

“Simon the Sorcerer”

Acts 8:4-24

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Introduction:

Over and over again, we are reminded that all of us make mistakes. Perhaps you can remember what happened less than a year ago when a Madison company produced a road sign for an exit off of Highway 51 just south of Wausau. And what makes this sign unusual is that every single word is misspelled, except for the word **“Exit.”** Someone apparently had a bad day at work and misspelled not only the word **“business,”** but also the names of both towns at that exit! Now I realize that not all of our mistakes may be this public, but over and over again, we are reminded that we are not perfect.

This morning, then, I would like for us to consider a question that comes up on a regular basis, and the question is: **When a Christian falls into sin, what must that person do next in order to be right in the sight of God?** And this is a very important question! As Christians, hopefully we struggle and we try hard not to sin, but there are times when all of us will fall short. It may not be something that is seen by thousands of motorists every day, but sin is serious and has the potential to separate even a Christian from God.

With this in mind, I would invite you to turn with me to a passage of Scripture in **Acts 8**—a passage that shows a person becoming a Christian, it shows him falling into sin, and then it also shows what he was told to do in response to his sin. I am referring, of course, to the account of the conversion of Simon the Sorcerer. The passage is found in **Acts 8**, and in our pew Bibles the Scripture starts on **page 1714**. In the opening verses of **Acts 8**, the church is scattered because of the persecution that was started by Saul (the same man who later came to be known as Paul). But as they ran for their lives, the early Christians were not silent, but the Bible says (starting in **Acts 8:4**)...

⁴ Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word. ⁵ Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them. ⁶ The crowds with one accord were giving attention to what was said by Philip, as they heard and saw the signs which he was performing. ⁷ For in the case of many who had unclean spirits, they were coming out of them shouting with a loud voice; and many who had been paralyzed and lame were healed. ⁸ So there was much rejoicing in that city.

And with that, we come to the account of Simon. If you will, please look with me at **Acts 8:9-24**. I would like for us to carefully consider these verses and then keep our Bibles open to this passage throughout this morning's lesson as we apply it to our situation today. **Acts 8:9-24**...

⁹ Now there was a man named Simon, who formerly was practicing magic in the city and astonishing the people of Samaria, claiming to be someone great; ¹⁰ and they all, from smallest to greatest, were giving attention to him, saying, "This man is what is called the Great Power of God." ¹¹ And they were giving him attention because he had for a long time astonished them with his magic arts. ¹² But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike. ¹³ Even Simon himself believed; and after being baptized, he continued on with Philip, and as he observed signs and great miracles taking place, he was constantly amazed. ¹⁴ Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent them Peter and John, ¹⁵ who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. ¹⁶ For He had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ¹⁷ Then they began laying their hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸ Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, ¹⁹ saying, "Give this authority to me as well, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." ²⁰ But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! ²¹ "You have no part or portion in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. ²² "Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that, if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you. ²³ "For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity." ²⁴ But Simon answered and said, "Pray to the Lord for me yourselves, so that nothing of what you have said may come upon me."

As we look at this passage, I would like for us to consider three stages in Simon's life.

I. **And the first thing we notice is that Simon (once a sorcerer) became OBEDIENT TO THE GOSPEL.**

In **verse 9**, we find that Simon was "*formerly practicing magic.*" He was "*astonishing the people of Samaria,*" and he was, "*claiming to be someone great.*" In **verse 10**, the people of the area were referring to Simon as the "*Great Power of God.*" I know that when we think of a magician today, we normally think of someone who is quick with his hands, someone who has you pick a card, any card,

someone who pulls a rabbit out of a hat, someone who gets paid to entertain at a child's birthday party. But the magician we are talking about here is more of a sorcerer, someone who is heavily involved in the dark side, the occult, someone who has established some kind of a special relationship with evil. Sorcerers in that time were often influential people in the community, people to whom you would go for advice—perhaps similar to a palm or tarot card reader. These are all things that the Bible is very clear in condemning. God's people are to have nothing to do with sorcery.

And so in **verses 4-5**, we find that Philip comes to town and Philip starts preaching the gospel. The people paid attention, they saw the demons being cast out, they saw those who were paralyzed being healed, and the Bible says that there was much rejoicing in the city of Samaria. In **verse 12**, we find that Philip was ***“preaching the good news about the kingdom of Christ and the name of Jesus Christ,”*** and when they heard this message, the Bible says that both men and women believed in Christ and they were being baptized. And then in **verse 13**, we discover that, ***“Even Simon himself believed; and after being baptized, he continued on with Philip, and as he observed signs and great miracles taking place, he was constantly amazed.”*** We remember some of the last words that Jesus spoke before going back to heaven, ***“He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved” (Mark 16:16a)***. This is what Simon did. Just like many of the other Samaritans, Simon also believed and he was baptized. Based on the promise of Christ, then, we put our trust in the fact that Simon was now in a saved condition.

Not only that, but in **verse 9**, we find that he was ***“formerly”*** practicing magic. In other words, this was something that he had done in the past that he was no longer doing. He repented, and then he was baptized. Not only that, but we find in **verse 13** that Simon ***“continued”*** with Philip even after his baptism; that is, at least for some period of time, Simon stuck with it. In many ways, Simon (at least up to this point) is an excellent example for all of us here this morning. He heard the gospel, he turned away from his sins, he believed in the Lord, he was baptized into the Lord, and he stuck with it. His sins were forgiven as he was born into the family of God.

II. However, as we continue reading, we find that SIMON HAS A RELAPSE—WE FIND THAT SIMON FALLS, THAT HE TURNS BACK TO HIS FORMER WAY OF LIFE.

As we look at this passage, we discover that Simon and the other Samaritans had been baptized, they were in a saved condition; however, they had not yet received the power to perform the miraculous gifts. We find in **verses 14-17** that the spiritual gifts could only be passed along through the laying on of the apostles' hands. So, in **verse 14**, Peter and John were sent to Samaria to lay their hands on these new Christians so that they would have the power (as Philip did) to perform those miraculous signs. When Simon sees that this is the way the gifts are passed along, he offers to pay not for the miraculous gifts themselves, but for the power to give those gifts to others. In **verse 19**, Simon says, ***“Give this authority to me as well, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.”***

So, Simon was trying to purchase the kind of power that only the apostles could have.

And with that, we find that Simon slips back into his former way of thinking. As a magician, Simon most likely had often paid people to discover the secret of their power. He would use those spells and those tricks to make more money, he would continue to get stronger and stronger, and when he sees that the power to perform miracles can be passed along through the laying on of the apostles' hands, Simon wants that power! Simon sees this huge source of revenue, and he trips. He falls back into his former way of thinking. He stumbles and he falls.

Don't we understand today that old habits die hard? It doesn't take much to fall back to a life of sexual sin, or drinking, or lying, or into a cycle where we are just plain mean to people. It is a constant struggle, and so the Bible explains that when Simon saw the transmission of that power, he slipped right back into his old way of thinking. We remember what Jesus said about the seed that fell among the thorns in **Matthew 13:22**, ***"And the one on whom seed was sown among the thorns, this is the man who hears the word, and the worry of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful."*** The word of God in Simon's heart was being choked by the deceitfulness of wealth. He was choosing to give up the blessing of being in Christ for a little bit of gold and silver. Simon tried to purchase a gift that was not for sale. With his background, we think of all of the good that Simon could have done, all of the people he could have reached with the gospel, but he stumbled and fell into sin, thinking that he could purchase the power of God with money. Even today, it is so sad to lose a member of the congregation, to see someone who seems so strong, but then to see them stumble and fall—to see them fall into some kind of blatant sin, or even to see them just sort of slowly drift away. Unfortunately, the problem of Simon continues in the church today.

III. But thankfully, as we keep reading, we discover that GOD HAS A PLAN FOR THOSE WHO SIN AFTER BECOMING CHRISTIANS.

And again, this is a question that comes up often, especially from those who are considering the Christian faith, from those who worry that they may not be good enough, from those who are concerned that once they obey the gospel they may slip back into sin: **What is God's plan for Christians who sin?** And thankfully, the account of Simon gives us an answer to that question! Knowing that people would ask what needs to happen when a Christian sins, it seems that the Holy Spirit included this account in the Bible for a very good reason.

And even before we get into what Simon is told to do, I should point out that Peter and John cared enough to say something! Sometimes, when someone leaves the church or gets caught up in some kind of sin, it is so tempting just to let it slide, to just let the person fade away into oblivion. After all, Peter could have saved some time and could have avoided such an awkward situation if he had just pretended not to hear Simon. He could have just let it go. But thankfully, Peter cared enough to confront the issue straight on.

Several years ago, I shared the story of a congregation that moved into a new church building, and they were all happy about their new facility. In fact, someone had donated two very large and beautiful potted plants for the front of the auditorium. But several months after the opening of the new building, to the great dismay of the elders and the building committee, the two plants disappeared. Well, they started making announcements—every Sunday, every Wednesday, **“If you have seen the plants, please contact the elders!”** They put a notice in the bulletin. They put a notice on the bulletin board. They made calls. Several men were assigned the task of finding the plants. For two months, everybody talked about those plants—they talked among themselves at home, they talked about the plants whenever they got together as a church. This went on until the preacher got up after one of the plant announcements, and the preacher said this—he said, **“We have heard a great deal about the missing plants that were lost. For two months at every service announcements have been made and people have been earnestly looking for that which was lost. For years, we have known that sheep have strayed from this flock. Prodigal sons are away from the worship, and the Bible declares that they are lost. Each soul missing here today is more valuable than the whole world—and yet we have not heard one announcement nor have we seen any anxious concern about Mary Smith, John Brown, or Sam Jones, whose eternal welfare may hang on our concern. If we had put forward 1/10th of the energy in locating the lost souls of this flock as we have the lost plants, surely the angels in heaven would rejoice!”** As you can imagine, there were no more announcements made about those missing plants!

We know what it means to get our priorities mixed up, but thankfully, Peter had the courage to say what needed to be said, and so in **verse 20** Peter immediately says to Simon, **“May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!”** I would say that is a strong statement. In fact, *The New Testament in Modern English* by J.B. Phillips has Peter saying, **“To hell with you and your money!”** Isn't that what Peter is saying here? **“May your silver perish with you!”** A strong statement!

I am reminded of a story from many years ago about an entire family that had left the church, but one day while the three teenage sons were playing out in the field, a rattlesnake came and bit Sam, the youngest, and he was not doing well. The doctor was called, but Sam was too far gone for medical help, and so the doctor suggested that they call in the preacher. Well, the preacher was called to the young man's bedside, and this is what he prayed, **“Oh, wise and righteous Father, we thank you that you in your righteous wisdom sent this rattlesnake to bite Sam, in order to bring him to his senses. He has not been to church in years, and it is doubtful that in all of these years, until now, felt any need for prayer. Now we trust that this will prove to be a valuable lesson to him and that it may lead him to genuine repentance. And now, O Father, will you please send another one to bite John, and one to bite Jim, and another BIG ONE to bite the old man! We have been doing all we know for many years to restore them to the church, but nothing has worked. It seems, therefore, that what all of our combined efforts could not do, this snake has done. We thus conclude that the only thing left that will do this family any good is**

rattlesnakes. **So, Lord, send, we pray, bigger and better rattlesnakes. AMEN.**" Well, that is not exactly what Peter said here, but it is pretty close, ***"May your silver perish with you!"*** A strong statement.

In **verse 21**, Peter tells Simon that his heart is not right before God in this matter, and then we come to what Simon is told to do. In **verse 22**, Peter says to Simon, ***"Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that, if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you."*** First of all, we are told here that Simon was to repent. Repentance means that we turn away from our sins. It means that we admit that what we are doing is wrong, we have a change of heart about it, and we turn around and go in the other direction. Repentance is a change of heart that results in a change of lifestyle. If we have not changed the way we're living, then it is pretty obvious that we haven't changed the way we think about sin. Repentance is perhaps the most difficult step in God's plan of salvation—it is difficult because it is an ongoing process. In a sense, we repent before we are baptized, but in another sense, repentance is something that continues. Several days ago, it occurred to me that repentance is a little like what happens when we are following the GPS in a car and we take a wrong turn. When we turn off of that magenta line, the thing starts recalculating, and we then turn to get back on the path. The Christian life is like that. We are aiming for perfection, we are making our way to heaven, but sometimes we turn aside. Repentance is that process where we constantly readjust as we bring ourselves back to the right path. And sometimes we need someone like Peter to turn us back to that path—a friend, a parent, a brother, a sister, a spouse, or maybe even a total stranger—someone to remind us that we are not headed in the right direction, that we need to turn around and turn back to that path.

But secondly, not only is Simon told to repent, he is also told to pray. The important thing to learn here is that we need to work it out with God. This reminds us of what the Lord's brother had to say in **James 5:16**, ***"Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much."*** In other words, we need to admit what we have done, and then we need to take it to God in prayer. Notice: We are not told to take it to the priest or the preacher, but we are to confess our sins to ***"one another."*** As I understand the Scriptures, as a general rule, the confession is to be as public as the sin. If I sin against a member of my own family, I work it out with them one-on-one. If I sin against a member of this congregation, I can work it out with any of you one-on-one. But if we sin in such a way that brings disgrace to the entire congregation, if we neglect our attendance, if we become unfaithful to the church, then we need to work it out with the church. But depending on the sin that we commit, we can either pray on our own behalf, or we can go to our Christian family and have them pray for us. We can pray the prayer that King David prayed after his murderous affair with Bathsheba. When confronted by Nathan the prophet, King David said in **Psalm 51**, ***"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from Your presence and do not take Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation and sustain me with a willing spirit"*** (**verses 10-12**).

Conclusion:

As we close this morning's lesson, I would simply point out that Simon had fallen, he had made a huge mistake; in fact, even as a Christian, Simon had sinned—he had sinned in a big way. However, it was not too late. Peter did not condemn Simon forever, but Peter gave Simon a plan to follow. Simon was told 1.) To repent and then 2.) To take his concern to God in prayer. It is interesting that Luke (the author of this passage) just kind of leaves it there. We do not have any resolution here. In **verse 24**, Simon says to Peter and John, ***“Pray to the Lord for me yourselves, so that nothing of what you have said may come upon me.”*** And yet beyond that, we do not really have an answer concerning what happened next. And so with that, the passage ends up back with us. What do we do about this? Well, if we have made mistakes, if we have sinned, if we have slowly drifted away from God, the answer is that we must 1.) Change, we must repent of whatever we have done, and then 2.) We must take that concern to God and work it out with Him. For a Christian who sins, salvation comes through repentance and prayer.

If you are in this position, we would beg you to make it right with God. We would urge you to turn away from sin and to take your concerns to God in prayer. We would be glad to help with this. If you have any questions, we would be glad to meet with you. We would be glad to pray about it one-on-one or even publicly with the rest of the congregation. Write it down, talk to me after the service, but let us make sure things are right with God before it is too late.

On the other hand, if you are not yet a Christian, what Simon did at first is still valid as a pattern—we must hear the word of God, we must believe in the Lord and what he has done for us on the cross, we must step away from sin, we must allow ourselves to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of our sins, and then we must stick with it. If we can help you with any of this, we would invite you to let us know about your decision as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: church@fourlakescoc.org