



Bible Study

April 29, 2015

Acts 8:18-25

John 6:35-39

Acts 8:18-25 (NKJV) -

And when Simon saw that through the laying on of the apostles' hands the Holy Spirit was given, he offered them money, saying, "Give me this power also, that anyone on whom I lay hands may receive the Holy Spirit." But Peter said to him, "Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money! You have neither part nor portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity." Then Simon answered and said, "Pray to the Lord for me, that none of the things which you have spoken may come upon me." So when they had testified and preached the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many villages of the Samaritans.

John 6:35-39 (NKJV) - And Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst. But I said to you that you have seen Me and yet do not believe. All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day."

Commentary -

Today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles describes the conclusion of the first encounter between the Apostles, in particular St. Peter, and Simon Magus, or Simon the Sorcerer. Simon was first encountered by St. Philip as he evangelized the Samaritan people. Until St. Philip's arrival, Simon had been a magician or sorcerer who had gained renown, wealth, and power in the villages of Samaria through displays of spiritual power and wonder-working. Such sorcerers were not uncommon at the time, and they relied upon a mixture of astrology, primitive medical science, and theatrical tricks along with in some few cases actual harmful spiritual phenomena like demonic possession, to create the impression of spiritual power and authority in various communities. In fact, we see many points in the Gospels at which the opponents of our Lord Jesus Christ accuse Him of sorcery, an accusation which He was quick to refute (see, for example, Mark 3:20-30).

When St. Philip began proclaiming the Word in the Samaritan countryside, it was received with

great enthusiasm as whole villages embraced Jesus as the Great Teacher who they believed was prophesied to come. As many flocked to St. Philip to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, Simon came as well, eager to receive some new spiritual knowledge that might be on offer. When the Apostles, who had thus far confined their efforts in spreading the Gospel primarily to the people of Judea heard that Samaria was embracing Jesus as the Christ as well, St. Peter and John were sent to see St. Philip's work, and to bestow their apostolic blessing, and with it the Holy Spirit, upon those who had been baptized.

It is at this point in the story that today's reading begins, as Simon sees the effects of the coming of the Holy Spirit on his fellow Samaritans, and interprets this as a power, as a form of spiritual manipulation, being performed by the Apostles, as if they, too, were sorcerers. He therefore decides to offer money to the Apostles in the hopes that they would teach him this new technique and he could add another trick to his repertoire. St. Peter is, rightly, indignant and rebukes Simon not, we should notice, in order to condemn him, but that he might repent of his way of thinking, and his way of life, and truly come to Christ, and so warns him of the end and result of his way of thinking, namely death and destruction.

Simon, however, rather than repenting and submitting himself humbly to the Apostles' teaching that he might come to know the Truth, merely asks St. Peter to pray that the destruction he spoke of might not find him. He still sees St. Peter as another sorcerer, someone with spiritual power who might be able to influence God or fate to cause good things to happen to Simon rather than bad. The linguistic legacy of this encounter is found in the name of the crime of 'simony', the attempt to buy or sell that which is holy, named for this sorcerer.

This episode is recorded here in the Acts of the Apostles, however, not only to condemn simony, but because Simon Magus would become an opponent of the Apostles throughout their ministry, and the false religion he helped found would continue to lure souls away from Christ for more than two centuries after his death. After this incident, Simon would go on, along with a prostitute whom he purchased as a slave named Helen, to found a religion around himself, using the superficial understanding of Christianity which he gained from the Apostles in Samaria as a template for his heresy.

The sect of the Simonians is generally categorized as a species of Gnosticism because of its common beliefs with many other such sects. Simon began to teach that Helen was an incarnation of the wisdom of God, God's first creation as expressed in his understanding of the books of Proverbs and Wisdom, and that he, Simon, was in fact God himself, descended into the world to bring true knowledge and spirituality to a world gone astray. He would eventually take this cult of himself to Rome, and there again encounter St. Peter during the reign of the Emperor Claudius, battling him for converts and deceiving many. Key to his false religion were mysteries of initiation, in which what we now would identify as drugs and psychological manipulation were used to bring about deceptive pseudo-spiritual experiences.

St. Luke, therefore, records Simon's first encounter with St. Peter in part to say, "We know of this Simon, he is a sorcerer and pretender, a would be disciple who was turned away because of his spiritual darkness", but also to show the root of his error, an error into which an unfortunate number of others would later follow Simon. Simon understood religion in terms of power, both power in the spiritual realm, and power over people around him, followers and disciples. He sought to be able to manipulate the primal forces of the world, and by doing so to control the world, and the people around him to do and be what he wanted them to be. More simply put, Simon wanted to be God, as he would later claim to be.

The idea of magic was ubiquitous in the ancient world. Spiritual beings and powers, including those which were worshiped as gods, were researched and rituals designed in order to placate and manipulate them into doing what the worshipers wanted. Farmers wanted good rains and a large harvest, military leaders wanted victory in war, and merchants wanted success in their ventures. All of

them recognized that while they could work and prepare as hard as they liked, guaranteeing success was beyond their power, and lay with other powers in the world itself. They therefore sought ways to control these forces to get the success they depended on, and a functionary such as Simon Magus, who seemed to be able to exercise such control, would receive wealth, honors, and allegiance beyond any other men in those cultures as well as fear and respect.

We as Christian believers in the 21st century, though our religious world may seem far removed from ancient paganism, face the same challenge today that faced those in Rome in the middle of the 1st century who heard both St. Peter and Simon Magus proclaim their respective doctrines. We are called upon to discern between the spirits, specifically what comes from the Holy Spirit and what comes from the spirit of Antichrist. We have not just two, but hundreds of voices competing for our attention, and claiming to offer spiritual wisdom, or power, or secrets. All of these voices claim to possess the truth, and that all of the other voices are deceivers.

As we read today's Gospel reading, one key difference between Christ and those like Simon who would substitute themselves in His place becomes clear. Jesus Christ, though He is the God who created the sea and the dry land, who stretched out the heavens, who created the universe and all that is in it, came to us not to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many (Matt. 20:28). He came to sacrifice His own Life, so that we who were dead in our sins and trespasses could live again, and live eternally. He came to give His flesh and blood as food and drink to strengthen and preserve us, and to unite Himself to us as bone of His bone and flesh of His flesh. He yielded and set aside His almighty power over all things to call to us out of love that we might repent and be healed.

There is none of this humility or sacrificial love in the spirit of Antichrist. Simon and those like him grasp desperately and futilely for the power that Christ Himself considered not something to grasped and held onto, but to be laid aside for our sakes (Phil. 2:6). This other, unclean spirit seeks domination and control, stokes pride, and brings about its own destruction, and that of all those who follow after it. It is the spirit of the devil himself, who sought in ancient days to unseat God Himself from His throne and to replace Him.

Brother and sisters in Christ, all too many come to us today and speak to us with this same voice, seeking to manipulate us by playing on our passions, on our vanity and pride, on our desire to be in control of our life and the world instead of the Lord who made us, and on our emotions by creating false spiritual experiences and sensations. Whether those speaking thus are themselves knowing manipulators or whether they are deceived themselves, the end of the road down which they beckon us is destruction. We must always listen closely for the voice of Christ. We, His sheep, will recognize it when we truly hear it, for it is filled with the love of the true shepherd, who lays down His life for the sheep.

Questions to Ponder -

- 1) True prayer is God Himself praying in us. Think about how you pray. Is your prayer a loving communion between yourself, the Lord, and those for whom you pray, or is it more like reading God a list of your demands? Is your prayer a time of peace that leaves you in the end with a deeper understanding and knowledge of God, or do you come away frustrated because your 'prayers go unanswered' in that God doesn't do what you want Him to?
- 2) Our Lord Jesus Christ gave up His life for us freely. Those who truly follow Him give Him, and His Gospel away to all for free as well. We as believers have received the greatest treasure imaginable, the Kingdom of God, as God's gift to us. When given a great gift freely, we often fail to value it with its true value. For you and I, Christ endured more than 30 years of weakness, sickness, rejection, loneliness, crushing poverty, homelessness, betrayal, and ultimately brutal torture and death. Yet, we are so ungrateful that we often demand more, and become accusatory toward Him when He does not also find us the perfect marriage partner, or

give us financial or career success, or give us a life free of suffering and loss, all on our own timetable. Christ is Risen, conquering death for your sake. How much of your life do you spend glorifying and thanking Him for it, and how much do you spend insisting upon and worrying over far less important things?

- 3) Simon Magus was fundamentally confused about the Gospel of Jesus Christ from the beginning, and would end up becoming an enemy of the Faith in general, and of St. Peter in particular. St. Peter, however, seeing clearly into his heart from their first encounter recording here in the Acts of the Apostles, rebukes him in the hopes that he will repent. He describes Simon as 'poisoned' and 'bound' by his sinfulness and wishes for him the healing and freedom that comes only from Christ through humble repentance. Can you say the same of those who oppose you, mislead you, or otherwise do you harm? Do you see them as fellow victims of sin and its consequences? Do you pray for their repentance and healing?

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