

A Reflection on Acts 8:9-25

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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.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."¹¹ And they paid attention to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic.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.¹³ Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed.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.¹⁷ Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit.¹⁸ Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money,¹⁹ saying, "Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit."²⁰ But Peter said to him, "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, for your heart is not right before God.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."²⁴ And Simon answered, "Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me."²⁵ Now when they had testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans

The Simon of whom we read in Acts 8 could do some impressive things, things simply called "magic." These impressive things helped Simon to substantiate his claim that he was a great man (vv. 9-11). We really do not know all that his "magic" entailed, but this matters little to us because the type of magic for which Simon was acclaimed is beside the point. Suffice it to say that despite the fact that you and I are probably not magicians as he was, it is nevertheless likely that we too have a few tricks which we like to perform before the eyes of others so as to win their admiration. There is something in us that is disposed towards being regarded as *great* and we long for others to give us attention, or even to be amazed at us.

They all paid attention to him, from the least to the greatest . . . And they paid attention to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. (vv. 10a, 11)

Is it wrong to want to be recognized? Is it wrong to desire to be given credit for that which you have done well? Not necessarily, but probably. That is to say, if there is anything which the great Christian writers have taught us about the condition of our hearts, it is that our motives typically fall far short of being Christ-like. Usually there is a good bit more of Self in us than there should be.

Simon is a good example of someone who seems initially to have been interested in Jesus for the wrong reasons. The text tells us that he believed Philip's preaching about "the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ" and that he allowed himself to be baptized. Then, at the end of v. 13, we begin to get a hint that the old man (the man who wanted glory and acclaim for himself) was still fighting for supremacy within Simon.

And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he (Simon) was amazed. (v. 13b)

A little while later, the great apostles Sts. Peter and John came into the area and they fulfilled their apostolic ministry by calling down the Holy Spirit on those who had been baptized. Simon's reaction to this is telling. He does not ask that he too might receive the Holy Ghost, but rather tries to bribe Sts. Peter and John to give *him* the power to do such marvelous deeds!

Then they (Sts. Peter and John) laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit. Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, saying, "Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." (vv. 17-19)

This is the most profane of suggestions – "Tell me how I may use God to get glory for myself." Perhaps we think ourselves incapable of such baseness, but we are not. This is a potential temptation for each of us. Let us pray for God's help, that He might deliver us from the net of pride which will entangle and destroy us. We must be on our guards against any and every temptation to use the things of God for self advancement. Distrust yourself and be wary of your propensity to turn acts of service into opportunities to feed your pride.