

The Power of the Gospel

Acts 8:4-25

Anytime you enter into a close relationship, sooner or later you will realize that the two of you have different ways of thinking. Shortly after Brenda and I got married, I would notice the trash can in kitchen would be full to overflowing. And I found myself thinking, “I wonder when Brenda is going to take out the trash.” She found herself thinking, “I wonder when Steve is going to take out the trash.” It turns out that in her family her dad took out the trash, and in my family my mom took out the trash. That’s a trivia example, but over the years we’ve discovered we think differently about dozens of things.

If you enter into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ, sooner or later you will realize from Scripture that you and God think differently about dozens of things. Because he is our Maker, his way of thinking is always right and always best. This is why Paul spoke about being “transformed by the renewing of [our] minds” (Romans 12:2).

Today’s passage illustrates how wrong our thinking can be about the gospel (and therefore the power of God). Acts 8:4-25 argues that ***The gospel has no boundaries and no brokers.*** But sometimes we think the gospel ***has*** boundaries and ***needs*** brokers (we’ll explain that later).

Last week we saw from Acts 7 that Stephen was executed for his conviction that everyone who believes in Jesus has full, unfettered access to God. You don’t have to become Jewish first; you don’t have to worship at the temple to be accepted by God. You can come to God through faith in Jesus alone.

We read in 8:1 that a great persecution arose and that Jesus’ disciples in Jerusalem “were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.” In the sovereignty of God, this “scattering” of disciples was God’s plan for taking the gospel to “all Judea and Samaria and to the remotest part of the earth.”

Our passage today describes how the Samaritans believed in Jesus, making clear that ***the gospel has no boundaries and no brokers.***

The gospel has no boundaries. (Acts 8:4-13) There are no geographical or ethnic or cultural boundaries. Luke describes how the gospel brought salvation to a most unlikely ***group*** of people (the Samaritans) and to a most unlikely ***individual*** within that group of people (Simon the magician).

4 Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. 5 Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. 6 And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs that he did.

Remember the expression, “the crowds. . . ***paid attention to***” what was said by Philip because Luke will repeat it twice, both in verse 10 and verse 11. To pay attention to

someone is to “hang on their every word” and devote yourself to what they say. The crowds were so attentive to Philip because of his teaching that Jesus was the Messiah and because of the signs he performed. Specifically, we read in verse 7:

7 For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. 8 So there was much joy in that city.

The Samaritans’ response is striking because of the animosity that had existed between the Jews and the Samaritans for a millennium. For starters, the Samaritans were descendents of Jews who had intermarried with other peoples. Therefore, the Jews viewed them as neither Jew nor Gentile.

As well, the Samaritans believed that only the first five books of the Hebrew Bible were authoritative. Therefore they didn’t believe what was taught in the rest of the Old Testament, specifically that the Messiah would be a descendant of David or that the temple in Jerusalem was the place where God was to be worshiped (they worshiped on Mt. Gerizim). When Jesus talked with the Samaritan woman in John 4, he told her that “salvation is from the Jews” (the Samaritans were wrong about that), but that a day was coming when you would be able to worship God anywhere (see John 4:20-25).

Here in Acts 8, that day had come. The gospel is the power of God for salvation (Romans 1:14) to anybody anywhere. And to illustrate this Luke draws our attention to the response of one specific individual, a man named Simon.

9 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.

When we hear the word magic, we think of “sight of hand” or pulling a rabbit out of a hat. But in Scripture magic (μαγεία) refers to sorcery, “harnessing evil spirits” for supernatural purposes. Simon was a man who “amazed the people of Samaria.” And he touted himself as somebody who was “great.” Notice the wording of verses 10 and 11.

10 They all paid attention to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, “This man is the power of God that is called Great.”

The Samaritans formerly “paid attention” to Simon and attributed to him the power of God.

11 And they paid attention to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. 12 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.

They now paid attention to Philip's teaching about how the kingdom of God was being established in the name of Jesus Christ. And they believed - both men and women - and were baptized.

13 Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed.

"Even Simon". . . even a former megalomaniac who harnessed unclean spirits to amaze people believed and was baptized and continued with Philip. As we'll see in the second half of this passage, Simon still had some poisonous desires in his heart that he needed to address. But Luke makes clear that the gospel was good news to "even Simon." Therefore, ***the gospel has no boundaries.***

Here's the implication: ***You are not beyond God's reach and neither is anybody you know.*** You are not beyond the reach of God. If you have believed the gospel, you already know this. But if you haven't there may be any number of reasons why you think you're beyond God's reach. Maybe you've done things that you think are unforgivable. Or maybe you think that you could never be as committed as the Christians you know. Or maybe your identity is wrapped up in being above any one faith; you can't imagine one specific faith (like Christianity) being THE truth about finding God.

If I'm describing you in any way, the teaching of this passage and the rest of Scripture is that ***you are not beyond God's reach.*** I'd encourage you to do what the Samaritans did: *pay attention to the good news about Jesus.* Take a risk and talk with genuine disciples of Jesus that you know; ask them about their faith (what they believe and why) and how they've experienced the power of God through Christ. Come back next as we study Acts 9; we'll see how a man named Saul went to Damascus an enemy of Jesus and returned to Jerusalem as a missionary for Jesus. Invite God to convince you that you are not beyond his reach.

You are not beyond God's reach and neither is anybody you know. You probably know people (or whole groups of people) that you think will probably never become followers of Jesus. It could be a family member, a coworker, a friend, or a neighbor. Today's passage and the rest of the New Testament declares that nobody is beyond the reach of God and therefore we shouldn't write them off and think of them as such.

Many of you read through the gospel of Luke in the weeks leading up to Easter. You may remember in Luke 9 when Jesus "set his face to go to Jerusalem" and send messengers ahead to make preparations for him in Samaria. But the Samaritans wouldn't receive Jesus when they found out he was going to Jerusalem. When James and John found this out, they asked Jesus if he wanted them to "tell fire to come down from heaven and consume" the Samaritans. But Jesus "turned and rebuked them." Why? Because the Samaritans were not beyond God's reach; as we've seen in Acts 8 many Samaritans became Jesus' disciples.

This is why we shouldn't condemn people and write them off as unreachable. No, we should have same affection for them that Christ had for the Samaritans and for us when

we were his enemies. We should pray for them and befriend them and tell them the good news that they are not beyond the reach of God.

The gospel has no boundaries. And. . .

The gospel has no brokers. (Acts 8:14-24) A broker is an agent or a go-between for two parties entering into an agreement. We use brokers for securities and real estate and other transactions. But when it comes to the gospel, there are no comparable brokers. We go directly to God through Jesus Christ.

In these verses, Luke first describes how a couple of apostles travel from Jerusalem to Samaria to confirm the Samaritans had indeed received the gospel.

14 Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to 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 on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. 17 Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit.

The evidence that they had “received the Holy Spirit” was probably speaking in tongues (as in Acts 2, 10, and 19) or some other manifestation.

But what Luke describes here is unprecedented. The normal pattern in Acts is that God gives the gift of the Holy Spirit when they believe or when they believe and are baptized (Acts 2:38, 1 Corinthians 12:3, 13). But here Peter and John arrive in Samaria and discover (we’re not told how) that even though the Samaritans had believed and been baptized, the Holy Spirit “had not yet fallen on any of them.” We aren’t told why that was the case.

The most likely explanation, I think, involves the longstanding controversy that existed between the Jews and the Samaritans. By delaying the gift of the Holy Spirit until **apostles from Jerusalem** prayed for them and laid hands on them, God was saying at least two things.

First, by giving the Spirit through the apostles (who were Jewish), God would be establishing that “salvation is from the Jews” for everybody. Therefore, there is only one church and one body of Christ.

Second, since the apostles were the official spokespersons for Jesus, their involvement confirmed that the Samaritans weren’t in any way second-class Christians. The Samaritans believed the same gospel and received the same Holy Spirit that they did.

Notice Simon’s response:

18 Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money, 19 saying, “Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.”

Do you see how he misinterpreted the power that he saw in the apostles? He seemed to think that they had within themselves the power to give the Holy Spirit to whomever they wanted and that they could **sell** that power to whomever they wanted. It was as if the apostles had the Jerusalem franchise for the Holy Spirit, and Simon wanted the Samaritan franchise for the Holy Spirit. Just like during his magician days, he still wanted to be “the man.” He still wanted to amaze people with his power. If you can buy the power of the Holy Spirit, you can sell the power of the Holy Spirit. He wanted to be a broker for the power of the Holy Spirit. That’s not the way it works in the kingdom of God.

The “old Peter” might have cut off Simon’s right ear like he did to that guy in the Garden of Gethsemane. The new Peter stops short of that here, but he’s still VERY strong in his rebuke of Simon.

20 But Peter said to him, “May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!

Throughout the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts you have examples of people who used their money to glorify God (the women in Luke 8 who supported Jesus’ ministry, Zacchaeus, Barnabas, etc.) and examples of people who loved money and refused to glorify God (the rich young ruler, Judas, Ananias and Sapphira, and now Simon).

Peter calls out Simon for thinking that he could buy “the gift of God” (i.e. the Holy Spirit). The fact that it’s the gift **of God** means that nobody else can give it. Even the apostles prayed to God before they laid hands on the Samaritan believers. God was the One who gave them the Holy Spirit. It was not a gift that Simon could obtain and monetize and use as **he** wished.

Notice how Peter continues:

21 You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God.
22 Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. 23 For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity.”

Scholars and commentators disagree on whether or not Simon was a genuine believer who had received the Holy Spirit. But everyone agrees that Simon was in a very dangerous place spiritually. Peter tells him:

- * “. . . your heart is not right before God”; he didn’t want to be a humble servant of God to used at his pleasure; he wanted power/authority for his own purposes.
- * “You are in the gall of bitterness” or “a bitter poison”; his thirst for power and recognition revealed a bitter poison that needed to be extracted from his heart.
- * “You are . . . in the bond of iniquity.” Instead of being free from his sin, he was still in bondage to his sin.

But there was hope for Simon (“even Simon”). Look at verse 22 again.

22 Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you.

Peter tells Simon that he has to do business directly with the Lord. “Repent”: turn **from** this wickedness of yours and turn back **to** God. “Pray to the Lord”: go directly to God and ask **HIM** to forgive the intent of your heart. Simon had to do business directly with God; nobody could do that for him because **the gospel has no brokers** - not even the apostles.

Simon’s response has been understood in a couple of different ways. Here it is:

24 And Simon answered, “Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me.”

Some understand this as an expression of humility on Simon’s part, submitting to Peter and asking Peter to pray for him. There’s obviously nothing wrong with asking others to pray for you; Paul asked for prayer quite often in his letters. But in this context others see Simon as wanting Peter to do for him what he was just told to do for himself. I lean towards this second view. Ultimately we can’t say for certain. And Luke leaves Simon’s spiritual condition unresolved. And it leaves us wondering what happened to Simon, and it makes us consider if we’ll avoid his foolishness.

Here’s the implication: **You don’t need a broker and you can’t be a broker.**

First, **you don’t need a broker.** In Christ Jesus, you have the freedom and the responsibility to go directly to God. It’s not that you don’t need other people in your discipleship; you definitely do. You need people to encourage you, pray for you, bear your burdens, admonish you, love you, etc. But as valuable as other believers are in our lives, you don’t go to God through them. As Paul said in 1 Timothy 2, “there is one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus.”

Just as Simon needed to go directly to God in repentance and prayer to be free from his lust for power, you may have things from your pre-Christian past that you need to deal with. Other believers will play a role in your maturity, but you have the freedom and the responsibility to repent and pray and seek God. Nobody can do that for you, not Faith Manhattan Church, not your parents, not your bible study leader. You have full access to the God of the universe through Jesus Christ. Let that truth fill you with faith and hope.

Maybe today is the day you quit being passive and begin going directly to God through Jesus Christ.

You don’t need a broker and you can’t be a broker. In terms of **not being a broker**, I don’t really know anybody as brazen as Simon the sorcerer was, although some prosperity doctrine preachers come close. But I want to speak to those of us who have *positions* of spiritual authority or simply have spiritual influence in the lives of others; I’m thinking about pastors, elders, parents, Bible study leaders, teachers, mentors, etc.

The caution is to avoid subtly filling a role in the lives of others that only God should fill. This can be complex; this requires great discernment. But for example, when I teach, I certainly don't want to teach less than what is written; but neither do I want to teach more than what is found in Scripture. I don't have the freedom to bind your conscience to things that aren't taught in Scripture. I suggest applications, but I trust that the Holy Spirit himself will convict you of sin and lead you in ways that I never could.

Even though we may have the best of intentions, we need to avoid coming between others and God. We need to get out of the way and let God do what only he can do. We play our God-give roles and use our God-given gifts, but we always encourage people to go directly to God through Jesus. In that way they experience directly the power of the Holy Spirit.

God is powerful, strong, and good. Therefore the gospel has no boundaries and no brokers.