



Sent – Part 8

The Counterfeit Christian

This week, we are back in our series on the book of Acts! Back in Part 7 of Sent (Acts 6-7), the early church faced yet more problems with its “everything held in common” model. The Apostles sought to remedy the situation by appointing the first ever deacons. Stephen, one of the seven deacons, is brought before the Sanhedrin for declaring the Gospel. After explaining how the Old Testament parallels the Jews’ treatment of Jesus, he is stoned to death. What we learn is that God calls us to His purpose, which is to speak the truth to advance the Gospel. Our obedience leads to opportunities, but our obedience is required even unto death.

In Part 8 (**Acts 8:1-25**), we will explore the issue of “Counterfeit Christianity.” During the time of the early church, there were people who looked the part, but were not genuine followers of Jesus. Simon the Magician falls into this camp of false converts, seeking his own fame and glory rather than submitting himself to Jesus and His authority. Counterfeits can be quite believable, partly because they have convinced themselves they are the real deal.



BELONG

Start the group with an opportunity for community. We want this to be a place where the body of Christ can **belong** by sharing their lives with one another in genuine fellowship.

- How is everyone's week going? Any life updates?
 - What is something the group can be praying about?
 - What is something the group can praise this week?

 - What is the most convincing counterfeit you have ever seen? (This can be anything; something fake that convinced you it was the real thing!)
 - Right now, what would you say is a Counterfeit Christian? What does Counterfeit Christianity look like to you?
 - Do you think Counterfeit Christianity is a problem in the church today? Why or why not?
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BELIEVE

Move into the relevant Bible passages and read along together. This is where the body of Christ can learn together to **believe** in Jesus more and love Him better.

Acts 8:1-25 (NIV)

8 And Saul approved of their killing him. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. **2** Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. **3** But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison. **4** Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. **5** Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. **6** When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. **7** For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. **8** So there was great joy in that city. **9** Now for some time a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria. He boasted that he was someone great, **10** and all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, "This man is rightly called the Great Power of God." **11** They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his sorcery.

12 But when they believed Philip as he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. **13** Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw. **14** When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to Samaria. **15** When they arrived, they prayed for the new believers there that they might receive the Holy Spirit, **16** because the Holy Spirit had not yet come on any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. **17** Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. **18** When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money **19** and said, "Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit."**20** Peter answered: "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! **21** You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. **22** Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord in the hope that he may forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. **23** For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin." **24** Then Simon answered, "Pray to the Lord for me so that nothing you have said may happen to me." **25** After they had further proclaimed the word of the Lord and testified about Jesus, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many Samaritan villages.



Saul Persecutes the Church

Following the stoning of Stephen in the streets of Jerusalem (overseen by Saul of Tarsus, who approved of his killing according to verse 1), great persecution breaks out against the church, forcing Christians to scatter across Israel for fear of their lives being taken in like manner.

The text says that the Apostles did not flee from Jerusalem, perhaps because they were not the focus of the persecution. Considering the Apostles were Jewish, and the persecution was instigated in response to the killing of Stephen (whose name is Greek), it is possible the persecution focused primarily on Grecian Jewish Christians, although the entire church was affected.

Despite what many would rightfully see as a dark day in the story of the early church, the persecution of Christians in Jerusalem actually led to the preaching of the Gospel in yet unreached areas. Before the impetus of the persecution forcing Christians to evangelize in the areas of Judea and Samaria, there was no significant attention given to these places. Keep in mind that Saul of Tarsus later becomes Paul, the primary author of the New Testament. Even before his conversion, God was using Him in what some might call a roundabout way to grow the early church!

Thus, this great scattering of Christians from Jerusalem sets the stage for the story concerning Simon the Magician (other translations might say Sorcerer). Of note is a man named Philip, whose preaching in Samaria was incredibly successful. The text says multitudes of people heeded his words and bore witness to the miracles he performed, such as healing the paralyzed and the lame as well as casting out unclean spirits. It is in response to Philip's incredible acts that Simon, one of the first examples of a Counterfeit Christian, is drawn into the church.

The Counterfeit Christian

Before Philip showed up on the scene, Simon was a well-known figure in Samaria, whose magic and sorcery astonished the people. Apparently, Simon was called the "Great Power of God" (a title that reflects pagan language) in response to his seemingly "miraculous" acts. The text draws a sharp contrast between Simon and Philip. For a long time, Simon had amazed people with his tricks, leading them to believe he was given power by God. Now, Philip enters Samaria *actually* empowered by God, and offers genuine miracles that not only amaze, but bring with them real healing and ultimately spiritual salvation.

Simon is enticed by Philip's power, fixated on his miracles and signs rather than the person of Jesus Christ. For this reason, the authenticity of Simon's belief in the name of Jesus is doubtful. Nonetheless, the text says that Simon did in fact believe when confronted by the message of the Kingdom of God. As James points out, simple intellectual ascent to certain facts about God is not enough to be saved.



James 2:19 (NIV)

¹⁹ You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that – and shudder.

Being born again is not only a matter of the mind, but a matter of the heart. The book of 1 Samuel puts it like this:

1 Samuel 16:7 (NIV)

People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”

Simon being a Counterfeit Christian was evidenced by his impure motives, seeking after his own fame and glory (just like he had already been doing). We can all be fooled, but God knows a person’s heart. It is up to each of us to examine our own hearts as well to see where our motivations lie.

1. Counterfeit Christians Come to God on Their Own Terms

If we are going to have a relationship with God, it can only be on *His* terms. Near the end of the American Civil War, the Confederacy sent a letter to the Union requesting the terms of surrender. General Ulysses S. Grant, the leader of the Union army, wrote back,

“No other terms than unconditional and immediate surrender. I propose to move immediately upon your works.”

These are the same terms Jesus gives us for following Him: unconditional and immediate surrender. There are no negotiations. Following Jesus means submitting your life to His authority in its entirety. Simon wanted to fit God into *his* plans and *his* purposes. Upon hearing that the Gospel is being preached in Samaria, the Apostles send Peter and John to see how things are getting along. The two of them begin to lay their hands on those who have accepted Christ so that they can receive the Holy Spirit, but Simon’s response to this is quite telling.

Simon offers the Apostles money to receive their power. He wasn’t content with his own fancy tricks; he wanted the real thing. Although he recognized that God held real power, he wanted that power to fit nicely into his own plans. He wasn’t thinking how he could fit into God’s kingdom; he was thinking about how God might fit into *his* kingdom. Jesus isn’t an advisor or consultant; He is God and He is the King. If you are going to follow Jesus, it has to be on *His* terms, not ours.



2. Counterfeit Christians Attempt to Purchase What Only God Can Give

As already mentioned, Simon tried to pay the Apostles for their ability to lay hands on people to give them the Holy Spirit. For him, following Jesus was like a transaction: I give God this, and God should give me what I want in return.

He treated the power of God like something that could be bought, something that could be earned through effort or, in this case, enough resources. For many of us, our relationship with Jesus can become the same thing. We think we are trading with God, doing things for Him as though we are placing God in our debt.

However, the truth is you can never earn God's favor because you will never be good enough, or rich enough, or powerful enough. Paul is very clear on this point:

Ephesians 2:8-9 (NIV)

⁸ For it is by grace you have been saved, though faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰ For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works...

Salvation isn't earned, but a free gift of grace. If we could earn it, Jesus wouldn't have needed to die on a Cross in our place. We receive this free gift through faith in Jesus, not by doing good things. God isn't sitting in Heaven trying to figure out how He is going to make things work if you don't help Him. God doesn't *need* us to accomplish His purposes, but rather God *wants* us to participate in His plans because He loves us.

The Apostles rebuke Simon for his attempt to buy them off. He actually makes this exact point, that "you thought you could buy the gift of God with money."

3. Counterfeit Christians Are Motivated by Selfish Gain

All Simon wanted was a new magic trick. Philip's arrival and the miracles he performed had taken away his spotlight. To become relevant again, he would have to step up his game, and unfortunately for Simon, to compete with God is not a game you are going to win!

He saw the power the Apostles had, and through this was his ticket back to the top in Samaria. He wanted to be somebody great, someone who was rich, powerful, and popular. Peter tells Simon that salvation is a matter of the heart, saying, "You have neither part nor portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God."

The question is do we want the gift or the giver? Do you want God for blessing, or do you want God just for Him? Following Jesus isn't about your own personal gain – it's about God's glory. You can't have both; you can't make your life about what you can



gain or accumulate, and still get Jesus in the process. A person's heart only has room for one master.

In response to Peter's rebuke, Simon asks him to pray to God that the disaster he spoke of would not fall upon him. It is not wrong to want to avoid Hell, but Simon's motivation for doing so was only so he could remain alive to further his own selfish interests. Simon requested the Apostles to speak to God on his behalf because he thought they had bargaining power with God.

Once again, no one can "bargain" with God, not even the Apostles. They were given authority and power on Earth because they had surrendered what authority and power they thought they had to Jesus. True Christians do not follow God for what they think they can gain; they have recognized their own insufficiency and given up everything to follow Jesus.

BECOME

Wrap up the discussion by asking some closing questions. We can **become** more like the people God is calling us to be by reflecting on what we've learned and applying it.

- Of the three marks of a Counterfeit Christian, which one do you struggle with the most?
 - Coming to God on *your* terms, not His?
 - Trying to earn God's favor through actions?
 - Doing things for selfish gain?
- How can we check our own hearts to make sure we aren't living out a Counterfeit Christianity?
- How can we defend ourselves against Counterfeit Christians, recognizing true believers from false converts?