

Center of Attention

(Acts 8:9-25)

Introduction

1. Theme: Jesus accelerates us by the Holy Spirit to grow deeper through His family, wider in our impact for the gospel.
2. Why do we get caught up in image management? How can Jesus set us free?
3. Background:
 - a. [Acts 6-7] Stephen is a humble, Spirit-filled servant of God who is the first martyr for Jesus, a witness willing to live or die to testify to the truth that Jesus is the prophesied Messiah-King, Savior & God.
 - b. [Acts 8] Philip is also a Spirit-filled servant of God proclaiming Jesus with miraculous power, while Saul leads wide-scale persecution, driving Christians out of Jerusalem into Judea & Samaria.

Is your self-worth based on people's acceptance? [Acts 8:9-13]

1. [9-11] Simon the famed street magician craves acceptance
 - a. [9] He puts out his own press release, claiming to be "somebody great."
 - b. [10] The Samaritans agree with his self-assessment, acknowledging him as "great."
 - i. From poorest to most influential, they think he possesses the divine, supernatural "power of God."
 - c. Maybe he has a special connection to God & secret power, so they're amazed & pay attention to him.
 - i. [9, 11] They are "amazed" by his magic.
 - ii. [10, 11] They "paid attention" to him (as they did to Philip's powerful preaching & miracles; cf. 8:6).
 - d. He's used to being the center of attention & loves the limelight.
 - i. He seeks adulation/glory for himself, when glory/adoration belong to Jesus in worship.
 - ii. He finds his self-worth/values based on the acceptance of people?
2. Application: Do I try to be the center of attention, because I need to get affirmation & acceptance from people?
 - a. Do I exaggerate facts/stories about myself to look smarter, holier, better in others' eyes?
 - b. Does my happiness depend on what people think/say about me? Whether they accept or reject me?
 - c. Do I have to have credit for my work? If I'm not appreciated, do I get upset?
 - d. Am I a people pleaser, because I'm afraid of anyone thinking less of me?
 - e. Do I care more about how I present myself to the opposite sex, or how I can bless them? What they can give me (affirmation/attention) or what I can give them?
 - f. Do I not speak up, participate, open up out of fear/image management? Then I'm ruled by what people think.
 - g. It's not wrong to receive attention, praise & encouragement from people, but when you live for it & your goal with people it to get them to like you, approve you, acclaim you, give attention to you, that's a problem.
3. [12-13] A turning point in Simon's image management machine
 - a. [12] Philip comes to town, preaching good news about Jesus & His Kingdom.
 - i. Jesus is the Messiah-King who lived the life you cannot live, died the death you should have died, & rose to give you the gift you cannot earn: Forgiveness of sin & eternal life.
 - ii. Simon's dilemma: His magic is simply illusions without real power; now he's confronted with the real thing in the supernatural work of Holy Spirit.
 - iii. Samaritan men & women believe and are baptized.
 - b. [13] Simon also claims to believe and is baptized.
 - i. He follows Philip around, but not because he loves, worship, wants to learn more about Jesus.
 - ii. His heart motivation: "He was amazed" (cf. 8:9,11); by what? "Seeing signs & great miracles."
 1. The object of his faith is not Jesus, but the supernatural power he's witnessed.
 - c. Simon says & does all the "right" things:
 - i. In words, he claims to believe, in action, he is baptized.

- ii. But like his “magic”, his faith is just smoke & mirrors, more illusion than substance.
- iii. When consumed by what people think, we tend to focus only on the external behaviors (to please people) rather than an internal heart genuinely yielded to Jesus & transformed by the Holy Spirit.
- d. Application: Do you say & do all the “right” things as a Christian, but your life with Jesus is more illusion than substance? More external appearance & image management than internal relationship & transformation?

The Holy Spirit accepts Jesus’ followers [Acts 8:14-17]

1. The news about Samaritan believers gets back to the apostles in Jerusalem.
 - a. [14] They send Peter & John to officially verify the Samaritans’ faith.
 - i. Samaritans: An offshoot of Jewish people who’ve intermarried with pagans & practice heretical faith.
 - ii. Because of intense conflicts, Jewish people would avoid them and walk around Samaria
 - b. [15-17] They come & pray for the Samaritan believers to fully receive the Holy Spirit.
 - i. Even though they believe & are baptized, they haven’t yet manifested His supernatural power/work.
 - c. Holy Spirit: 3rd Person of the Trinity (one God expressed in 3 persons), given to every follower (cf. 2:38).
 - i. Throughout Acts, *He empowers*: to speak in other languages about Jesus [2:17-18], prophesy about Jesus [2:33; 4:25; 7:51]; to speak with boldness about Jesus [4:8,31]; accompanies obedience to Jesus [5:32]; to serve [6:3,5]; to witness [6:10; 7:55]; to praise Jesus [10:46].
 - ii. There is a real, identifiable manifestation of power: He empowers us to experience transformed life with Jesus, and accomplish great things for Jesus.
 - iii. In Acts, the promise isn’t all who receive the Spirit speak in tongues/prophesy, but that they will have power to testify as a witness about Jesus to the world [cf. 1:8].
 - d. Application: Did you receive the power of God’s Spirit when you believed?
 - i. To obey Jesus (in subduing sin, growing in love), to a life of praise, to boldness about Jesus?
2. The delay in receiving the Holy Spirit is not the normative pattern.
 - a. Generally in the New Testament, people are sealed with the Holy Spirit once they believe (cf. Eph 1:13).
 - b. In Acts, there are some exceptions where believers received the Holy Spirit after being prayed for, because it was a major turning point in the Church as outsiders joined God’s people.
 - i. The delay was for the Jewish apostles to see for themselves that it was true: Non-Jewish Samaritans were truly transformed by Christ and receiving the Holy Spirit.
 - ii. The Jewish apostles were witnesses to the unity/oneness of the Samaritan & Jewish Church.
 - c. Application: For Samaritans/outsideers like us, instead of finding acceptance/approval from men (like Simon does), God the Holy Spirit affirms & accepts us by declaring we belong to Jesus.
 - i. Do you know the Holy Spirit affirms/accepts/approves you?
 - ii. Not based on culture, being part of the in-crowd, performance, what others think, but by faith in Jesus

Repent of using God for our gain [Acts 8:18-25]

1. [18-22] Repent of the intent of our heart
 - a. [18-19] Simon attempts to bribe the apostles for the power to lay hands on people to receive the Spirit.
 - i. He sees it as another magic trick, mistakenly attributing the Holy Spirit to the apostles’ own power.
 - ii. He’s so used to using people for his own glory that he now tries to use God in the same way.
 - iii. Who receive praise, honor & worship, you or Jesus?
 - b. [20] Peter’s strong response: May you & your money go to hell/destruction!
 - i. The Holy Spirit is not something to buy/use, but someone to have relationship with as God.
 - ii. He is the gift of God: You don’t earn Him; He accepts you. You don’t pay for Him; He’s a free gift of grace for all who believe in Jesus (along with forgiveness, eternal life, etc).
 - c. [21] Peter clearly expresses that Simon is not a Jesus follower
 - i. He has nothing do with the life of Jesus, the movement of the church, the power of the Holy Spirit.
 - ii. Because his heart is “not right” with God, literally: “crooked” before God.
 - d. [22] But there’s hope: He can repent of the intent to use God for his own gain/applause.
 - i. The solution is to repent of the wicked intent of his heart.
 - ii. Repentance isn’t just external words (“sorry”) or change of external choices, behavior & lifestyle; it’s also internal change of the desire, direction, attitudes of the heart.
 - iii. Then, the Holy Spirit can make a crooked heart straight/upright, & we can be forgiven.
2. [23] Root of the problem: Simon uses people & God because of the “gall of bitterness & bond of iniquity.”
 - a. Gall of bitterness: Like the bitter vinegar wine Jesus refused on the cross (cf. Matt 27:34)

- i. Acidic bile that erupts from stomachs into throats/mouths when frustrated, envious, angry or bitter, eating us up from within.
 - ii. Refers to anger accumulated over time from not getting what we want.
 - iii. Simon longs for approval/acceptance from people, but has also been rejected time & again in the past, resulting in accumulated anger.
 - b. That causes us be in the “bondage of iniquity”: To end up tied up, in chains, a slave to sin.
 - i. When we are angry, bitter or lose our temper is when we are most likely to fall into sin.
 - ii. We feel entitled to relieve the frustration, no matter how destructive it is to ourselves or others.
 - iii. Enslavement to retaliation/hatred, greed, selfishness, lust/addiction, using people as objects.
 - c. When people don’t give us what we want (acceptance/approval/acclaim), over time, we harbor bitterness/anger, which enslaves us to sin.
 - d. Application: What if I don’t have to be the center of attention, and people don’t owe me acceptance/approval?
 - i. What if Jesus could be the center of attention in my life, & give me fulfilling acceptance/approval?
- 3. [24-25] Which direction will you go?
 - a. [24] Simon tells Peter to pray for him, instead of praying to the Lord himself (cf. 8:22).
 - i. Repentance is something only we can do with Jesus, not someone else on our behalf.
 - b. [25] It ends with Peter & John returning to Jerusalem & continuing to preach to Samaritans along the way.
 - i. What happens with Simon? What does he choose to do?
 - ii. We never hear about him again; we do not know if every genuinely repents & follows Jesus.
 - c. God leaves this detail out, so that we have to put ourselves in Simon’s place: How will we respond?
 - i. Application: If we struggle with being a people-pleaser, needing approval, affirmation, acclaim through people’s acceptance, using God & others to get it, repent.
 - 1. Ask God to lead you to not only a change of external behavior, but confess/surrender the internal crookedness of your heart.
 - ii. Application: Are you bottling accumulated anger/bitterness in your heart?
 - 1. Ask the Holy Spirit to bring it to the surface & root it out, because it enslaves you to self-destructive and other-destructive sin.