**The Devastation of False Faith**

**Acts 8:1-24 (ESV)**

May 2, 2021

Dr. Ritch Boerckel

In high school, God gave me the opportunity to work at McDonalds. One afternoon a middle aged woman paid for her hamburgers and fries with a $20 bill. I put the $20 bill face up on the cash register drawer as I was trained to do, as I began to count out some change for her. At this moment, I noticed something odd about this bill. The four corners of the bill had the number 20, but the face looking up at me was George Washington! I looked down at that bill and I thought to myself, “Hey George, you’re not supposed to be there.” Something was not right! So I asked this customer, “What is George Washington’s face doing on this bill?” She looked at me sheepishly and she didn’t have any answers to that question. So I called our store manager over and asked if she knew why George Washington was on this $20 bill. You see, someone had cut off the ends of the 1 on a $1 bill and then likely cut off one part of a $20 bill and another part of another $20 bill because it still could be used as currency in that condition. Then they taped it so that in this way, you could take $41 and make it $60 of currency if you were successful. That was the idea. Of course, we didn’t know who did that. It was my suspicion that it was the person in front of me.

Now this false bill was entirely worthless. We couldn’t accept it. It was the only money this person had, and so this person was disappointed and in fact a little bit angry that she wasn’t going to get a Big Mac and fries from this $20 bill. We couldn’t accept it as worth anything in exchange for food. This false bill was actually one of those counterfeits that was rather easy to detect. Even my untrained high school eye could discern it. Some false bills are not like that. They’re so much like the real, genuine article that a really trained eye has to be used in order to discern that it is actually false. But here is the truth. All false currency is worthless. It’s not just worth a little bit less. It is worthless. It’s to be destroyed.

In Acts 8, we are introduced to two instances of false faith. Faith is the currency which we use. It’s a gift from God to us, but it’s currency that we use to connect to God and to receive His blessing. False faith is worthless. This false faith here in these two folk’s lives appears to have value to some that observe these two lives. If you ask them, “Is this person a Believer? Do they have faith?” the answer would be “Yes” from many people around them and they even would commend them. But what the story tells us ultimately is the faith that they had was false, and thus, it was worthless. More than it being worthless, it was actually devastating to their soul. One ultimately received God’s grace. He came to truly believe and receive God’s deliverance and salvation. The other appears never to have.

You see, false faith leaves a person in their sin underneath the infinite righteousness of God. False faith places a person outside of God’s grace and keeps them underneath God’s eternal condemnation. False faith closes the door to heaven and opens the door to eternal misery in hell. False faith is absolutely devastating! For this reason, God warns us often against it in His Word. He warns us often against it through examples like Cain and Saul and Judas, and here today, Saul of the New Testament and this guy named Simon Magnus. God not only provides real life examples of people who had false faith, but He also gives us precepts that are exact statements about false faith and warning us away from it. Jesus, for instance, in Matthew 7 says

**Matthew 7:21** “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

On the Day of Judgment, when we give an account to God of our lives,

**Matthew 7:22** On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’

Presumably, the answer to those questions is yes. They actually did those things. They actually cast out demons in the name of Christ. They did mighty miracles in the name of Christ. But Jesus’ response on that day is going to be this. In spite of the fact that in Jesus’ name they did these amazing things, He says, “here’s what my response to that person is going to be.”

**Matthew 7:23** And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’

What Jesus is saying is that there is something false about their faith and it’s going to be devastating on that day when they stand before God and give an account of their lives. In 2 Peter, Peter urges us this way. He says

**2 Peter 1:10** Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election,

You see, salvation again, is a free gift of God. I believe faith is a gift of God. But he says to confirm it. It’s something invisible, but it’s something that should have tangible results. It should result in a change of heart, a transformation of life that God produces. So he says be all the more diligent to confirm your calling, confirm your election, and I would say confirm your faith as genuine.

**2 Peter 1:10-11** …for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

James famously warns against false faith. He says

**James 2:14** What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?

**James 2:19** You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!

In other words, the demons have a kind of faith, but it’s a false faith. It’s a faith that doesn’t connect them to God’s blessing. So God, through His Word, teaches us that salvation comes to us by God’s grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. True faith always connects us to God’s eternal, infinite grace. There is never one time that true faith doesn’t connect the person to infinite grace. Every time, everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved. They will receive all the blessings that are found in Christ. False faith never connects us to God’s infinite grace, not once! That’s why it’s so important to discern for ourselves, “Is my faith true or false?”

Here’s the central idea. Let’s treasure true faith in Jesus Christ. Let’s treasure true faith as though it is our greatest source of riches, because it is. If you have genuine, true faith, then no one can call you poor. You are the most blessed and richest person in the world. On the contrary, if you don’t have true faith, no one can call you rich. There is just an eternity of nothingness and lostness and misery that awaits. So let’s treasure true faith. Let’s value her, and let’s reject false faith of every kind. Let’s turn away from it. Let’s identify it, repudiate it, and repent of it.

In Acts 8, God provides us these two amazing examples of false faith so that we might avoid these two specific errors. There are other kinds of false faith that we could talk about. We’re going to confine our consideration today to these two men and the kind of false faith that they exhibited. The first is Saul, whose faith was in a worthless object. The second is Simon, whose faith was filled with willfulness. He had a willful heart.

**Category #1: Saul—Faith in a worthless object.**

Saul had strong faith, but it was strong faith in an object that was utterly worthless. You remember that Saul is introduced at Stephen’s execution in Acts 7. Look at verse 58.

**Acts 7:58** Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.

Then the opening of Acts 8 in verse 1 says

***1*** *And Saul approved of his execution.*

He was just delighted. He was filled with glee. You see, Saul’s faith led him to believe that participation in stoning Stephen, God’s servant, is actually a righteous thing. He thinks that he is actually earning points from God by participating in and approving of the crushing abuse of this man who spoke the Word, this man who spoke the Gospel, this man who lifted up Jesus as the resurrected Savior. His life purpose has become clear. Saul believes that God has now set him apart to make it his central labor in life to be the terrorization of those who follow Jesus.

***1*** *And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.*

Stephen’s execution kind of fueled and fomented this hatred of people of The Way, people who followed Jesus. So these Jewish Christians who are part of this Jewish church in Jerusalem because that’s where God chose to start the church, are scattered. They’re scattered because they recognize, “If we don’t get out of town, we’re going to die. So let’s do the smart thing.” Now, the apostles are staying in the city. They know that the church needs their leadership. It needs it centrally. So they’re staying.

***3*** *But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.*

Now Saul is an active participation in this persecution. That word “ravaging” is actually used of a wild boar who is tearing apart its victim. It’s this incredible energy. It’s an incredible zeal. It’s a demonic energy. But it’s a kind of faith that fuels this zeal to see that this sect, and Saul believes at this time that this group is dishonoring God and needs to be annihilated. He believes this ravaging of the church, this violence against the church is actually a godly thing. He goes house to house now. He’s looking for them very individually, very specifically. It says he is dragging off men and women, dragging them off and committing them to prison. Imagine that! A guy comes to your neighborhood and begins dragging off moms and dads away from their homes because they believe in Jesus. That’s Saul here. That’s what he’s doing.

I like to say Saul was leading a purpose driven life. I point this out because many think that if you discover a purpose that you find meaningful and that you find satisfying, then you are living a successful life. Beloved, that is simply not true. This issue is not whether you have found a purpose that brings fulfillment or that thrills you or that rewards you. The central issue that God tells us is key is whether we have found our life purpose in Jesus Christ. Is Jesus the central issue of your purpose? If He’s not, it doesn’t matter whether you have a purpose. I think if Saul was asked, are you having a great life? He would say, “I’ve never been more excited about my life and excited about my work! I’m really doing something. I’m influential. I can hardly wait to get to work and I can hardly wait to finish the day and to begin the next day.” Do you find a lot of meaning? “Yes, I’m finding a ton of meaning in what I’m doing.” I think that’s what Saul would say. Yet, his purpose driven life was leading him to eternal destruction. It was devastating!

I say that because we often evaluate our life on the basis of our emotions and our feelings. It’s the wrong place to evaluate. The place to evaluate is on the Person of Jesus Christ. Is Jesus Christ central to my life? Do I get up in the morning thinking about Jesus? Do I walk throughout the day thinking about the Lordship of Christ? Do I think about His eternal salvation? Do I go to bed at night rejoicing in Jesus? That’s the question. If you have that, then you have the right kind of purpose driven life. Don’t get me wrong. I’m for a purpose driven life. It’s just, what purpose is it? That’s the key. Because just like faith, if you have faith in the wrong object and you have your purpose in the wrong object, it’s devastating. That’s the way Saul is living at this point. We discover our true purpose for living when Jesus becomes the center of our life.

So with great zeal, Saul’s faith is leading him to ravage the church. He’s a relentless hunter of believers. He goes house to house bringing misery to sweet, loving, kind, gracious people like Stephen. Why did he do this? It sounds kind of cruel. It sounds really dark, doesn’t it? Certainly, to our ears, it does, but not to Saul and not to the people around Saul. It seemed to them like it was a big threat to what is good.

Why did he do this with such violence and with such zeal? Perhaps he was born with a sadistic bent. Perhaps he was abused as a child. Perhaps his parents didn’t love him. I don’t know all the psychology of his growing up, but here’s what Paul says was his motivation. His motivation was his faith. Saul is sincere. He is real and genuine in what he believes. He just simply believes the wrong thing. His faith is driving him toward these murderous actions. Listen to what Saul testifies in Acts 22. This is after he is converted, after he sees the light, after he understands what true purpose is, after he understands for me to live is Christ. That’s my purpose now. To die is gain. He says

**Acts 22:3** “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel

Gamaliel was the most famous teacher in all of Israel at that time.

**Acts 22:3-4** …according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day. I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women,

He’s saying, “I was doing it for God.” He’s connecting his zeal for God and his faith in God to his persecution of the church. That’s his testimony. In Philippians 3, he says a similar thing about his former life. He says

**Philippians 3:4-5** If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee;

In other words, “If you took the Law and its external commandments and you look at my life, you would find no inconsistency.”

**Philippians 3:6** as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

He wants us to see that his faith led him to the persecuting of the church because he wants us to see that there is such a thing as false faith. If we have false faith, it is devastating to our soul. Devastating!

What made Saul’s faith a false faith? Again, it wasn’t a lack of sincerity. It wasn’t a lack of genuine belief. He lived what he believed every day. He wasn’t a phony. He wasn’t a pretender. So it wasn’t a lack of authenticity that made his faith a false faith. What made his faith a false faith is that he was placing his faith in a worthless object. That’s what made his faith a false faith. It was worthless and devastating to his life. He was believing in his own righteousness’ ability to commend him to God. Faith is only as valuable as its object. We all kind of know this in the physical world in which we live. If you place your faith in some physical object that is not trustworthy or that fails, you realize “I placed my faith in the wrong thing.” Let me just tell you a little story.

When I was about twelve or thirteen years old, some friends and I obtained this big innertube of a tractor. We had this really big, steep, long hill that we were able to get this innertube to. My one friend had the idea, “How about if I get inside the innertube and Jeff then can help me to be propped up and he can kind of get the innertube rolling down the hill? Ritch, you stand at the bottom of the hill and you stop me before I crash into the fence.” So I’m standing about twenty feet in front of the fence. It all seems good. As the plan of a twelve or thirteen kid does, we thought this was going to work great. Do you know what? It was beautiful at first.

My friend Kevin got in the innertube. Jeff helped him and got it rolling. For the first quarter of the hill, it just kind of gradually got going. Well, about halfway down the hill, it seemed like it was going about forty miles an hour. (Laughter!) About three quarters down the hill, it is like a locomotive bearing down on me. I was supposed to stand in front of this thing with my friend in this giant innertube and it is moving fast. I gave it a good try, but it scared me to death. So I decided I’m not going to stand square in the middle of this thing. It will just bowl me over. So I thought I would just step aside and then I would stop it with my hands. I stepped aside and I kind of slapped the innertube as it went racing by me. Sure enough, Bam! It hits this fence and my friend Kevin, gets ejected out. He was thrown about fifteen feet in the air and lands on the ground. I run over to him and he’s kind of groaning. And he says, “Ritch, why didn’t you stop me?” (Laughter!) I had no answer for him other than that I was scared to death.

You see, my friend Kevin believed in an object, a person, to do something that he shouldn’t have believed in. I guarantee you that if it went a hundred times, I wouldn’t have stopped him on any of those hundred times. I was untrustworthy for the job. Now fortunately, he just had some bruises and everything was fine. The Lord protected him and me and everything from a really bad outcome. But faith in an object that is not sufficient is a false and worthless thing. In fact, when it comes to faith for our soul, it’s devastating. Thankfully, again, by God’s grace, Saul eventually came to true faith and true salvation. We read about that in Acts 9. We’ll study it, where Saul is the one who is proclaiming that Jesus is the Son of God.

I often ask people the question, when you stand before God on the Day of Judgment and if the Lord were to ask you, “Why should I let you into my heaven?” what would you say? Think about that for your own soul if you haven’t thought about that, because it’s going to happen. You’re standing before God. I don’t know if He’s going to ask us any questions, but if He would ask the question, “Why should I let you into my heaven?” what would you say?

Almost always, it’s a rare thing for a person to give me what I would say is a Gospel answer, an answer that the object of faith is actually something that is sufficient. Almost always, a person will say something like, “I’ve tried to live a good life. I’ve tried to be a good person. I’ve tried to obey the commandments of God as best I could. I go to church.” It’s usually something along those lines. All that is an object. That’s what Saul was doing. He is trusting in his own righteousness. He was trusting in his own ability to obey the law. He is trusting in his own rituals. He’s trusting in his own goodness. At this point in his life, he is persecuting the church. By that, he is showing that he has no life of God and that he should expect certain condemnation.

You see, if you are continuing to believe in an object for the forgiveness of your sin that relates to you, understand that that’s as worthless as a twelve year old kid sitting at the bottom of a hill, expecting to stop this giant projectile coming at him. It’s not going to be sufficient. You’ll get bowled over. There is only one Person who can stop that movement toward condemnation, and that’s Jesus Christ. There’s only one Person. We can trust Him for that. He’s the only one. If we’re trusting in anyone else or anything else, the object of our faith is in something that is not reliable and then that faith becomes worthless. It becomes actually devastating to our soul. Here’s what Paul says about his fellow Israelites in Romans 10.

**Romans 10:1** Brothers, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved.

He knows that they’re not saved. They’re not ready for the Day of Judgment. They don’t have their sins forgiven. They are not reconciled to God. He says

**Romans 10:2** For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God,

This is a good thing. They have a zeal for God. They have a faith that caused them to be really zealous for God. If you ask this person who has this faith, “Are you excited about God? Are you committed to God?” Saul is going to say, “I am absolutely! My whole life is about God.” He’s talking about his fellow Jew and he says they’re all zealous for God. Everybody I know is zealous for God. But it’s the kind of zeal that is

**Romans 10:2** …but not according to knowledge.

It’s the kind of zeal that’s not localized in Christ. He says

**Romans 10:3** For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God,

This is a righteousness that is found in Christ and is offered to us as a gift. Being ignorant of that righteousness, they’re

**Romans 10:3** …and seeking to establish their own,

They know that on that day when they stand before God, righteousness has something to do with the evaluation. So they think the best thing I can do is establish some righteousness that I produce. And here’s what Paul says.

**Romans 10:3** …they did not submit to God’s righteousness.

They don’t receive the righteousness offered as a free gift. He says

**Romans 10:4** For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.”

He says they’re not saved because they’re trusting in their own righteousness. Their own righteousness is going to fail them. I would ask you, is that true for you? Are you trusting in any way in your own righteousness? Because it’s a false faith if you are.

**Romans 10:13** For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

Sometimes people will ask me, “You know, Pastor, as I listen to this and I hear what you say,” and I pray that what I say is only what the Bible says. I have no authority of my own. But it’s right here in Scripture. They ask me, “Okay, Pastor. Talk to me about my Hindu friend or my Muslim friend or my Jehovah Witness friend or my Mormon friend. They’re amazing people. In fact, they’re better people than most Christians I know. Are you telling me that they will not be allowed into God’s heaven and that they’ll be separated from God forever and ever?” I tell them that’s what the Bible says. That’s what Jesus says.

There is only one Person who can stop that life from crashing into the fence of eternal condemnation, and that Person is Jesus. If they don’t have Jesus standing in front of them, they will crash. God offers Jesus to be the Savior. So no one can say, “Jesus wasn’t in my neighborhood.” No, everyone has the opportunity to have Jesus be sitting at the bottom of the hill, stopping that sin from rolling your life into eternity away from God. Everyone has the opportunity. But if you choose something else other than Jesus, that something else will fail. That’s a false faith and it’s going to devastate your life. So I would ask you, are you trusting in Jesus Christ?

**Acts 4:12** And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

**Category #2: Simon—Faith with a willful heart.**

What an amazing story this is, because it tells us of sort of Satan’s assault upon the church not just by people outside, by persecutors like Saul, but by people who are corrupt inside the church. These are people who have professed Christ and even been baptized and become members of the church. Simon is such a man. This false faith is the kind of faith that externally, looks really good in terms of its confession, but this instant revealed a heart that had remained willful and unchanged. It’s a heart that is still unregenerate. It’s untransformed. Simon’s faith is directed toward Jesus, but it’s false because it is self-centered and willful. He gives lip service to Jesus, but his heart is not surrendered to Christ.

***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.*

That’s been his life. He’s been self-advertising, self-promoting. It has worked because everybody in this city, when they talk about Simon, they say, “He’s such a great man. In fact, he’s like God.” In other words, his sales about himself is effective. That’s his reputation for many, many years, in fact.

***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 mayor as well as the beggars in the street paid attention to him. We call him Simon Magnus. “Magnus” just simply means “great.” That’s been his reputation.

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

I don’t know what show he had, but he didn’t let his show get stale. It’s like he’s there five, ten, twenty years and he’s coming up with new stuff and people want to go see the new show. So he’s there a long time and he’s still amazing people with his occultic power, which is power that is connected to demons.

***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.*

So now it’s talking about what God is doing in Samaria. This new church is starting. We’re not sure exactly how many Christians there are in the world at this time. Some scholars believe there are around 20,000 in the world at this time. It starts in Jerusalem, where a few thousand come to faith in Christ on the Day of Pentecost. Another couple thousand come later in a sermon by Peter. But it’s growing and these folks are now getting scattered. As they’re scattered, people like Philip are still telling the Gospel wherever they go. There is a church now that gets started in Samaria. These are folks that are not Jews. They’re not quite fully Gentiles. They’re kind of a mixture as a result of the history. When the Assyrians took over the northern kingdom, some Assyrians stayed around and intermarried with the Jews. That’s who the Samaritans are. So they have this mixture of some Old Testament knowledge, but also a lot of pagan ideas. A church now has started in Samaria. It’s really exciting, and then it gets even more exciting!

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

We have these three circles in your bulletin. I don’t know if you’ve observed those. But we believe this is sort of a path of discipleship. A person hears the Gospel when they don’t know Jesus and they believe. What the text tells us is initially, it seems like Simon does this. He believed and it says he believed. Then the second circle is Belong. You belong by becoming baptized. Your baptism is the rite of initiation into membership in the church. So now, Simon is a member of the church. Simon, according to the story, is now in this third circle. He’s becoming like Him, growing. He’s living his life for Christ. That’s where it seems as though the progression is going for Simon at this point.

It’s a fantastic story, isn’t it? He’s really the first celebrity Christian. It’s spoken of at first in a really positive way. You can imagine that the people in the church, this is a new church, are saying, “Hey, we have a celebrity. This is a guy who used to be doing all this crazy stuff with occultic practices and now he’s professing Jesus as Savior and Lord. He’s getting baptized. He has given his testimony. You can imagine listening to the testimony of Simon, and after his testimony, everybody claps. Praise God! This is amazing! People are thinking, “Well, maybe God will use him in a really mighty way because in his other life, he had a big audience. Maybe he’ll be really used to help us grow the church for Jesus.” They’re excited about this! So it’s a really fantastic story at this point.

But as the story plays out, we discover that Luke is telling us a chapter in the story that’s not actually a story that I would put in the annual report of a church business meeting. “What happened this year?” Okay, let me tell you about Simon. It’s not a story I want to tell, but Luke tells it. Why? There are a lot of great stories he could have told about this church in Samaria because there are a lot of people that are genuinely born again. He chooses to tell a story that is a little bit embarrassing. Why? Because he wants us to know that there is a real spiritual battle inside the church and a real danger inside the church. So he tells this story.

***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.*

I wish we had time to talk about why the Holy Spirit delayed. I think the reason is that here is this new group of people. So far, only the Jewish Christians have received the Holy Spirit. There is this big divide between Jews and Gentiles that God established. God created the divide and now He’s bridging that divide. If they gave evidence of receiving the Holy Spirit without any apostolic witness, it would have been possible for the Jews to say, “I’m sure it happened, right? You’re just telling a story. We don’t know.” So God actually allowed Jewish apostles to come and be part of this so they could say, “No, they’re exactly like us. God accepts them exactly like us. We’re one church.” That’s the whole point.

***17*** *Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit.*

People who already had been baptized in the name of Jesus and believed in Jesus are receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit. It’s very dynamic. Simon sees this and he is fascinated. He recognizes he had a certain kind of power that other people thought was great when he was a pagan, when he was an occultic practitioner. But he recognizes that what he sees now is real and genuine. He would consider that what he did was like a fire cracker and what they’re doing is like dynamite. I want the dynamite! His selfish heart is stirred. Now Jesus becomes a means to do what he used to do, only do it a lot better and more powerfully. I want that! You see, Simon’s faith is revealing itself to be about him and not about Jesus.

***18*** *Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money,*

He had become a very wealthy person.

***19*** *saying, “Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.”*

Notice the pronouns. Give *me* this power also, so that anyone on whom *I* lay *my* hands may receive the Holy Spirit. Simon now through his actions and his words reveals his internal heart condition. He reveals the heart behind his faith. He has verbally confessed Jesus, but he wants Jesus in order to acquire the power of Jesus for himself. He is a lover of self rather than a lover of God. He wants that kind of influence to be attached to himself. Listen to Peter’s response.

***20*** *But Peter said to him, “May your silver perish with you,*

Wait a minute! He’s a member of the church. He’s probably tithing. We don’t have a lot of money. There’s a church in Jerusalem that is really suffering. Peter could care less about the externals. He says “what is important is that this church is about Jesus. Simon, you’re going to stand in the way. If you’re not confronted and either submit and repent or not submit and be removed, this whole church is in jeopardy.”

***20*** *But Peter said to him, “May your silver perish with you,*

Some people ask, how do we know that Simon wasn’t actually a believer who just maybe sinned? Believers do sin. Well, we know for sure because of Peter’s response. I think the story bears it out too, in Simon’s attitude throughout, from beginning to end. But Peter’s words, I think, make it unalterably clear.

***20*** *But Peter said to him, “May your silver perish with you,*

He uses the word “perish.” What does John 3:16 say? For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish. He says, “Simon, you’re in a state of perishing. I am now calling down a curse by saying, “may your silver perish with you.” You’re already perishing. May your silver perish with you.” He’s talking about the state of his soul. He says

*because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!*

You thought you could buy God’s grace, which means you don’t understand God’s grace at all.

***21*** *You have neither part nor lot in this matter,*

The word “matter” is the Greek word *logos*. He’s saying “you don’t have part in this word. The word is Jesus. The word is the Gospel. The word is this ministry of the Holy Spirit. You don’t have part or lot. It’s not like you’re kind of corrupting what you’re a part of. You have no part, no lot in this ministry of the Holy Spirit, this ministry of Jesus that brings eternal life. You have no part and no lot at all.” He goes on to say

*for your heart is not right before God.*

He says “Simon, this isn’t about making a mistake or about having a lapse. This shows where your heart is. Your heart is not right. It’s not humble. It is not Christ-centered. But there is still hope for you.”

***22*** *Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible,*

Of course, all things are possible. Peter knows that God’s mercy is infinite, but he also wants him to know not to presume upon God’s mercy. It’s not because of your repentance that you’re going to do this. It’s still all trusting in God’s infinite grace. He says

*if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you.* ***23*** *For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness*

In other words, your heart is filled with bitter and selfish pride and desire for the stuff of this world. And your heart is

*and in the bond of iniquity.”*

It’s still enslaved to sin.

All of these things point to Simon as not having received the gift of life. The fact that there are some in the church who possess false faith shouldn’t surprise us. God speaks of it both in the Old and the New Testament. He speaks both by example as well as by precept. When I think of Jesus’ ministry, we think of Judas. He had false faith. When we think of Paul’s ministry, we think of Demas. Demas, having loved the world, left the faith. He was once a dear, beloved co-worker. So we have example after example in both the Old and New Testament of false faith. We also have very specific precepts. Whenever the Gospel of Jesus is preached it produces both genuine faith and false faith.

Jesus tells this amazing parable. You might just jot down Matthew 13. A sower went out to sow seeds in his field. He sowed this great and beautiful harvest of wheat. But at midnight, the enemy comes by and sows weeds. The workers eventually see the weeds growing up with the wheat and they say, “Should we start pulling out the weeds in order to clean the field of all these weeds that this enemy sowed in?” The man said, “No. Wait until the end of the harvest.” That’s the end of the time, when we stand before Jesus. Only God can discern. He said the worst thing that would happen is we start trying to purify the church right away and acting like we can see inside people’s hearts. As we pull up what we think is a weed, it’s actually a wheat and then we’ve just really, really done something devastating and hurtful. First, do not harm, is sort of the message of that parable.

Now, that doesn’t mean that sometimes weeds don’t grow up to become very, very obvious. At that point, it’s right to do something about it. That’s what is happening here with Simon. Peter didn’t come into the village saying, “I can perceive Simon that you’re not right with God.” He waited until Simon actually revealed himself and it becomes obvious that he’s not a genuine believer. He’s not transformed. So Jesus’ point is in this present age, when God works and He plants seeds, and these seeds are sons and daughters of the kingdom, that Satan also works in that same field. Where there are sons and daughters of the kingdom that are grown by God, Satan is going to work so that in that same field, there are going to be sons and daughters of the evil one. So expect it.

I don’t know who that would be here at Bethany, but we’re a church of about a thousand people and I know there are some. It concerns me as a pastor. I want to labor for you because I’m concerned that a person could sit under a ministry and under the teaching of the Word for a year, five years, ten years, twenty years, twenty-five years, and at the Judgment Day we discover that there was no genuine faith. That keeps me awake at night. It’s part of my prayers because I want to labor as much as I can to see that doesn’t happen. But I know it will happen. It’s unavoidable, Jesus says. So here we see in Acts 7, this parable revealed in very specific ways to say, expect this to happen.

By the way, just as an aside. This is not even in my notes, but I have two minutes here, three minutes. When you come to church, oftentimes I hear people starting to back away from their zeal for God or worship because in the church, there are some people that don’t act like Christians. Well, of course! What were you expecting? Jesus told us that that’s going to happen. Jesus told us some of those folks aren’t genuinely born again. What are you to do? Are you going to back away from the work of God in His church, or are you going to press in by faith and say, I’m going to be one of those people who influences for the Gospel. That’s what I’m going to do. That’s my response.

How do we know whether we have false faith or true faith? Here are four indicators real quick, and then there will be two applications before we leave. First, false faith has external confession without internal heart change. The big lie that Simon held onto is that Jesus is simply a better means to pursue my own selfish ambitions and worldly glory. That’s what he believed. That’s why he was in. That’s why he was being baptized. Jesus is simply a better means to pursue my own selfish ambition and worldly glory. The Gospel tells us that Jesus is a means to discover God, to love Him, to know Him. True faith says I’m a wretch! I need God. False faith says, “I’m doing pretty well and I really want God to bless all my endeavors here in this world.”

The second indication is false faith thinks of God’s grace as a means to earthly power and wealth. Simon was riding the fence between God and this world. He is struggling between two opinions. He’s trying to serve two masters. He thinks he can love God and love the world at the same time. Eventually, this boils out in this story. Simon wants the best of the Christian life and the best of the present world. But Jesus says, “You have to choose. In order to gain your life, you’re going to have to lose it. You can’t serve two masters. You’ll either love one and hate the other or you’ll hate one and love the other. You have to choose.” False faith never wants to choose, so it’s compromising.

The third indication is false faith looks for a way to barter with God. Simon literally thought that God wanted his money and would give him something in exchange for money. He literally thought that. Most people are more sophisticated than that. They think maybe God wants my energy, my time. “God, if I do this, would you do that?” At that point, we’re totally misunderstanding the grace of God and we’re totally outside the Gospel. False faith looks for a way to barter with God. True faith comes to God for a blessing like a beggar comes to a rich man for food. We have nothing in our hands. We just need God.

The last indication is false faith refuses to repent personally of sin. They think repentance is great as an idea, but personally? Look at what happens. In verse 22, Peter gives him hope.

***22*** *Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours,*

What does Simon do?

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

Is that a humble response? Absolutely not! It’s the most proud response this man could have made. He agreed with repentance in general. He said, “Pray for me,” but he refused to bow his knee and personally repent. Friend, whatever faith is in your life, it must be personal, with personal humbling, personal repentance, personal trust. Simon says, “I don’t want it to be personal. That’s too close. I’m a little bit scared of that. Maybe you’ll pray for me. That’ll be good enough, won’t it?” No, it’s not!

There are some applications that I would draw. First, examine yourself to see if you are in the faith. This is a healthy spiritual exercise. God’s call is for us not to be careless with our own soul. In fact, there is a command in 2 Corinthians 13 that actually says this.

**2 Corinthians 13:5-6** Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test! I hope you will find out that we have not failed the test.

I hope we find out that we don’t have false faith. Test yourself. It’s the most important thing to know you have true faith or false faith. When we test ourselves, is my object Jesus? Is my heart one of a beggar? “God, I have nothing to bring. I just need Jesus to redeem and to deliver me.” That’s the test.

The second application would be to speak the Gospel to those who profess faith, but whose lives give strong evidence to the contrary. We have to be careful of pulling up the weeds. But at the same time, we ought not to affirm or confirm what we can’t confirm. So if someone is giving evidence of a lack of genuine faith, we shouldn’t say, “I’m sure you’re saved.”

Oftentimes, I’ll have a mom or a dad come to me throughout these twenty-seven years of ministry and say, we’ll just use a son. “My son, for the last thirty years of his life, he has not followed Jesus. He hasn’t opened his Bible. He hasn’t gone to church. He has lived a life of willful sin. He doesn’t want to talk about Jesus. He gets mad when I try to bring it up. But when he was ten, he prayed a prayer to trust in Jesus. I’m so thankful for that.” I have to tell you, you shouldn’t be thankful for that. In fact, you’re helping this person remain in unbelief if you have that attitude because you’re communicating whether passively or actively that “yes, his life is not pleasing God, but he’s okay.” Do you hear what Peter said to Simon?

Now again, I know we have to navigate the world and how we go about communicating, but for sure, we should first pray. “God, save my son. He’s not saved. He’s giving every indication and I can’t believe that he has true faith when this is the way he’s living. So I’m praying for you to bring true faith to him.” Then when you talk to him, tell him, “I’m concerned for your soul. On the basis of what Jesus says, I’m concerned for your soul.” Let us be instruments of the Gospel!