

—The Message of Acts—
Lesson 10—The Master Versus the Magicians

- I. Magic and the Occult
 - A. Magicians in the first century were thought to possess supernatural knowledge and power. Magic promised you control over the uncontrollable in private experience: romance, birth, illness, death, business, and travel. By invoking the name of one or more gods or demigods, the magician assured his clients that he could expel demons, heal diseases, warm the heart of a reluctant lover, bring misfortune on a rival, ward off storms and pirates at sea, enable a wife to conceive a son, &c. Closely related to astrology, magic sometimes claimed to offer insight into the future as well.
 - B. Luke provides a sampling of the gospel's confrontation with the religious and philosophical options of the Hellenistic world showing us that God's truth confronts humanity's religions and extends His arms to fugitives who have sought refuge from life's assaults in falsehood.
- II. Simon of Samaria, 8.9-24
 - A. The Great Power meets a Greater Power
 - 1. When Philip entered Samaria with the proclamation of the Christ, he was entering a city dominated by another religious teacher. Simon practiced sorcery or magic (v.9) and through his magical arts had amazed the Samaritans.
 - 2. Philip preached the news about Jesus and performed signs and miracles, casting out demons and healing the lame, and this brought much joy to the city, vv.5-8
 - 3. Yet the emphasis in Luke's narrative rests, not on the powerful miracles that Philip did, but on the message he proclaimed, cf. vv.4-6, 12, 25. Thus, while miracles attested Philip's message, it was the word of the Lord that drew people into the kingdom through faith in Jesus Christ.
 - B. Not for Sale
 - 1. In treating God's grace as a business commodity, Simon showed himself to be not a divine power, but an enemy of the omnipotent Lord. For centuries the Samaritans had practiced the syncretism that God's Law condemned (2Kgs 17.25-41) and Simon was continuing to promote that poisonous mixture.
 - 2. The account of Simon is open-ended. Luke says nothing of Peter's response to his appeal or of whether Simon truly repented. But such inquiries are really beside the point. In the end, we see the superiority of Jesus and His gospel over Simon, the spokesman for ancient magic.
- III. Elymas of Cyprus, 13.6-12
 - A. A second confrontation between the word of the Lord and ancient magic occurred at the start of the gospel's spread to the Gentiles beyond Palestine. When Paul and Barnabas traveled to Cyprus they met a Jewish magician and false prophet named Bar-Jesus. Whereas Simon claimed divine power, Bar-Jesus claimed divine knowledge.
 - B. Luke focuses more on the defeat of the magician than on the conversion of the proconsul, to show that his reason for including this account is to show the superiority of the Messiah Jesus over all other religious claims.
 - C. Bar-Jesus is judged by Paul, who essentially said of him that he was mis-named. He was not a son of salvation, but rather a son of the devil (v.10) because no true prophet of God could oppose the message about Jesus, as Elymas was doing. Consequently, Elymas brought upon himself the judgment of God, v.11.
 - D. Again, the story of Elymas is inconclusive. He was blinded "for a time." But what happened after this? Did he repent? Was he converted? Luke doesn't say. Instead, he wants us to see the power of the gospel of Jesus, not only over demons and false teaching, but also over the human heart. It's not by signs and wonders that hearts are conquered, says Luke, but by the preaching of the gospel of God's grace in Christ, vv.5, 7, 12.

IV. The Fortune-Teller of Philippi, 16.16-24

A. The Lord's lawsuit against the idols in Isaiah is important as background.

1. The Lord's ability to announce the future proves His power to control the future, 42.8-9; 46.9-10. Comparatively, the idols' impotence is shown by their muteness in the face of the future's uncertainties, 41.22-24. Though many claimed to be able to predict the future, the Lord shows them to be liars by thwarting their predictions, 44.24-26
2. The Philippian slave girl was trapped in the system of pagan divination. She was controlled by a divining (fortune-telling) spirit, pawned by her masters as a means to their own profit and gain, 16.16, 19

B. Christ's way is supreme over the spirits

1. The superiority of the gospel of Christ over pagan divination was shown first in the girl's announcement of the apostles' mission, v.17 (cp. Lk 4.34, 41; 8.28). But as true as this testimony was, it came from a source the apostles could not condone. So just as Jesus silenced the unclean spirits, Paul silenced this spirit.
2. The gospel's supremacy is seen also in the exorcism of the spirit. Paul's words are brief, and Luke's description is matter-of-fact, v.18, but only one thing explains the instantaneous result, namely, "the name of Jesus Christ." By invoking Jesus' name, Paul, like Peter before him (3.6), pointed away from his own power and piety to the authority of his Lord.
3. The climactic demonstration of the gospel's victory over pagan divination was the vindication of the apostles through their imprisonment, the midnight earthquake, the conversion of the jailor, and the apology of the magistrates at daybreak.

V. Exorcists and Occultists at Ephesus, 19.11-20

A. Sceva's Sons: Abuse of the Lord's Name Frustrated

1. The healings and exorcisms that God was doing through Paul set the context for the attempt by the sons of Sceva to tap into the power of Jesus' name. The outcome had two surprising results:
 - a) The would-be exorcists were pounced upon by the demoniac, beaten, and sent fleeing naked and bleeding.
 - b) The name of the Lord Jesus was magnified. The incident instilled in the people of Ephesus an awe-filled recognition of the terrifying holiness of Jesus' name (cf. 5.5, 11).
2. Moreover, the sobering demonstration of the realities at work in the warfare between Christ and Satan prompted Christian believers to make a clean break with their pagan past in the occult arts, vv.18-19. The saving power of the gospel in Paul's hands and the failure of Sceva's sons to tap into Jesus' power without allegiance to His authority, convinced the Ephesian believers that they could not maintain dual loyalties (cf. 1Kgs 18.21; Lk 16.13).
3. Again, Luke emphasizes, not so much Paul's miracles (19.11-12) as that it was the word of the Lord that transformed hearts and liberated minds from the lies of spiritual counterfeits, v.20.

VI. Responding to the Modern Merchants of Magic

A. The Uniqueness of the Living God

1. The logic behind magic is that a variety of competing spiritual forces operate behind the scenes in people's daily lives. If this were reality, then syncretism makes sense. But while God's Word reveals that unseen spiritual creatures, good and bad, influence human life, it also reveals that He alone is the Creator and ultimate Sovereign over all that happens. Advocates of religious pluralism are living in a world fabricated by their own imaginations.

B. The Gift of Grace

1. False teaching always centers around money and is a moneymaking racket fueled by the desire to put God in our debt and obligate Him to do our will. This runs directly contrary to the testimony of God's Word that His grace is a gift and cannot be purchased. The gospel is a message of God's gift of salvation and blessing, unearned, undeserved, unmanipulated, and uncoerced—which challenges us, because it exposes our pretensions to independence and autonomy and our delusion that we can bargain or barter with the God of the universe.

C. The Power of the Word

1. In all the confrontations of spiritual powers in the book of Acts, Luke purposely keeps our focus on the preaching of the gospel and its impact on people's minds and hearts (8.5, 12, 25; 13.5, 7, 12; 10.10, 20). Signs and wonders are God's testimony to the truth of the apostles' witness about Jesus (Heb 2.3-4) and, for that reason, are subordinate to the message itself. They were never meant to be centerstage.
2. As Christ's people interact with adherents of other religions today, the temptation arises to go "one-on-one" in a duel of marvels and miracles: prayers answered, astonishing coincidences, inexplicable healings, unforeseen riches, etc. But if we listen to Luke, we realize that such surface events are not the point. What really matters is not whether God makes our daily life more pleasant or less painful. The heart of the matter is the power of the word of Jesus Christ to reconcile us to the living God and give us eternal life.