

Words and Deeds: Taking The Spirit Seriously

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Titus 3:4-7; John 20:19-23; Acts 8:1-25

Our final Scripture reading today, as it did last week, comes from Acts 8:4-25. May God add His richest blessing on the reading of His holy, inerrant, and infallible Word. “Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there. When the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said. With shrieks, evil spirits came out of many, and many paralytics and cripples were healed. So there was great joy in that city. 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, and all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, “This man is the divine power known as the Great Power.” They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his magic. But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw. When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. When they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them; they had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money and said, “Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.” Peter answered: “May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin.” Then Simon answered, “Pray to the Lord for me so that nothing you have said may happen to me.” When they had testified and proclaimed the word of the Lord, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many Samaritan villages.”

Do you remember something where you saw it and thought, “I’ve got to have that”? It happens all the time. I remember first seeing big-screen TVs in the ‘90s and thinking, “Those are awesome!” It took the better part of 20 years, but I finally got one a few years ago. Everybody else must have been thinking the same thing, because now on a good sale you can get a great high def ’50 inch TV for the same price than what we paid for a big ol’ boxy junky-lookin’ 20 inch TV when we were right out of college. We hear about a great new movie and think, “I’ve got to see that,” or a great book and think, “I’ve got to read that.”

There are times in our lives when it’s not just about physical things, either. We all tend to have a jealous streak about relationships. We see someone’s good marriage and think, “It would be nice to have that.” We see someone’s kids who don’t want to attack everything in the grocery aisle and think, “What I wouldn’t give!” We know of families that seem to have it all together, from grandma and grandpa on down, and wonder what that must be like.

But how often do we see someone who shows extraordinary kindness and think, “You know, I’d love to be like that”? How often do we see grace shown to someone and not just think, “How nice,” but, “I want to pattern my life around God’s grace too”? When we see others around us at church every Sunday, how often do we see people whose lives are an example to us? And how much do we want to grow to be like them? It’s a deep question this morning, and one I want to get into in our second study on this passage of Scripture from Acts 8.

Now last week we talked about a specific part of this passage – namely, how the death of Stephen and the persecution of the church was a part of God’s larger plan. Through those things, the Samaritan people were introduced to Jesus and became believers themselves. The lead apostles, Peter and John, wound up coming and finding for themselves that God had indeed brought this nation from outside Israel into God’s Kingdom – and the Holy Spirit coming upon the new believers was proof. And we discussed how the end result of God’s plans is joy – both joy in the present and joy eternally when we live in the presence of God Himself.

Today we’re going to discuss a completely different section of this passage and a different concept it tackles. We want to see the Holy Spirit and what He does in this passage. The Holy Spirit is working throughout Acts, but He is really front and center here, and I want to dig deeply into His presence and how it affects everything we see going on in the early church.

Philip goes to Samaria and starts doing the miraculous. In the Greek, they are literally “signs” and “works of power.” People possessed and oppressed by unclean spirits are freed from their bondage. People receive healing, and not just from the sniffles – people who are paralyzed can move; people who are lame have their limbs restored. It’s astonishing, but at the same time it’s not surprising given that the apostles and disciples in Jerusalem have been doing the same. And it’s all by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Then you’ve got this guy, Simon, right? He does magic. The Greek word that describes it is only found here in the New Testament, but most outside sources refer to it as healers using bizarre practices and rituals. It could definitely be more sinister since many ancients believed in laying curses and blessings on other people through special incantations. And he thinks he’s big stuff. He calls himself great, and his followers called him something like “the Great Power of God” or “the divine Great Power.”

And Simon is shocked when he sees the Holy Spirit in action because he’s supposedly “the Great Power,” and then he sees Philip doing **real** works of power. Undeniable signs, nothing like his stuff – because he knows ultimately he’s a fraud. This is the real deal. What Philip does is so stunning that Simon not only believes in what Philip is saying, he gets baptized and follows Philip around. This guy who once had his own followers is now following one of the apostles!

Now he might genuinely believe – it’s hard to say because it’s not a stretch to trust someone who touches people you know have been disabled for decades and they start jumping around. But Simon’s heart isn’t right. The new believers have yet to receive the Holy Spirit because God wants to show the leadership of the whole church that the Samaritans are now welcomed into the Kingdom.

When the Holy Spirit comes on the first Samaritans that Peter and John lay their hands on, Simon wants it. He offers money to the apostles so that he can have the power to bestow the Spirit on whomever he wants. And of course, that doesn't go well. After a stern warning about his sinfulness, Simon retreats, begging Peter and John to pray for him so that God won't wipe him out for his wickedness.

That's the plot, but there are several things for us to think about. First is this: *the presence of the Holy Spirit was and is demonstrable in works of power and service beyond human reason*. Here we have a guy who dabbled in powers who is overwhelmed when he comes into contact with the genuine article. This entire town in Samaria listened to Philip closely because the signs he did were so convincing. Nobody doubted that God was working through Philip because it was plain and obvious.

This was the pattern in the early church. When Paul writes to correct the Corinthian church in some areas they've gotten really wrong, he reminds them of why they believe. He says in 1 Corinthians 2:4-5, "My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power." In Hebrews 2:4, it says, "This salvation [through the Son], which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will."

And the Spirit is still working in power today. Here is a list of the gifts of the Spirit given to various believers at various times from 1 Corinthians 12: the message of wisdom – insight into what God is doing. The message of knowledge – knowing something we wouldn't otherwise know due to God's intervention. Faith – not just belief but strong and abiding encouragement in God.

Gifts of healing – some who can heal by the Spirit. Miraculous powers – accomplishing signs to convince unbelievers. Prophecy – speaking a truth about the future. Distinguishing between spirits – being able to tell if something someone else says is actually from God or not. Tongues and the interpretation of tongues – the ability to use and to translate unknown languages for the glory of God and the salvation of others.

But there's more. The fruits of the Spirit. Sometimes people think that bearing fruit for God means bringing new people into the church or helping them into the Kingdom. That's true in a certain sense, but it's not what Scripture usually means. They are the signs that the Spirit is working in someone's life. They are, from Galatians 5, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. These are powers too, because how many secular people, people without faith or people who are only nominally involved in church, show these sort of things everyday in their lives to the point where others are like, "You aren't like other people I know" and mean it in a good way?

I do believe that certain of the Spirit's gifts, He reserves for times of introduction. From missionary reports, I believe that works of power like healing and tongues and signs do still occur, but following the pattern of the early church, they happen when word of Jesus is first reaching a people group. God shows Himself in power so that there is little question about what is going on. I know of many missionaries who have been greeted by those who have dreamt about them long before they arrived – it's the power of the Spirit working! We should not feel bad that we do not regularly see these gifts because they were rare in the early church too.

But we should expect to see the Holy Spirit working in us in ways that surprise and delight us, that continually remind us that He is present and working. I've been reading the book *Forgotten God* by Francis Chan and Danae Yankoski, and it's about the Holy Spirit. It helped me prepare this week and I encourage you to pick up a copy. In it, Chan describes how the most Spirit-filled person he knows is Joni Eareckson Tada.

Most of you have heard me speak about her before – she was paralyzed from the neck down by a diving accident at age 19. She was suicidal for a good year after the accident. Yet she turned her pain and predicament over to God. Now she's written over thirty-five books, has created paintings that are sought after, and headed a non-for-profit that has distributed over 50,000 wheelchairs to 102 countries. Yet Chan says "it is not because of these accomplishments that I consider her the most Spirit-filled person I know...it has to do with the fact that you can't spend ten minutes with Joni before she breaks out in song, quotes Scripture, or shares a touching and timely word of encouragement...Joni is a person whose life, at every level, gives evidence of the Spirit's work in and through her."

Truth is, we do not have to see signs and wonders to know the Holy Spirit is with us. We can know He is here when we see ourselves changing...when we become kinder to strangers...when we become generous with the least...when we are graceful with people who are hard to love...when we have peace in the midst of difficulties. These are not traits that unspiritual people have in great measure. As followers of Jesus promised the Spirit, we should expect them – not because we are believers, not because we are good, but because God is good and has promised to work in His people's lives in real and unmistakable ways.

That brings me to our second thought, one that is super important: *the Spirit is a person – the third person of the Trinity – with His own will and purposes who cannot be bought, commanded, or controlled but works in harmony with the Father and the Son.* The Spirit did not come upon the Samaritan believers because the apostles laid their hands on them. The Spirit came to them to fulfill the promise Jesus made that we who are believers would have the Spirit as our counselor and guide to remind us of God's ways and to steer us in them. He did not come at their baptism, which is what the Spirit normally does, because He wanted to show the whole church that the Samaritans had been forgiven and accepted by God.

When Simon offered money for the ability to give the Holy Spirit to people, it shows he had no understanding of the Spirit at all. He was looking for power to buy and sell, not a relationship with the God of the universe. Because that is ultimately why the Spirit is here – to lead us closer to Himself and the Father and the Son. The gifts of the Spirit are ultimately given to us so that we and those affected by those gifts might know and love God more.

But here are the facts: the Spirit is a person who dwells with us and will be in us (John 14:17). The Holy Spirit is God – what you do to the Holy Spirit, you have done to God (Acts 5). The Spirit is eternal and holy – there at creation in Genesis 1, promised to be with us forever (John 14:16). He prays for us (Romans 8:27). The Spirit can be pleased with us and grieved by us (Isaiah 63 and Ephesians 4). The Spirit has His own will (1 Corinthians 12:11). He helps us witness to others (Mark 13 and Luke 12). He draws people closer to Jesus (Ephesians 3). The Spirit reminds us we are children of God (Romans 8).

The Holy Spirit is utterly amazing. He is with us; He is here for us; He is the reason we can sit here today and want to learn, want to worship; every good deed we do comes from a prompting of the Holy Spirit. He does so much yet is perfectly content to give all glory to the Father and the Son. We worship Him just as we do the Father and Jesus because He is worthy of it. He is perfect in every way. And when we pray, we ask the Spirit to work within us in mighty ways according to His will. We do not boss Him, command Him, or expect particular gifts that please us. Instead, He will give us what we need when we need it – and more than that, He will give us His ways and shape them and form them in us so that we are more like God every day that we turn to Him.

That leads to the big heart question of the day: *Are you ready for more of the Holy Spirit? Do you want more of the Holy Spirit?* I am going to be adding that prayer request to our weekly lineup – that we would have more of the Spirit in our lives. Because you know what? I am tired of living with less than what the New Testament promises. I am tired of living with a “make do” attitude when my God can do anything He desires. I am tired of being a group of people content with letting the world actually go to hell and watching it burn rather than claiming our birthright as children of God and bringing them to the Kingdom through the power of the Holy Spirit. I do not want to be the pastor of a small church if the reason we’re small is not because God intends us to be small but because we’re making no difference for God in our community because we are self-interested and not following the Spirit’s lead.

Answering the question “do you want more of the Spirit” means getting very real very quickly. Because there are reasons that we might say “yes” but mean “no” in our hearts. Saying “yes” to more of the Holy Spirit means being willing to give up sins you haven’t turned over to God yet. Saying “yes” to more of the Spirit means being convicted to get out of comfort zones and to do what the Spirit leads us to do. Saying “yes” to the Spirit means that we don’t get the final word in what we do. Saying “yes” to the Spirit means giving up control. That scares us.

We – and by this I also mean me – we are so scared of what we’ll lose and so uncertain of what we’ll gain. As Francis Chan writes, “The truth is that the Spirit of the living God is guaranteed to ask you to go somewhere or do something you wouldn’t normally want or choose to do. The Spirit will lead you to the way of the cross, as He led Jesus to the cross, and that is definitely not a safe or pretty or comfortable place to be. The Holy Spirit of God will mold you into the person you were made to be. This often incredibly painful process strips you of selfishness, pride, and fear.”

And yet all of this is so good – good for us, good for God, good for His Kingdom. If we genuinely want more of the Holy Spirit, He will show up. In the Old Testament, the prophet Elijah stood up for God and did incredible miracles by the Holy Spirit. He had a disciple named Elisha, and Elisha's one request when Elijah came to the end of his time on earth was to receive a double portion of his spirit – meaning the Holy Spirit, the Spirit by which he was able to glorify God through all these great signs. And while Elijah couldn't grant it, it was granted – Elisha has exactly double the number of recorded miracles as Elijah.

We can receive a full portion of the Spirit, not the small portion of Him most of us allow into our hearts. And with that Spirit, we can make a gigantic difference for God's Kingdom in Chesterfield and Macomb Township and Mount Clemens and New Baltimore and wherever we wind up. The Spirit can overcome our fears, overcome our weaknesses, our sins, our failings. He can make CrossWay a spiritual giant that has eternal consequences for this city. But it's going to take wanting the Spirit, inviting Him in, committing to get rid of what He says to clean out, doing what He says, not being OK with the status quo. The rewards will be worth it, and we (and this church) will not be the same. Are you willing?