



+ **YOU**

Summer 2023
Set Apart: A Life Lived for God

Sermon Title: Beware of Shortcuts
To be used with Session 4: Set Apart for the Journey
Scripture: Acts 8:9-24

Connection with the Study: To complement the Bible study “Set Apart for the Journey” this sermon cautions listeners against trying to circumnavigate or take shortcuts on the road to spiritual maturity and leadership. The story of Simon’s desire for prominence is a cautionary tale for all who hold or desire responsibility within the church. It is important that they understand the goal of spiritual leadership is not personal popularity or honor in the eyes of others nor can it be purchased quickly or easily. It is also important that they understand the need for repentance when confronted with their own sin.

Introduction: Dr. Fredric Neuman write the following:

“Someone wrote a book—and then a musical—about how to succeed in business without really trying. It was a prescription for what an ambitious person without skills, talent, or brains needs to do to succeed. It was a matter of being in the right place at the right time and saying the right things to the right people.

“It was amusing because it alluded to certain aspects of business that we all recognize. People sometimes fail their way up the corporate ladder. Others ‘rise to their level of incompetence.’ It is said—usually by someone who is not progressing quickly in a career—that ‘It’s not what you know, it’s who you know.’”¹

Aren’t we glad we are not like those people?

Almost everyone wants success and most of us want others to see us as successful. This is true in our spiritual lives, as well. *Waiters*, a musical by Kathie Hill, includes a song with lyrics that expressed it quite well: “I wants what I wants when I wants it, and I wants what I wants right now!”² What path are you taking in order to gain spiritual power?

1. We Cannot Save Ourselves (Acts 8:9-13)

There is no neutral ground between lost and born again. It is not the opinions of others that define our standing with God. Simon was admired by everyone. He had power beyond that of politicians, the military, or successful businessmen. The people admired him and believed he had

¹ psychologytoday.com/us/blog/fighting-fear/201406/its-not-what-you-know-its-who-you-know

² Kathie Hill, *Waiters: A Youth Musical About Waiting on the Lord* (Nashville: Genevox, 1994).

great spiritual power because he appeared to be able to perform miraculous works and he had been doing it for a long time. In the same way, there are many today who appear to have everything they need and are admired by everyone else. The problem is that their point of view is confined to appearances and this mortal life.

When Philip went to the city in Samaria, proclaiming Christ, casting out demons, and healing the paralyzed and lame, joy became a characteristic of that city (Acts 8:5-8). Simon understood that this was something greater than his abilities and he was impressed. He believed and was baptized which was an acknowledgment that he could not save himself.

2. The Community of Faith (Acts 8:14-19)

This particular spiritual awakening in Samaria came about as God used one of the first deacons, Philip—a man known to be full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom (Acts 6:3-5)—to draw the people to Him.

In His infinite wisdom, God has filled the church with people He has gifted to accomplish His purpose. Some of those are expressly given for the purpose of building up the body of Christ until we all reach maturity in the faith (Eph. 4:4-13). As Paul pointed out in 1 Corinthians 3:7-9, many people are involved in a person's spiritual growth. Word of the Samaritans turning to Christ came to the apostles in Jerusalem, and they sent Peter and John who laid hands on them as a result, these Samaritan believers received the Holy Spirit. Now, Simon had witnessed how God used different people to build up His kingdom, but Simon was not interested in the process; he was interested in the result. He wanted to impress the people with his spiritual prowess and power just as he was impressed with what he saw happening through Peter and John. Note that his criteria was "anyone I lay hands on" rather than those to whom God directed him.

There is a community of faith through which God works to build His kingdom. The people He uses are His choice, not ours, and the process He uses cannot be bypassed nor the end result immediately achieved with money or favors.

3. Back to Basics (Acts 8:14-19)

The problem was not that Simon was not worthy because no one is worthy. No one is worthy of a right relationship with God or being used by God in His kingdom. God uses us despite our unworthiness. It is about Him, not us. Simon's problem was exactly as Peter stated it: "Your heart is not right before God." Simon's desire was sinful and as Isaiah 59:2 says, "Your iniquities are separating you from your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not listen." We repent in order to receive God's forgiveness, but unfortunately we still fall into sin.

Parents' love for their children continues even when the children are disobedient. Even more, God continues to love His children and they remain in His hand (John 10:28-29). But our continued disobedience affects our relationship with Him so that we are distanced from His protection and provision just as the prodigal son removed himself from his father's protection and provision.

The “fix” for Simon was the same as it is for us: repentance. Even though Peter addressed that need, it was completely up to Simon to do it and the text leaves the matter unresolved except for Simon’s request for Peter to pray for him. That may indicate that Simon was depending upon Peter’s intercession rather than praying himself. Pastors, parents, and others may warn a person of the need to repent, but it is up to that person to actually turn away from sin and run to God.

Conclusion: The abundance of plaques, name plates, and dedications in numerous church buildings testify to the pleasure many have when they are honored by others. What we should desire above all else, however, is to have our Lord say, “Well done, good and faithful servant!” (Matt. 25:21,23) Such faithfulness is not bought with money, but it is the result of a consistent lifetime of humble service and growth. It is fed and strengthened by spiritual disciplines such as a persistent prayer life, continuous Bible study, consistent individual and corporate worship, fellowship with other believers, ministry, witnessing, discipling, loving, and so forth.

Can you identify specific spiritual disciplines that you need to spend time working on? Are you willing to ask God right now to remind you daily to give those areas your attention?

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