “Your heart is not straight (*eutheia*).” In other words, “Simon, you’ve got a *crooked heart*.”

“Wait a minute,” someone might say, “That’s being judgmental. You can’t know a person’s heart.”

While it’s true that we can’t *see* a person’s heart, we can *interpret* a person’s heart. Remember Jesus’ words in Luke 6:43-45? “No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. ⁴⁴ Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thornbushes, or grapes from briars. ⁴⁵ The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks.”

It’s called fruit-inspecting. If you want to know the condition of a person’s heart, listen to what comes out of his or her mouth. When a man says, “I’ll give you money if you’ll give me the power of the Holy Spirit,” his words are giving you a clear picture of his heart. When another person says, “I don’t care what the Bible says. I’m going to do what makes me happy,” that person has just revealed the condition of his or her heart.

Ponder Jesus’ words in Matthew 7:16-23 “By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them. ²¹ “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. ²² 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?’ ²³ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’”

Please understand this. A profession of faith doesn’t prove a person is saved. Baptism doesn’t either. By their fruit you will know, Jesus said.

Don’t miss the risk Peter is taking here. Remember, this Simon is the most influential person in the city. He’s quite a catch for the kingdom. What will happen to this newly formed church if it loses Simon? We can’t afford to lose powerful, wealthy people like Simon, can we?

To which Peter would reply, “We can’t afford to *keep* people like Simon. Indeed, the church that doesn’t deal with Simons will soon cease to exist.”

⁶ I. H. Marshall, *Acts*, p. 159.

Warren Wiersbe makes this observation, “The early church had its priorities straight: it was more important to preach the Word than to win the support of the wealthy and influential people of the world.”⁷

We need to give careful thought to this. James Boice helps us by offering a valuable insight, “Compare how churches function today in terms of membership with how they functioned in what was probably the strongest period of all for American churches, the age of the Puritans. In those days membership in the churches did not represent a large percentage of the population, perhaps only 6 or 7 percent of the population as contrasted with 45 or 46 percent now. Yet the churches were tremendously effective. One reason is that today, if a church has a membership of two thousand people, it probably knows where about one thousand of those members are, and about five hundred come to church. But in the days of the Puritans, if a church had five hundred members, one thousand were in church and the congregation was having an impact on at least two thousand. The Puritan practice suggests that it is not wise to make membership in a church too easy.”⁸

Peter wasn't into church growth. He was interested in church health. That's why he exposed Simon. How did Simon respond? Simply put...

D. He refused to change (24). “Then Simon answered, ‘Pray to the Lord for me so that nothing you have said may happen to me.’”

Pray for me, he said. You say, “What's wrong with asking for prayer? That's a good response, isn't it?” The problem with Simon isn't what he did, but what he *didn't* do.

1. *Though he asked for prayer, he didn't pray.* And remember, that's what Peter told him to do. “Pray to the Lord. Perhaps He will forgive you.” But Simon said, “You pray for me.” As before, Simon said. That's how he approached life.

2. *Though he seemed sorry, he didn't repent.* Instead of praying, he asked for prayer. Instead of repenting, he tried to avoid consequences. He was more concerned about avoiding judgment than getting right with God.

Simon wasn't being humble. He was being disobedient. His response was quite simply a cop out. He passed the buck. Peter told him what to do, yet Simon refused to do it. He refused to pray and repent.

Listen. If *we* have sin in our lives, then *we* are the ones who need to take action. We need to pray, and we need to repent. In fact, anything else—even a request for prayer—is simply avoiding the issue.

So what happened to Simon? Did he take to heart Peter's admonition? Did he pray and repent? Luke doesn't say. Luke merely goes on with the story and tells us in verse 25, “When they had testified and proclaimed the word of the Lord, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many Samaritan villages.”

So how about it, was Simon a saved man? I don't know. He presented himself as a saved man, and no doubt others viewed him as such. For a while.

You say, “But the text says that Simon *believed*. Doesn't that mean he was saved?”

It's true that a person who exhibits genuine faith is saved, but it's also true that the demons believe yet tremble. There is a *deficient* faith.

The question that remains is this. What was the basis of Simon's faith? Did he believe in the Word of God, or did he merely believe in the miracles he saw Philip

⁷ W. Wiersbe, p. 436.

⁸ James Boice, *Acts*, pp. 136-7.

perform? Only God possesses the final answer to that question, but the fruit certainly isn't there.⁹

In the end, of course, the spotlight isn't on Simon. It's on us, and here's why. God preserved this account to warn us. Simon is no longer be alive today, but there are plenty of "Simons" who are. They may be serving as deacons, Sunday School teachers, camp staff workers, or pastors. It's called easy-believism, and it's rampant in a country where 240 million people identify themselves as Christian.

Take Inventory: Three things to consider...

1. *It's one thing to profess Christ.* And in order to be saved you must profess Christ. You must confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord. Making a profession of faith is essential. The problem is, it's not enough. Simon said the right words, but Peter said his heart was crooked.

Have you ever prayed a prayer to receive Christ as your Savior? And have you ever been baptized to make a public profession of your allegiance to Him? If you haven't, you need to. But know this. It's one thing to profess Christ.

2. *It's another thing to possess Christ.* Satan is a counterfeit artist. This account in Acts 8 shows us how close a person can come to Christ, and still be lost. Simon heard the Word. He saw the power of the Word. He witnessed the true conversion experience of many other people. He even gave a profession of faith, was baptized, and became part of the church. But in the end, he was simply what he had always been. Until Peter came along, he had deceived everyone, including himself. Everyone that is *except God*.

Dear friends, it's a fact. It's possible to profess Christ, yet not possess Christ. It's possible to claim to be a Christian, yet be a counterfeit. A person can think he is a child of God, yet still belong to the kingdom of darkness. For in the end...

3. *Only God knows the difference.* And He does know the difference, and will make it clear to us if we approach Him humbly. Let's ask Him to help us see the true condition of our hearts today.

⁹ See Wiersbe, p. 435.