

We've all heard of "a good Samaritan", and the parable that Jesus told about "the Good Samaritan" is so well known, that whenever a **stranger** does a good deed for anybody, or rescues them from some dire predicament, they nearly always get referred to as, "a good Samaritan"... And so we tend to think of the Samaritans as "the good guys who we don't know". But that misunderstands completely, the story that Jesus told....

The Jews **hated** the Samaritans... And the Samaritans hated the Jews right back – the feelings were quite mutual. And there was a whole **history** of hate.... Hundreds of years earlier, Israel had divided into 2 kingdoms, (the tribes of Judah and Benjamin in the South, and the other 10 tribes in the North)... Well, the Northern Kingdom was coaxed into idolatry, and they inter-married with other races... And those who lived in the region of Samaria (the Samaritans) were seen as a particularly impure and idolatrous people.

And they had arguments with the Jews over where they were allowed to worship and they had wars, and what-not... But they were still part of Israel – they continued to **be** God's chosen people – God hadn't forgotten them, and nor had they forgotten God.

It wasn't only the Jews who were waiting for the Messiah – the Samaritans were waiting for the Messiah too (And if you want to know more about that, you can read the account of when Jesus met the Samaritan woman at a well, and in their discussion, ^{John 4:25} The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things." And Jesus basically says "that's me"... -

So they were waiting for the Christ, and we're told that when Phillip went into Samaria, that's exactly what he proclaimed, and that's what they responded to – he proclaimed that Jesus was the Christ, and God backed it up with significant miraculous signs, and the Samaritans believed.

But anyway, the Samaritans and the Jews did **not** get on. And to talk about a “good” Samaritan, well... *That would be like telling the ANZACS the story of “the Good Turk” or “The Good German”. (where the allies left one of their own on the side of the road to die (because they didn't want to stain their uniform... and finally, along comes somebody who not only helps, but goes out of his way, and goes to great personal expense, to see that his enemy is safe and sound and well...)). Who was the neighbour???*

It would be like telling the Israelis the story of “the good Palestinian”. It'd be like going to the State of Origin in Brisbane and telling the story of “The good NSWelshman” ... It wasn't the fact that he was a stranger – it was the fact that Samaria and the Jews, had it in for one another, on racial, political, and religious grounds. They hated each other.

And so when Jesus told His parable, and the Samaritan was a better neighbour than the rest of the religious Jews, well that was really something.

You know, even the disciples (James and John) – when they went into a Samaritan village with Jesus, and that village didn't welcome Jesus, they said ^{Luke 9:54....}“Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” ... **NO!!!**

.....

Just before Jesus ascended into heaven, He said to His disciples: ^{Acts 1:8....} **you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."** And today's reading, is the beginning of the mission into Samaria.

And I find it quite interesting, that it's not the apostles who led the mission. The **2nd** generation Christians led the mission. The Apostles, later verified it, and got on board with it – but only after they'd seen that it had already gone quite well – The Samaritans **were** believing and being baptised, and so on **their** way home, the **apostles** preached the gospel in **many** villages – But not at the start.

It was **Phillip**, a "**Hellenist**" – a **Greek**-speaking Jew – someone who probably wasn't so caught up in this whole Hebrew purity thing (and wasn't so much against the Samaritans) – well he was the evangelist who began...

You see, when the Christians began to be persecuted, they had to get out of Jerusalem, and flee for their lives. We're told that all but the apostles left Jerusalem. And they were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria, and do you know what they did wherever they went??? They preached Christ.

Persecution, very often has that effect. When Christians are **forced** to leave their homes, and to uproot their lives and make a new beginning,,,,, well wherever they go, the Gospel spreads.

And when they preached Christ, the Samaritans responded. And when the news of this reached the apostles in Jerusalem, well this they had to see... And so they sent Peter and John...

You realise, John was one of the 2 disciples who had earlier said to Jesus “Do you want us to nuke ‘em ‘????’”... I mean, they’d seen the Samaritans reject Jesus in person, and now they were on their way, to check it out for themselves – that these Samaritans now believed in Jesus.

And when they got there, they laid hands on them, because The Holy Spirit had not fallen on any of them... And when they laid hands on them, they received the Holy Spirit.

You know, a question a lot of people ask me, and a question I find myself asking sometimes, is “When does God give us the Holy Spirit?”

We like neat answers and processes, don’t we? We like to have a set pattern – a formula of cause and effect – if I do this, then God will do that – if I satisfy these requirements, then God will give me His Holy Spirit.

But God doesn’t work like that. What we’re going to find, as we continue through Acts, is there is no set pattern. The Holy Spirit :

- Comes sometimes through the ministry of the Apostles
- And sometimes without
- Sometimes He comes with the laying on of hands
- And sometimes without
- Sometimes the Spirit comes very close to the time of Water Baptism

- Sometimes no where near it
- Sometimes before water baptism
- Sometimes after

The point is, the giving of God's gift – the Holy Spirit – is not in **our** control – it's in **God's** control. The book of Acts suggests God's sovereignty over this whole matter. It's not in the control of ministers. Nor was it even controlled by the Apostlesⁱ.

God is sovereign, and **God** chooses when to give the gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus said: ^{Luke 11:13} **... how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"**

And that's all we **can** do. Ask! We ask and eagerly desire to be filled with God's Holy Spirit. And we wait for God. And when we ask, God **will** fill.

But there's one person here who... – well it looks like he never did received the Holy Spirit. His heart wasn't right. And that's the title I've given this message – "A matter of the heart".

Simon was a magician. He was a magician of great renown. He was given almost god-like status by those who were amazed by his magic.

What is magic, by the way? How does a magician or a sorcerer, do their tricks?

Well, there's 2 ways. One way is very innocent, and the other is vile, evil, and dangerous.

Most magicians who put their shows on for us, are what we call illusionists. They are very clever – very dextrous people, who perform their tricks with smoke and mirrors, or slight-of-hand, or clever machinery and props, and distractions.... –Totally innocent – very entertaining.

But the second type of magic – real magic that **isn't** an illusion – is **far** from innocent. This type of magic (or sorcery) harnesses the satanic powers of the occult, to do things spiritually, that are physically impossible. And when someone begins to dabble, or get caught up in occult, well Satan can get a real grip on them. And I'm pretty sure that Simon the magician, was very much into the occult. And for a long time, he had amazed the people with his magic. And he'd been elevated to almost God-like status, and he loved it.

But when Phillip came to town, the works that God did through Phillip, were way better than Simon's magic. We're told: that when Philip preached the **good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ**, the people believed and were baptised. ¹³ Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed.

Alright, so the amazer, became amazed.

But when the apostles came, and laid their hands on them, and the Holy Spirit fell upon them – what a neat trick that

was. “I’ll give you some money” “You give me that power”. “Make it so, when I lay my hands on people, they get the Holy Spirit”

But basically, what Peter said was “You and your money can go to hell... You can’t buy God’s gift with money”.

What’s the story with this fella??? I mean, Simon believed the gospel. He believed that Jesus is the Christ. He believed that Jesus died and rose again. He was even baptised, for goodness sake.

I mean, aren’t we taught, that as long as I believe – and as long as I’m baptised, then I’m forgiven and born again? Aren’t we taught that????

Well, Simon **did** believe, and he **was** baptised, and yet the language that Peter’s using, is “You’re going to be destroyed.” “**May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!**”²¹ You have neither part nor lot in this matter,

He believed. He was baptised. And he was cursed – he was doomed... What was wrong?

I’ll tell you what was wrong – his **heart** that was wrong.

Peter said: **your heart is not right before God**

And here’s a very important lesson for us: Simply believing that Jesus is the Christ, and that he died and rose again to

save us – well that doesn't save us. Even Satan believes that, and he's not saved, is he?

Being baptised, and doing **other** religious acts doesn't save us. It's a matter of the heart.

A lot of people in Australia today, are under a false illusion. They believe "As long as I'm baptised, and believe in God, then I'll have eternal life". And let me tell you, many people who have been baptised, and many who believe in God, will pass through the gates of Hell on judgment day.

Why? Because despite what they believed – despite what religious acts they did, their hearts have never been right before God.

What does that mean? What did it mean for Simon – that his heart wasn't right before God?

Well, for a start, he totally misunderstood the Gospel. When we understand that Jesus died to save us from our sins, the first thing we should do, is fall on our knees in repentance, and he did not.

The fact that the Son of God died for us, means that the gift of God is not something that money could **ever** buy, and yet here's Simon, wanting to buy the power of giving out the Holy Spirit... He hadn't changed at all.

When someone becomes a Christian, they're born again – they start anew – we are changed – we are not the same people we once were.

It's a matter of the heart. When you encounter Christ, self falls away – I have **no** power in myself. I have **no** greatness in myself. I have **no** claim to rights or privilege or status or even the gifts of God.

Christ has the power. **Christ** has the greatness. **Christ** is Lord and King. And if Christ is Lord and King, a humble heart falls before Jesus Christ, and is subject to His power – subject to His throne – subject to His authority.

And when our **hearts** are humbled – when our hearts are **right** before God – Christ takes us by the hand, and lifts us to our feet, and in His grace and mercy, He gives us all the things we **don't** deserve.

He gives us salvation. He gives us His Holy Spirit. He gives us freedom. He gives us purity. He gives us holiness. He gives us gifts. He gives us life.... Not because we've bought it. Not because we've earned it. Not because we deserved it, but because God is gracious and merciful.. Isn't God good??? We humble **our** hearts before God, and He lifts us up.

I don't think Simon had any relationship with Jesus at all. Even when Peter said to him: 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."

What did he do? He **didn't** repent. He **didn't** pray. He asked **Peter** to fix it for him. “You pray, Peter...” “Fix it, so it doesn't happen to me.”

Simon wanted freedom from punishment, rather than true freedom of a changed heart.

And you know, I sometimes wonder, “How many so-called ‘conversions to Christ’ – whether they be on a death bed, or whether they be after a hell-fire & brimstone message, or whether they be to any other kind of message – I wonder how many are seen as “an insurance policy – just in case. Just in case, Lord, I want freedom from punishment” ..., and how many are the true freedom of a changed heart.

And you'll probably be just as glad as I am, that I'm **not** the one who judges hearts – God is.

My job, as a preacher of Christ, is to tell you, it's not just what you believe. It's not just what religious acts you do. It's a matter of the heart. We must humble our hearts before Christ. Enthroned Him in our hearts. Love Him with all our hearts. Trust Him with your whole heart. And experience His freedom, in your heart.

It's a matter of a heart, right before God.

Questions?

ⁱ Witherington III Ben. 1998. The Acts of the Apostles – a Socio-rhetorical Commentary. Eerdmans – Grand Rapids. P.287-288.