



Buying Blessings

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Acts 8:14-24

We really like to be in charge. We like to be confident. We like to contribute. We like to have status with others. We like to feel good about ourselves. We like to have others depend on us more than we depend on others. We like power and influence. It makes us feel more secure. It builds our self-esteem. It gives us a sense of value and importance. We think it makes us more important. When the gospel of Christ Jesus is all about grace, however, what do we do with our drive to feel important, powerful, or in control?

The prophet Joel had announced the coming of a new day, the “Day of the Lord.” At that time, God would pour out God’s own breath on all humanity, giving them access to God without distinction. The Jews looked forward to the fulfillment of that prophecy, yet it was a one-of-a-kind prophecy. It seemed to stand apart from the rest of the Old Testament witness to the mind, plan, and will of God. While many yearned for this coming “Day of the Lord,” the very idea was difficult for many to swallow.

Joel’s prophecy was about the eradication of social distinctions and a complete equality of value before God. For many people, that was a threatening proposition. It smacked of danger, of destruction of the very structures that knit a society together. The words smacked of revolution, of anarchy, of breaking down the very fabric on which society was built, the way people understood and valued one another. It was a threat to life and society as known, introducing people to a wholly new reality.

When God’s breath was poured out, it did not happen all at once according to Joel’s words. It came about in stages. Today’s text was the second stage of that fulfillment. It took a while for the disciples to process what God was all about and their role in extending the reach of God’s breath poured out on all humanity. The disciples had first received the anointing of God’s breath on Pentecost, but as they heard reports of the gospel reaching into Samaria, they realized their need to respond in affirmation of God’s movement and presence.

Peter and John were the designated emissaries to go to Samaria. It was not their first trip to Samaria, but it was their first without Jesus on hand, guiding the way. They arrived in Samaria and located the believers there. The first thing they did, it seems, is to have prayed for them, laying hands on them that they might share in the blessing of God’s breath, God’s Spirit poured out on them as among the disciples at Pentecost.

Amid their celebration of the wonders of God’s grace at including a people shunned by the Jews, this human desire for control, power, and influence reared its head. Simon, a magician in the area, saw what was happening and made the connection between the apostles laying their hands on individuals and the coming of God’s breath upon them. He did not so much see the blessing of God’s Spirit upon the lives of people. He was not focused on the meaning of the wonder that was transpiring before his eyes. He saw, rather, a power or authority in the persons of Peter and John, and desired that for himself.

Simon did not understand what was really happening. He did not grasp the significance of God becoming present in a semi-tangible way in the lives of these who had given themselves to the lordship of Jesus Christ. He did not recognize his own need for God. Rather, he saw an opportunity to advance his own position, power, and influence. He wanted the power to do as these apostles did, even while not understanding the significance of their actions.

Simon stepped forward to offer Peter and John money. He did not really know what he was asking, for he had not experienced giving his own life in service to God. He simply wanted power and authority for himself. He wanted to advance his career, his status, his wealth, his importance before others. "Give me this ability to lay hands on others that they might receive God's Spirit!"

On one hand, there was nothing wrong with the request. God could use anyone as an instrument of blessing. God was not restricted to use the apostles as conduits for the Spirit. In fact, two chapters later in Acts we read where once again the Spirit came without any laying on of hands at all. On the other hand, however, the request was totally out of line. It was not out of line because of some limitation on who was worthy to receive and serve God. It was out of line simply because Simon's motivation was completely out of step with God's purposes. He was not looking to serve God. He was looking to serve himself and advance his own purposes.

It is the same in our lives. God is not reticent about bestowing his presence and blessing on our lives. The purpose of that blessing, however, is not for the advancement of our personal sense of worth, importance, status, or power. It is rather about bringing us into fellowship with God and equipping us for service to God in accordance with God's mission.

Simon was focused on himself, his personal aims and ambitions. He does not seem to have been one of the believers who had been baptized, converted as a follower of Jesus Christ. He is rather one who looks on from the outside. He sees something going on and wants a part of it. He sees some potential there and recognizes something missing in his own life. He just does not understand what he is missing. He does not seem to understand that the greatest blessing expressed before him is not being the instrument of God's entering the lives of people, but the fact of receiving God's promised presence and Spirit into our lives.

It is God's presence that fills the void. It is God's breathing into our lives which grants us the security we crave. It is God's coming to dwell in us that equips us to serve according to greater purposes than our own. That is what Simon was missing. He was comparing his worth to others and seeking greater power, influence, and control. What he needed was the opposite. He needed emptying of self that he might be filled by God, instead.

Grace means that the gospel does not depend on our worth, power, influence, control, or dominance over others. It has nothing to do with our capabilities or efforts. It is rather about giving up on ourselves, our standing, our importance, our prominence, our belongings, our wealth, our influence, in order that God might fill us from the inside out.

Like Joel's prophecy, the gospel is not at all about our social distinctions. It is rather about the presence and influence of God in our lives. It is about God's gracious acceptance of us in spite of our failings and lack of power. It is about the access to God that God offers freely, not based on anything we might give God. Grace simply cannot be purchased. It is not the product of our actions, a recompense for our good deeds, or handed out to the deserving. It is God's favor bestowed on those with no right or claim at all.

When will we accept the reality that God's blessings truly are not for sale? If we should attempt to purchase them, we refuse what God offers. God offers himself to us freely that we might accept His grace and love. Any attempt to purchase what God gives simply cheapens God's grace. Are we willing to accept God's grace on God's terms? It is the only way to truly accept God's blessings.

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