

What Makes a Church: Greed or Gospel?  
Acts 8:9-13, 18-24

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How do you spell success? Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "Success is to laugh often and much, to win the respect of people and the affection of children, to earn the appreciation of honest critics and endure the betrayal of false friends, to appreciate beauty, to find the best in others, to leave the world a bit better, and to know that even one life has breathed easier because you have lived. This is success."

Simon the Magician thought success was to get people's attention, win their admiration, and accumulate wealth along the way. How do you spell success?

I want to conclude this series of sermons on "What Makes a Church" by talking about Greed and the Gospel. Every story in the Bible is not a reason to rejoice. Even the early Christian movement had its struggles. Ananias and Sapphira lied about their offering. Peter and Paul argued about doctrine. Simon the Sorcerer tried to buy the Holy Spirit to keep his business booming. That's where I want to land today. When Phillip takes the Gospel to Samaria, he encounters a magician by the name of Simon. Come let's take a closer look.

**SIMON WAS A MAN IN NEED OF FAME.**

Recognition is a fundamental human need. Sometimes you like to go where they always know your name. Sometimes you like to be where they're always glad you came. Every human heart swells a bit when we see our name in print or our face on TV. We need to know and to be known. Workers work harder when they are recognized. Volunteers re-enlist when they are properly appreciated. Even church members feel better when they are thanked for their faithfulness. We humans hunger for recognition.

The Bible tells us that Simon the Sorcerer made quite a name for himself in Samaria. He amazed all the people of Samaria. All the people, both high and low, gave him their attention. They even exclaimed, "*This man is the divine power, known as the Great Power.*" They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his magic. He had quite a reputation, wouldn't you say?

I remember as an eighteen-year-old kid preaching to six people on Sunday morning. An old gentleman in that congregation told me every week he would rather listen to me preach than Billy Graham. I developed an accent like Billy Graham. I carried my Bible over my heart like Billy Graham. I tried to give an invitation to those six people just like Billy Graham, all six verses of "Just as I Am" every Sunday. Finally, somebody pulled me aside and said, "Howard, read my lips. You are not Billy Graham." When the hunger for fame becomes a

reason for living, it becomes narcissism, arrogance, and pride.

Pierre Salinger was John F. Kennedy's press secretary. As Pierre liked to tell the story, he and the President were flying in Air Force One when a severe turbulence shook the plane. For a brief moment they thought they might crash. When the plane righted itself, Salinger said to Kennedy, "I wonder what the news story would have been if our plane had gone down?" The President replied, "You, Pierre, would have been on all the front pages, but in very small print."

Actor Ben Stein used to write a gossip column about the rich and famous entitled Monday Night at Morton's. Then in December 2003 he quit. In his final column, this is what he said, "Real stars are not riding around in the backs of limousines, or getting trained in yoga, or eating raw fruit while they have Vietnamese girls do their nails. A real star, the kind who haunts my memory night and day, is the U.S. soldier in Baghdad who saw a little girl playing with a piece of unexploded metal. He pushed her aside and threw himself on it just as it exploded." There is a real hero.

There is a difference between true greatness and merely making a name for yourself. Simon didn't really understand the difference in this story.

#### **SIMON WAS A MAN IN NEED OF FORTUNE.**

He knew how to make money and he wanted more of it. So when competition came to town, he tried to buy them out. "*Peter, what will you take for the power of the Holy Spirit?*" Peter answers, "*May your money perish with you because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money.*" I need to tell you that is the Sunday school translation of that phrase. If you want the literal translation look at J.B. Phillips or one of the newer translations. In effect, Peter tells Simon where he can go. You can get the drift of what I am trying to say. Greed is desire that has gone amuck. Actor Alan Alda says, "It's not necessary to be rich and famous to be happy. It's only necessary to be rich."

Gordon Gekko, the business tycoon in the movie Wall Street is bent on success at any price. During his takeover bid at a paper company stockholder meeting Gekko says, "The point, ladies and gentlemen, is that greed, for lack of a better word, is good; greed is right; greed works."

Greed has a way of slipping into our ordinary lives, as well. In the children's series Veggie Tales, Madame Blueberry is always blue, blue, blue, about everything. While the tree house in which she lives is nice, her dishes are chipped, knives are too dull, spoons are too small, and all her neighbors have more wonderful things than she has. Then one day a mega-store called "Stuff Mart" moves across the street. The sign glitters like a beacon of hope to Madame Blueberry. They have refrigerators to preserve her extra mashed potatoes and a giant air compressor to blow fruit flies off her dresser. The company jingle says it all, "Happiness waits at the Stuff Mart, all you need is lots more stuff."

As Charlie Brown says, “Most of us live just about one cookie away from being happy.” It sneaks in on us, doesn’t it? Greed comes hunting for us in the depths of our souls.

When greed comes to church, it’s preached as Prosperity Gospel. “If you will take a widow’s step of faith, God will give you financial security,” says Robert Tilton. “The day of the Lord’s favor means you deserve the best parking spot in a crowded parking lot, a first class seat on a crowded airplane and priority seating at restaurants,” says Joel Osteen, the pastor of the largest church in America.

The Trinity Broadcast Network, owned and operated by Paul and Jan Crouch, collects \$170 million dollars a year, mostly from contributions in amounts of \$50 or less. Paul and Jan receive over \$750,000 a year in annual salary, travel on their own 7.2 million dollar turbo jet, own thirty homes including two Newport Beach mansions, a mountain retreat near Lake Arrowhead, a ranch in Texas and the old Conway Twitty property here in Nashville. They are watched by more than five million households each week and have a data base of 1.2 million names and addresses from which they solicit funds day after day.

Of course, it’s easy to point our fingers at other people, but eventually the question must come home. How often do we ask God to bless our plans without a thought of becoming a blessing to his plans? Are our priorities God’s priorities? You see, it makes a difference, it really does. A couple of weeks ago our own Annual Conference approved 3 million dollars for clergy hospital insurance. Believe me, no one is more grateful for hospital insurance than I am. The same conference failed to vote a single dollar of aid to those who are losing their insurance as a result of TennCare cutbacks. We ought not be telling the governor what to do until we are willing to do something ourselves. Am I willing to increase my deductibles that others might have some coverage? Are you? What if Methodists created a large group plan that allowed all our premiums to go down? You see, it is awfully easy to tell somebody else what they ought to be doing with the social struggles of our day, but the real question of life is, are we as Christians willing to stand up and lead the way when it costs us something out of our own pockets? Simon was a man in need of fortune and it is seductive to all of us, I suspect.

### **SIMON WAS A MAN IN NEED OF FORGIVENESS.**

Peter said to Simon, *“Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart.”* Simon replied *“Pray to the Lord for me!”*

Kyrie eleison, Christe eleison. Lord, have mercy, Christ, have mercy. It has been the cry of the Church through the ages. Is it a gift you have received?

A.W. Tozer once said that mercy is an attribute of God, an infinite and inexhaustible energy within the divine nature which disposes God to be actively compassionate. Immanuel Kant wrote that was it not for the mystical possibility

of forgiveness, the serious individual would take one look in the looking glass of his past actions and fall into terminal moral despair.

*It's me, it's me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer. Not my brother, not my sister, but it's me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer. Not my father, not my mother, but it's me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer. Simon says, "Pray to the Lord for me!"*

Was Simon forgiven? Church history says, "No." In fact, early church writers thought the reason this story was included in Acts was to draw the distinction between true Christianity and heresy. Irenaeus called Simon the "Father of all heretics." "Simony" in the Catholic Church means the buying or selling of a church office. One legend says that a final showdown between Simon Peter and Simon Magus happened in Rome before Claudius, the emperor. Simon is performing magic for the majesty's entertainment. In order to prove himself a god, Simon flies up into the air. Meanwhile, Peter and Paul pray to God to stop the show. Simon stops in mid-air, and falls to his death. If that sounds like fiction to you, it's probably what it is.

I would say, "Why not?" Why shouldn't Simon be forgiven, even though his reputation haunts him for a lifetime? All we know from the Bible is this prayer of a magician whose business has been interrupted by the Gospel and all we know about him is the last plea, "*Please pray for me.*" Did the Lord hear his prayer? I can't prove that he did, but I am on Simon's side at this point.

At the height of his stardom, Mel Gibson realized he was empty. He had achieved everything he ever hoped for except a sense of purpose. Gibson felt he was drowning in fame, wealth, drink and despair. This led the one-time "sexiest man alive" to his knees and back to God. Of course, not everyone was ready to embrace his conversion. When his movie The Passion of the Christ hit the theaters, many were ready to crucify him with Christ.

If Simon can be forgiven, so can I. So can you. Our sins can be washed away, our wrongs can be pardoned, our lives can be made over anew. Why shouldn't we hope to be forgiven?

May the Lord of Mercy hear our prayers today.

Amen.





