

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, The Baptism of the Lord, January 10, 2016

## **You Can't Buy God's Grace**

Dr. Kenneth Humphreys

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Luke 3:15-17, 21-22 Acts 8:14-17

I had a wealth of scripture to choose from this morning. Today is Baptism of the Lord Sunday and last Wednesday was Epiphany, the 12<sup>th</sup> Day of Christmas, when we celebrate the coming of the Magi and their presentation of gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the infant Jesus. The Magi came to worship the Christ Child and brought very valuable gifts, gifts like those on the communion table this morning. The story is the climax to the Christmas season and we pastors have four suggested scripture readings from which to choose.

For the Baptism of our Lord we have four additional scripture selections. Obviously eight scripture readings in a bit much. I have opted to use the suggested Psalm for today along with the suggested readings from Luke 3 and Acts 8, but I did make one change. The reading from Acts is suggested as verses 14 through 17 which omits Peter and John laying their hands on the Samaritans so that they receive the Holy Spirit. I went on to read verses 18-23 about Simon the magician because these verses tell an important story we often don't hear in church --- a story of an effort to buy God's grace.

First let's consider the reading from Luke 3 which tells of John the Baptizer baptizing for the repentance of sins. He tells of the Messiah, Jesus, who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. John says that he is not worthy to untie the thongs of Jesus' sandals. To understand the meaning of this comment, consider that in Biblical times a disciple was expected to do almost any kind of menial task for his master, even those things that a slave would do, save one --- the untying of the master's sandals. Disciples were exempted from this task because it was considered to be too degrading yet John states that he is unworthy to carry out even this lowly duty.

John also says, referring to Jesus, that *"He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."*

When harvesting, wheat was thrown into the air with a wooden fork, shaped much like today's metal pitch forks. The grain, which was heavy, fell back and the wind would blow the chaff away. The symbolism is that the good people would be separated from the bad, the good receiving the Holy Spirit and the bad receiving eternal judgment.

The Messiah would separate the human wheat from the chaff --- would decide who was worthy to untie his sandals. You couldn't buy your way into acceptance, into salvation, into grace. That depended on how you lived your life.

When Jesus was baptized by John, the Holy Spirit descended upon him like a dove and God said, *"You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."*

The baptism of Christ symbolized the coming of the Holy Spirit for the first time with baptism, but certainly not the last.

Throughout scripture, whenever people were baptized in Christ's name, the Holy Spirit descended upon them. Often they began to speak in tongues, that is to speak in other languages as happened at Pentecost. But in today's reading from Acts 8 that didn't happen. The gospel was spreading beyond Israel and the Jews into Samaria and the Gentiles but where was the Holy Spirit?

In Acts 1:8, Jesus said to the apostles, *"You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."* Phillip went to Samaria proclaiming the Messiah, healing the sick, exorcising demons, and baptizing Gentiles in the name of Christ but for some reason, the Holy Spirit did not descend initially on those who he baptized. Peter and John went to Samaria and prayed that the new believers might receive the Holy Spirit laying hands on them. Then they received the Holy Spirit.

Philip, Peter and John had been watched by a local magician named Simon. In the world at that time, magicians were thought to possess secret powers which could help them determine the future of others. Unlike those of us who pay to see Penn and Teller perform their magic tricks on stage, the people believed that these magicians in the Hellenistic world could actually control their lives and they paid the magicians for their services.

Now here we have Philip baptizing and curing people and Peter and John laying on hands and bringing the Holy Spirit to those who had been baptized. This did not bode well for Simon's business. Not at all.

Simon was very popular. The people of Samaria said of him, *"This man is rightly*

*called the Great Power of God.*" People paid Simon for his services and he boasted that he was someone great.

Nevertheless Simon had been baptized but did he truly accept Christ? Apparently not. He followed Philip everywhere and was astonished at what he saw. But he was observing competition that was reducing his influence on the people and hurting his income. It was a catch-22 for Simon. He had claimed to have accepted Christ but that acceptance did not bring what he expected.

Then Peter and John appeared and Simon watched them place their hands on the new believers and those believers received the Pentecost experience --- they received the Holy Spirit. "Ah," said Simon, "I see. To receive spiritual power, all that is needed is to be touched by Peter and John."

Penn and Teller have a weekly TV show in which various magicians perform magic tricks. The show is called, "Fool Us." The magicians are hoping to fool Penn and Teller as to how they did the tricks. It is rare that they are fooled but Simon was fooled by Peter and John. He thought that they were performing a magic trick and he offered to pay them to teach him how they did it. He thought that he could buy their spiritual power just as he could buy virtually anything else that he desired.

He quickly found out that one cannot buy God's grace. You can't buy salvation.

Peter told him, *"Repent of this wickedness and praise the Lord in the hope that he may forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin."*

*"May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money."*

You can't buy God's gift of grace and salvation. Jesus did that for you, freely and willingly on the cross. All you need to do is to thankfully accept that gift. It is priceless.

**Amen.**

Note: All scripture quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible, 2011.