

Not for Sale!

Acts 8:4–25

August 19, 2001

“Your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!” The words are harsh. They lead to a call for repentance. And yet they are based upon, and articulate, the gospel. The Holy Spirit, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the forgiveness of sins, and the promise of eternal life are gifts from God. They are not for sale. They cannot be bought. But they do not have to be bought. They are gifts! Thanks be to God.

Simon the magician was accustomed to having what he wanted. He was accustomed to dealing in power. He was accustomed to fame and fortune. He was accustomed to dealing in money. He was not accustomed to being told that anything was not for sale. But the Holy Spirit, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the forgiveness of sins, and the promise of eternal life are gifts from God. They are not for sale. This was a shock to Simon.

It may be the case that those of us who are accustomed to paying for things have a hard time hearing this. How can it be that something worth having is not for sale? It may be the case that those of us who are most convinced of being self-sufficient have a hard time hearing this. How is it that we need to receive something from someone else? It may be the case that those of us with the least resources hear the good news most readily. It seems that being aware of our need for help is an important part of being able to receive it. At any rate, the Holy Spirit, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the forgiveness of sins, and the promise of eternal life are gifts from God. They are not for sale. They cannot be bought. But they do not have to be bought. They are gifts!

This is what our reading from Isaiah expressed in ironically reversed language: “Ho, every one who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.” That is to say, the good gifts of God are given to us freely, without price to us. “Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Hearken diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in fatness.” That is to say, the good gifts of God are what we really need for life. “Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live.” The good gifts of God are given through the word of God and the preaching of the gospel. “And I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.” God’s love for King David carried forward for a thousand years to Jesus Christ, born into the family of David. And through him, it carries forward to us today.

God is extending his good gifts to us yet today through the reading of his word and the preaching of his gospel. They are not for sale. But they are available for free. It is strange to stand before God empty-handed. By the way, that is an appropriate posture for prayer, indicating both our neediness and God’s generosity. But it is strange to stand before God empty-handed, because it is hard to admit that we have no basis for self-justification, no health, no goodness within us. And yet, only by that realization and admission are we open to the gifts being poured out upon us. If we try to buy them, if we try to earn them, we not only miss the gifts but we also insult and offend the giver. How rude it is to ignore or decline a gift, especially these gifts which cost so much, the gifts for which Christ both suffered and died, these gifts which are free to us, not because they are free in and of themselves, or because they have no value, but only because Jesus Christ has already paid the price.

William Temple has stated most clearly this disparity between what God gives us and what we bring to the situation ourselves:

All is of God; the only thing of my own which I can contribute to my own redemption is the sin from which I need to be redeemed. My capacity for fellowship with God is God's gift in creation; my partial deliverance from self-centeredness, my response to truth, beauty and goodness is God's gift through the natural world which he sustains in being and the history of man which he controls. One thing is my own—the self-centeredness which leads me to find my apparent good in what is other and less than the true good. This true good is the divine love and what flows from it appreciated as its expression. In response to that good, man finds his only true freedom, for only then does the self act as what it truly is and thus achieves true self-expression. . . . As the experience of grace becomes deeper, the conviction of its all sufficiency becomes more inevitable and more wholesome, until at last a man knows, and is finally “saved” by knowing, that all good is of God alone. We are clay in the hands of the potter and our welfare is to know it.¹

What, then, are these gifts which God gives us, gifts beyond all buying, gifts beyond all deserving, gifts beyond all imagining? First in prominence in today's reading is the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the presence and the power and the vitality of God. It is only by the power of the Holy Spirit that we believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. The people of Samaria could not have believed in Jesus without the inner working of the Holy Spirit. So when our text says they had not yet received the Spirit, what it refers to is any of the outer manifestations of the Spirit, or the gifts of the Spirit. This is confirmed by Simon's interest in the power of the Spirit. Since the inner workings of the Spirit are, by definition, hidden, they would not be of much interest to him. But the outer, powerful manifestations were of very great interest to him as a magician and trickster. That was something which he thought he could put to good use.

Second, and the basis of all the others, is the gift of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ himself. Here we go to the heart of the gospel. Jesus Christ gives himself to us. It is significant that today's reading begins with this characterization of the gospel: “Philip went down to a city of Samaria, and proclaimed to them the Christ.” That is the heart and soul of it all. Jesus has come from the Father to live with us, as one of us. He gives us his teachings. He calls us to be his disciples and his friends. He gives us his life. He gives us himself. What were the results of Philip preaching the Christ? “The multitudes with one accord gave heed to what was said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs which he did. For unclean spirits came out of many who were possessed, crying with a loud voice; and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. So there was much joy in that city.” What a wonderful picture of the young church and its preaching mission: it resulted in much joy. And we do well to remember that this very preaching was a result of the persecution of Christians in Jerusalem, from which Philip had been driven out. His very presence in Samaria, as well as his preaching of the gospel, was a gift from God. “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the

¹William Temple, *Nature, Man and God* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1934, pp. 401–402; cited in John H. Leith, *Basic Christian Doctrine* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 1993), p. 228.

heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain and the snow came down from heaven, and return not thither but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it.”

Third, and often the most immediate gift, the beginning point for Christian life, is the gift of the forgiveness of sins. The fundamental human dilemma is the brokenness of our relationship with God. Instead of being God-centered we have become self-centered, so that we are estranged from God. This sin of rebellion and disobedience is the source of all our particular sins and misdeeds. There is nothing we can do to extricate ourselves from this mess, since the desire to save ourselves would itself be self-centered and self-serving. Hence the importance of the gift of the forgiveness of sin. It is our only hope. It is our only help. It is our only way back to God. And God provides it himself for us.

Fourth, the ultimate gift, looking beyond the boundaries of time and space, is the gift of the promise of eternal life. If the greatest human predicament is our estrangement from God, the ultimate sign of that brokenness is our death. Death comes to every living thing, seeming to make all of our accomplishments, all of our relationships, all of our knowledge, and all of our love count for nothing. And yet, the power of death has been defeated. When Jesus Christ was crucified, dead, and buried, God raised him from the dead. God gave him a new and different life, forever beyond the power of death, and he did so as the promise of life eternal for us.

These four gifts are not all of the gifts of God. We could talk about the gifts of creation, life, love, family, friendship, fellowship, community, society, nation, the mind, intellect, language, will, decision, courage, faith, hope, love, church, and the communion of saints. We could talk about election and predestination, effectual calling and the assurance of faith, the Holy Scripture as the word of God, and on and on. And if we talked about all the gifts of God, all of them would still be just that, the gifts of God. They are not for sale. They are God’s wonderful gifts to us. We dare not turn our backs on God or worse, insult God by trying to strike a deal with him. All we need to do is to receive the gifts.

Hence Peter commanded and urged Simon, “Repent therefore of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you.” The grace of God is not for sale. It cannot be purchased at any price. But it is available for free. Let us turn away from our presumed self-sufficiency. Let us turn away from our own supposed goodness. Let us turn away from our self-directed lives. Let us turn away even from our despair. Let us fall on our knees before God with open, empty hands, receiving God’s gifts.

In some parts of the Christian church, such repentance is construed as the beginning of the Christian life, or even as the prerequisite. Some think that repentance has to come before faith and before forgiveness. But in the Presbyterian Church, as a part of the Reformed tradition of the Protestant churches, we understand repentance itself to be a response to God’s always prior grace, to grow out of faith, to follow upon the forgiveness of sin, and to be a part of our sanctification, our ongoing growth in the Christian life. Even in today’s reading it says in verse 13 that Simon believed and was baptized. And it never says that those were not valid. But it is not until verse 22 that he is commanded and urged to repent. That was not a prerequisite for Christian faith. It was a result of the Christian faith, a working out of the Christian faith, a growing in the faith.

Peter says of Simon, “Your heart is not right before God,” and, “I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity.” He does not say, “You are not a believer.” He does not say, “You are not a Christian.” He does not say, “Your faith is false and your baptism was a sham.” He says, “Your heart is not right before God. . . . You are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity.” Sin and iniquity are not simply the negative preconditions of the Christian life. They are, regrettably, continuing realities in the Christian life, both for new Christians like Simon and even for long time Christians. Turning the human heart around takes a long time. So it is that the call to repentance is not simply issued to non-believers but is given to believers, to Christians, to members of the Christian faith and the Christian church.

So it is for us today. Perhaps some are coming to the faith for the first time, and in that we rejoice. But it is much more likely, in an established church, full not only of new Christians but of people who have heard the gospel for their whole lives, that many have believed for many years and are well along the way in the Christian life. We, too, need to repent. We, especially, need to repent. That is what repentance is: the mature response of the Christian to the prior gift of God, always trying to make and to mold our lives ever more fully into conformity with the will of God for our lives. “Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD,” (that is, go back to where he has been before), “that he may have mercy on him and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.”

Peter said to Simon, “Your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!” The words are harsh. They lead to a call for repentance. And yet they are based upon, and articulate, the gospel. The Holy Spirit, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the forgiveness of sins, and the promise of eternal life are gifts from God. They are not for sale. They cannot be bought. But they do not have to be bought. They are gifts!

To God be the glory, forever and ever! Amen.

Dr. James C. Goodloe IV, Pastor
Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
1627 Monument Avenue
Richmond, Virginia 23220