

ARE YOU HERE BUT STILL THERE?

Today's Text: Acts 8: 9- 25

Extracts:

But there was a certain man called *Simon*, who *previously, practised sorcery* in the city and astonished the people of Samaria, claiming that he was someone great, to whom they all gave heed from the least to the greatest, saying, “This man is the great power of God.” ...But when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus, both men and women were baptized. Then *Simon himself also believed; and when he was baptized* he continued with Philip, and was amazed, seeing the miracles and signs which were done. Now when [Peter and John sent by the apostles from Jerusalem] ... laid hands on them ... they received the Holy Spirit. And when *Simon saw that ...he offered them money, saying, “Give me this power, also, that anyone on whom I lay hands may receive the Holy Spirit”* [Acts 8: 9-10, 12-15, 17-19]

Research in Motion Limited (RIM) is a Canadian firm that markets BlackBerry smart phones that are most popular among professionals and business owners for their security and reliability as an email device.¹ Ambitious to replicate its success in the market for corporate customers, RIM recently ventured into the consumer market. The result was disastrous. It could not compete against Apple's iPhones and Google's Android devices. In the first quarter of 2012, for example, RIM's net profit dropped by almost 65%, shipments of BB smart phones went down by 21%, and share value fell by 80% over the past year. Its CEO has had to resign. Now RIM has decided to “return to its roots and focus on business customers.”

Hoping for a better future, some believers gave up a life of sin to come to Christ, only to find the going difficult. Like RIM, some have chosen to go back. They can do so because many believers have no problem backsliding to their past comfort zone of sin. But there are others who want to be seen as believers while holding on to their evil past. Is that possible? Is it acceptable to God for us to pretend to be here (with Him) and still be there (with Satan)? In this week's Bible story, Simon, a sorcerer, gave his life to Christ but wanted to use Holy Spirit power to continue with sorcery! Let us find out how far he could go with that. The lesson is important for our successful walk with Christ.

¹ Based on: “BlackBerry giving up on the consumer market,”

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/46897956/ns/business/> ; Thurs. March 29. 2012; and “Blackberry-maker RIM plans new focus amid \$125 m loss,” <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-17557177> 30 March 2012

1. Background: A sorcerer becomes a believer!

In African folklore, a bat once showed up at the annual convention of birds. He spoke quite eloquently about the special issues concerning flying and stole the hearts of his listeners. However, when it came to electing the executive committee for the following year, the bat was not even nominated. He turned to the outgoing chairman and asked why he was not considered in spite of his glowing contributions to the success of that annual convention. The chairman replied, “It is true that you can fly like the rest of us but you are not a bird!”

When you look at members of the congregation in your place of worship, you may see worshippers who claim to be united by their faith in God through Christ Jesus. Having received water baptism, they all can be called believers, or more commonly, Christians. Most of them pose as paragons of excellence in terms of regular church attendance, payment of tithes, charitable deeds and administration of the church. But are they truly believers? Have they given up their wayward past and completely given their lives to Christ? Those and more are the questions that this week’s study will enable us to answer.

After Stephen, one of the seven deacons appointed by the apostles (to help them with the administration of the early church), had been martyred, persecution against the others intensified and many of them escaped and “were scattered everywhere preaching the word.” One of the seven deacons was Philip who fled to Samaria and preached Christ to the people there. Through his ministry, many miracles were performed and “unclean spirits... came out of many who were possessed; and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed” [Acts 8: 1-7]. One of the people that he came across was a sorcerer named Simon. Here is his story:

a) *Simon’s past*

We are told that Simon *previously practised sorcery* and “astonished the people of Samaria, claiming that he was someone great, to whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, ‘This man is the great power of God.’ And they heeded him because he had astonished them with sorceries for a long time” [vv. 9-11].

A sorcerer is a person who uses magical or witchcraft powers to produce signs and wonders that people may believe come from God. Take, for example, the Egyptian magicians in Pharaoh’s court when Moses came to ask for the children of Israel to be set free. In obedience to the word of God, Aaron cast down the rod of Moses before Pharaoh and his servants and it turned into a serpent. Pharaoh also called his wise men and the sorcerers who used enchantments and threw down their sticks in like manner and “they became serpents.” However, the serpent from Moses’ rod swallowed up the magicians’ [Ex. 7: 8-13]. In another example, Paul

encountered “a certain sorcerer, a false prophet” while he was preaching in Cyprus. Elymas, a Jewish sorcerer, tried to prevent the proconsul from following the true faith that Paul preached. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Paul pronounced blindness on the man that he described as “full of all deceit and all fraud [the] son of the devil [and] enemy of all righteousness.” The sorcerer was led out by the hand [Acts 13: 4-12]. Such was the past life of Simon the sorcerer at the time he encountered Philip in Samaria.

b) Simon’s challenge

Philip preached things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus and his listeners (both men and women) flocked to him and were baptized. Simon the sorcerer also believed, became baptized and continued with Philip. ***He saw the miracles and was amazed [Acts 8: 12-13].*** When the church elders in Jerusalem heard of the good news from Samaria, they sent Peter and John to go there and pray for them, that they might receive the Holy Spirit [vv. 14-15].

Simon the sorcerer (now a new convert) saw that, by the apostles (Peter and John) laying hands on people, they received the Holy Spirit. ***So, he offered money to Peter and said, “Give me this power also, that anyone on whom I lay hands may receive the Holy Spirit” [vv. 17-19].*** Simon was baptized but was he actually converted? Peter said to him, “Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money. You have neither part nor portion in this matter, for ***your heart is not right in the sight of God...for I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity***” [vv. 20-23].

From the foregoing, it is clear that ***Simon’s idea of giving his life to Christ was not for the sake of his salvation but to enhance his influence and trade as a sorcerer.*** In Peter’s words, Simon’s heart was not right with God (that is, he had not repented); he was poisoned by bitterness (that is, he was unhappy to have lost status among the people); and he was bound by iniquity (that is, he was still a sorcerer in his heart). He is here but still back there! Do you know how many of us are like him? Let us find out.

2. Where are you?

We all may attend the same church or profess the same Christ but by our fruits, it is easy to decipher what or who we are. Here are common examples of believers that you can find in a typical congregation:

a) Tourists

A tourist is attracted to visit places where s(he) can have the most fun. That is why the hospitality business relies heavily on designing attractive packages (built around low fares and cheap accommodation) to bring in as many tourists as possible. In like manner, ***some people are attracted to congregations where they can have the most fun.*** For example, those looking for contracts or political influence tend to attend churches where they can meet “big people.” Some lustful young people are attracted to churches where they can meet young lovers. Some people like good music and will tend to be attracted to churches with good choirs and songs. Some people look at popularity and will like to attend churches with the largest congregations.

Look at the huge crowds that followed Jesus, especially after He had miraculously fed five thousand of them [**Jn 6: 1-14**]. The following day, they could not find Him on the spot where He had fed them. So, they got into boats and came to Capernaum where they found Him. Then, they asked Him, “Rabbi, when did You come here?” Jesus replied, “You seek Me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled” [**vv. 22-26**]. They were not interested in the bread of life that He came to offer to them with His life. They were mere tourists attracted to the welfare bread that He had offered them the day before.

b) Commuters

A commuter lives in one (poor) part of town but works in another (more prosperous) part. At home, utilities, such as power and water, may be unreliable or inadequate. In the office, on the other hand, everything works quite well. People are well dressed; lunch is cheap (subsidized) and communications gadgets work quite well. A commuter thus develops an uncanny ability to be comfortable in both settings. Many believers operate in like manner.

Some believers are devout on Sundays or during weekday services but behave like children of Satan for the rest of the week. They hardly pray or read the Bible outside of the church. The same people that preach against sexual immorality or official corruption go back home or office to practise what they condemn. Jesus calls such people “false prophets who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves” [**Matt. 7: 15**]. What fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? What communion has light with darkness? Why should the temple of the living God allow himself/herself to be used as the synagogue of Satan? You cannot claim to be here and still be there.

c) Immigrants

An immigrant is a person who has moved from one country or location to live permanently in another country or location. S(he) becomes the citizen of the new country with or without renouncing the citizenship of the other. These days, most countries allow dual citizenship. ***With respect to spiritual matters, a believer is expected to renounce the kingdom of the devil and accept the kingdom of God. However, you cannot be a dual citizen of both kingdoms and expect to be called a true believer.***

The encounter of Jesus with a rich young man is a good illustration of believers who think that they can successfully serve God and mammon at the same time. He came to Jesus to ask Him how he could obtain eternal life. Jesus told him to keep the Ten Commandments. To justify himself, he replied Jesus, “All these things I have kept from my youth. What do I still lack?” Jesus told him to sell all that he had and give to the poor and then come to follow Him. The young man had great possessions that he could not give up. So, he went away sorrowful [Matt. 19: 16-22].

In the Nollywood film, *40 Days in the Wilderness* (2005),² Pastor Jerry led a team of young pastors to evangelize the Kingdom of Zuba, a place where he took his annual retreat “for spiritual revival.” In the city, the pastor was highly regarded as an anointed man of God. Whenever he prayed for people, miracles poured out. Therefore, the young pastors came to believe in him and willingly went with him to Zuba. However, two of them soon discovered that Jerry was actually not using the power of God but of a demon called *Kubala*, the god worshipped in Zuba! It struck them that, when Pastor Jerry claimed to be speaking in tongues in their church back in the city, he was actually invoking that demon, *Kubala*, to heal diseases or infirmities that he had inflicted on the congregation. That pastor was a dual citizen of the kingdoms of darkness and of light. In the end, he and the chief priest of *Kubala* were struck by the fire of God when they tried to kill the two young pastors that called on the name of Jesus in spirit and in truth. You cannot claim to be here and still be there!

d) *Ambassadors*

The ambassador is the official representative of his/her country abroad. The embassy (where the ambassador lives and/or works) is an extension of the home-country and subject only to its laws. That is what is called “diplomatic immunity.” ***In the context of a believer, an ambassador is a citizen of heaven who is still in human form here on earth. S(he) is governed only by the laws of the kingdom of heaven. His/her embassy is the kingdom of God which s(he) received on being born of water and the Holy Spirit [Jn 3: 3,5], thereby becoming the children of God [Jn 1: 12], and joint-heirs with Christ [Rom. 8: 12-17].***

² http://www.naijapals.com/video/40_Days_in_the_Wilderness-58274

From the foregoing, *we can conclude that a true believer is an ambassador of Christ [2 Cor. 5: 20]*. Therefore, s(he) is no longer bound by or accountable to the beggarly elements of this world but to the glory of God above by Christ Jesus. *It follows that only believers that have truly and totally accepted Jesus as their Lord and Saviour can claim to be here and NO LONGER there!*

3. Conclusion: Come to Christ in full!

Peter told Simon the sorcerer to repent of his wickedness and pray God, “if perhaps the thought of [his] heart [might] be forgiven [him]” [Acts 8: 22]. Like most of us, the sorcerer might have acted out of ignorance driven by inordinate ambition and human pride. But it was pride that drove Satan to rebellion against God in heaven [Rev. 12: 7-9; Is. 14: 7-15], and “rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft” [1 Sam. 15: 23]. Speaking to the church of the Laodiceans, Jesus said, “I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or warm. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth” [Rev. 3: 14-16].

God does not force people to worship Him. In fact, you are free to leave and go back to your love of sin if you think doing it right is so hard. But, those who will have the right to the tree of life and enter through the gates of the New Jerusalem, that heavenly city that will be descended at the end of the age, are those who do the will of God “but outside [will be] dogs and sorcerers and sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and whoever loves and practises a lie” [Rev. 22: 14-15].

You are either here or there. You cannot be here and still be there. It is best to be here and no longer there!