

Acts 8:9-24: Following the Wrong Savior

Introduction:

Happy new year and welcome back to APNTS for second semester. To new students, we embrace you this first day of classes as a member of our faith community. It is good for me to be back after our annual vacation, spent each year in the US so that our family can spend Christmas together. Our family is important to Dr. Peggy and me, as I am sure it is to many of you. Thanks for allowing us to be away for those three weeks.

Back in September I preached to the Taytay 1st Church of the Nazarene congregation about stewardship of the family in a sermon titled “Families Matter!” With a bit of humor and perhaps horror to introduce the sermon, I shared with them about a time when my mother accidentally left my sister Brenda at a gasoline station in our community. Brenda was three years old and had gone off to the bathroom with her older sisters and Mom’s permission while the gas was being pumped and I (as six-year-old big brother) stayed in the car to keep it safe. Mom went inside to pay, and upon returning and seeing children in the back seat, assumed all four were present and pulled away. After just a few meters down the road, five-year-old Beverly tapped her on the shoulder and asked, “Mama, aren’t we going to take Brenda with us?” Imagine the shock on my mother’s face and the speed in which she turned the car around and sped back to the station, only to find Brenda patiently waiting by the pump, unafraid and maybe even a little amused by the game her Mom, sisters, and brother must have been playing on her. Surely her loving mother would never leave her behind, she must have thought, confident that she would be back in a minute. And she was --- a little panicked --- and apologetic --- and grateful for Brenda’s childlike faith in her.

The scenario of accidentally leaving a child at home on a Christmas trip was the plot of a movie that premiered almost 30 years but is still popular today. Kevin McAllister's parents woke up late on the morning of their family departure, and somehow in the hurry that followed to get everyone to the Chicago airport, Kevin was left "*Home Alone*" (hence the name of the movie). Kevin made it through the week with his creativity, even when two guys Harry and Marv tried to rob the house, until his family returned. One would think that the family would never let that happen again. **Wrong.** A couple of years later the sequel told the story of "Home Alone 2," except this time Kevin got on the wrong airplane and spent his week in New York alone while his family went to Florida.

How could that happen? Watch closely as, in the airport, Kevin took his eyes off of Mr. McAllister and followed the wrong father. Keep *your* eyes on the man in the tan overcoat. (*View movie clip*)

It was an easy mistake to make. His dad had on a tan overcoat, and the man who Kevin followed wore the same. Dad was headed hurriedly toward the gate, and so was the other man. Dad and the family were flying American Airlines and so was the stranger. In fact, Kevin didn't even **realize** that the man he followed was not his father until he stepped off the plane and wondered where the rest of those with whom he began the journey had gone. A few moments later at the airport Kevin had arrived in, he looked out the window, recognized the Empire State Building, and realized he was in New York --- not in Florida with his family.

If we watch this scene objectively, we can see the signs of trouble early on. Kevin was distracted and preoccupied with something that wasn't important – the batteries for his video recorder – which led him to take his eyes off his father long enough to lose sight of him. When he realized he was separated, he looked for something familiar to connect with him again, and made a quick and misguided decision to follow the tan overcoat that looked like his father's. His haste,

the mess he made with the boarding passes at the gate, and his insistence that he was on the right track once he got on the plane, kept those who could have helped him from doing so. Once on the wrong plane, he shut his ears from announcements of his misdirection, relaxing in total confidence that all was well. Only when the plane landed thousands of kilometers away from his family did he realize something was wrong.

This year our chapel theme has been “*Fix Your Eyes on Jesus,*” using the metaphor of the race in Hebrews 12 to emphasize how important it is to have a singular focus on Jesus, our Savior and our Hope for life’s victory. The image of Peter sinking into the stormy water has also stressed the significance of not taking our eyes off Jesus and risk our salvation in doing so. But what happens when we do fix our focus, on someone or something that we think is true to Jesus, but in reality is a contradiction of who Christ is and how following Him shapes the way we live our lives?

I preached from John 6 back in October about the crowd that followed Jesus after he fed the five thousand with five loaves and two fish. Recognizing that they wanted to make him king by force, Jesus confronted these followers about their motivation. “You ate the loaves and had your fill,” he said. Your stomach is your god, He said in so many words, and if you’ve followed me for that, you’ve followed the wrong Savior for **He** is the Bread of life! Two of the options left to them were apparent: they could make Jesus Lord, or they could go back home and abandon His call on their life. John 6:66 states that many of them did the latter. Jesus’ question of the twelve as to their choice brought a more positive response --- you are the Holy One of God! Simon Peter proclaimed, to who else would we go for truth? But even as he spoke, Jesus hinted of a third option. Judas would continue to be one of the twelve, but had already been misdirected by his passion for overthrowing Judah’s political oppressors. He did not leave, continuing to be part of the group,

but with a different motivation for following. That motivation became his focus and his master, and Judas ended up following the wrong Savior.

Back to the movie. Kevin realized once he got to New York that he wasn't where his father was. But rather than repent, return, and reconnect, a sly grin crept onto his face. If you've seen the movie, you know that the next scenes showed Kevin using his dad's money to cruise Manhattan, to check into a rich hotel, and to fill up with ice cream and chocolate. This vacation is all right, he thought, who needs my family? Only when Marv and Harry, the two who were out of get him last time, showed up again to threaten and Kevin knew he shouldn't be where he was, did he realized what a risk having the wrong focus was. Thankfully, some loving New Yorkers and a persistent mother who keep seeking reunited him with his family where he belonged, and the danger was dispelled.

Is it possible to follow the wrong Savior today? To be in church, associated with Christian friends, everything seeming to go well. Such a person may have started out right, asking Jesus to forgive, believing in Him, following him to the "airport" of our life. That person gets on the plane (part of the church), even have the Father's "bag of blessings" to spend from, but something's just not quite right about this trip. Because it's the wrong plane, going to the wrong destination with the wrong motivation, and the person up front who is being following is not who it seems. Somewhere one became distracted and is actually following the wrong Savior, one who in reality cannot save at all but will put their life at risk as long as they do.

In Acts 8, the same Simon Peter who refused to abandon Jesus back in John 6 encountered another Simon. Luke, the writer of Acts, tells us that this Simon was a sorcerer. But maybe it wasn't so much the sorcery itself that he was living for. but the way it made him feel. Life was good and people called him the "Great Power." But that was about to change.

The passage tells us that Philip the evangelist came to Samaria, and verse 12 reported that scores of men and women were being saved from their sins. One of those who believed had come out a life of practicing sorcery. Verse 13 says that Simon believed and was baptized. His enthusiasm for what Jesus was doing was clear --- or at least for what Philip was doing: great miracles, signs, and wonders. He followed Philip everywhere.

Acts tells us that the Holy Spirit came in four “installments” emphasizing the universality of the gospel --- coming first to the Jews, then to the Samaritans here in Acts 8, in Acts 10 to God-fearing Gentiles who had embraced Judaism, and finally to full-fledged Gentiles. The infilling of the Holy Spirit for Samaria happened when Peter and John arrived in verse 15. As these two disciples laid their hands on believers, they were filled with the Holy Spirit just as the Jews had been in Acts 2. Then Luke recorded an interesting response on the part of Simon in verse 19, and his true motivation and interest became clear. Simon offered money to Peter and John to give him the power to bring the Spirit into people’s lives through the laying on of his hands. You can’t help but think that Simon was ready in his mind to resume his earlier commitment to one form of sorcery for what he assumed was another form of “magic,” that his control as the “Great Power” in verse 10 was something that he wanted to return to, except that his new power would be even greater. Peter rebuked him for his wicked heart and captivity to sin and selfishness in verses 20-23. Simon’s response revealed further his true focus, asking for prayer not that he would be forgiven and cleansed, but that nothing bad would happen to him.

What had happened to Simon? There is evidence to support that his initial belief was real; taken at face value his baptism meant he had repented of his witchcraft and decided to follow Jesus. But though Simon had dealt with his sins, the lordship of his life was another matter. With the power of the Holy Spirit came through Peter and John, Simon came face-to-face with his own

inner spirit, the principle that lingered in his heart. Somewhere along the way, he had been distracted away from the “good news of the Kingdom of God” (verse 12) and aligning his life with who Jesus really is and the surrender, sacrifice, and serving that are the core of what it means to follow Him. When the apostles laid their hands on others, he laid down his credit card. I want that! And the heart of sin – the capital I – took over. He had followed the wrong Savior.

How do we know? Three evidences revealed the true focus of his faith.

I. Status

The first was his passion for **status**. Verse 9 tells us that Simon’s boast before meeting Jesus was being someone great. People gave him their attention. He was important, he was “the man,” he was the center of attention. Being the “divine power” appealed to him. Life was about him; he was the main character. Though during Philip’s ministry, Simon had given up sorcery, sorcery was not the “bottom line” for Simon. Status was the real issue, and sorcery had just been something that helped him to get it. Once converted sorcery was put away, but the desire for self-promotion remained. It may not be coincidental that Acts records that the people believed **Philip** and his message. Simon’s faith may have been more in the messenger than the Jesus behind the message. When he saw Philip’s power, and then the power of Peter and John, he had to have it, seeing it as an inroad to the status that he had lost when he responded to Philip. An immature faith gave way to a distraction that reveals the heart of the problem. “Give **me** this ability (emphasis on *me*) so that those **I** lay my hands on (*capital I*) will receive the Holy Spirit (at *my* direction)” (verse 19). Perhaps he could use this spiritual authority to win back the followers he lost when he gave up sorcery, he may have thought, using it for his own ends rather than for the gospel.

Status is a subtle temptation! Jesus faced it in the desert, “Turn these stones to bread.” *You’ve got the power; take care of yourself; God doesn’t want you to be hungry.* But Jesus knew His

Father wanted something more; a surrender to His word. James and John faced it. “Let us sit on your right and left hand in the kingdom” they had asked Jesus. Peter himself knew the tug. “You shall never wash my feet.” *I’m in charge*. Jesus said that unless I do, you have no part of me. Jesus gently reminded them (and us) that “whoever would follow me must deny him/herself and take up the cross” - the most demeaning way to die – and to follow him. Jesus died for us, but on our behalf but not in our place. We too must die out to status, to self-rule. “Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, for I did not come to be served but to serve.”

Status --- wrong Savior. Self-surrender ... sacrifice ... serving --- the Jesus of the Kingdom of God.

II. Stuff

The second evidence that Simon had his eyes on the wrong Savior was his focus on **stuff**. In this case it was money, but it could have been anything material. Not only was the resulting status alluring, but the method by which he could find significance in life was misdirected. Bestowing the Spirit upon others to him was magic --- or at least a sanctified magic --- and he was prepared to pay for the privilege. It looked like a good investment, for if he was willing to pay for it, surely others would be, too. It would be God’s gift to him, something like the bag that Kevin found himself with, something that could provide food, shelter, and the necessities of life --- and surely God wouldn’t want any less.

Howard Marshall wrote of this incident, “The very thought of obtaining a divine gift by some sort of payment betrays a total misunderstanding of God’s nature and his gifts.” Such a misunderstanding lingers today. Some did as Jabez ask God to expand their boundaries, only with themselves as beneficiaries. Some count blessings in dollars and cents received, testifying of God’s

goodness in food, jobs, homes, cars, and standard of living, and wonder where God is when they find themselves suffering or in need.

Like status, a focus on possessions can be another subtle distraction. Jesus himself faced it in the desert, when the devil urged him to throw himself down, and prove that the angels will take care of him. We too can be tempted to put God to the test. Our prayers of blessing and gratitude often reflect a Savior who rewards us with stuff. Our preoccupation with the material creates a false dependency, leading us to miss the real blessing of giving it all away as promised in 2 Corinthians 9:11 where Paul wrote, “You have been made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion” and in doing so enlarge your own harvest of righteousness. What I have has been shared; the blessing is not in the stuff but in what happens when we give it away.

In September 1894, a Methodist pastor named Phineas Bresee left his comfortable pastorate to minister in the poverty-stricken areas of Los Angeles. His mission became the First Church of the *Nazarene*, a name used in derision of Jesus for the lowly people he associated with, and adopted by the new denomination whose mission was to do the same. He wrote, “It has been my long cherished desire to have a place in the heart of the city which could be made a center of holy fire, and where the gospel could be preached to the poor.” Several years ago I walked those same streets that are today’s “Skid Row” of Los Angeles. The relationship of holiness and ministry to the poor was no accident.

Jesus’ synagogue sermon in Luke 4 after being tempted announced his mission as preaching good news to the poor and the oppressed. The evidence later presented to John the Baptist of his Messiahship was that “the poor have the gospel preached to them.” James wrote in his epistle that pure and faultless faith looks after orphans and widows in distress. The church preaching to the poor is the most powerful sign and wonder of them all. *Giving to those who cannot give back is*

the true test of faithfulness, wrote Howard Snyder and Daniel Runyan in their book *Decoding the Church*. A life focused on stuff would never consider that; that only happens by the empowerment of the Spirit and being captivated by the character of Christ in a true focus on Him.

Stuff --- wrong Savior. Self-surrender ... sacrifice ... serving --- the Jesus of the Kingdom of God.

III. Sway

The third evidence that Simon was following the wrong Jesus was his preoccupation with having influence over others, or what I have called “sway” (to keep my alliteration going). Not only did Simon long for the status and the stuff that such a power might bring, he knew he could use it to influence others and win their attention and admiration.

The longing to be popular is not just something cherished by teenagers; it tugs and pulls at the lives of grown men and women who lose themselves in their careers for the rush of having control, perhaps even immerse themselves in the church for the clout it gives them. Though it’s easy to see that the thirst for status focuses on self, the desire for sway over others may seem others-oriented but the bottom line is still “me.” Even missions can accent our need for control over others, when the focus remains on the good feeling I get or the control I assert in my ministry to the rest of the world, rather than being directed toward the growth and empowerment of a truly global church. Simon wanted the power to maintain control of others, rather than releasing it. A life focused on others without the love and surrender of Jesus to drive it degenerates to manipulation rather than the image of God.

Sway, or influence over others, is also a subtle diversion, another one that Jesus faced during his temptations. The devil showed him all the kingdoms of the world and promised to give them

to Jesus in exchange for his worship. Captive to sin, as Peter described him, Simon apparently had already done so. We can sell our souls for the approval of others. Though being connected to a community of believers is critical for growth as a believer, believing that we can aspire to lead through any other means than taking up the cross will bring us again to the heart of the sin problem.

Sway --- wrong Savior. Self-surrender ... sacrifice ... serving --- the Jesus of the Kingdom of God.

Conclusion

There's not a happy ending to this story. Simon's seat on the wrong airplane was pretty far down the runway. Peter's words were strong; literally in the Greek, he said "may you and your money burn in hell." Peter and John then returned to Jerusalem, and the legend noted with a number of historical scholars was that Simon became a persistent opponent of Christianity --- just as a choice to follow the wrong Savior for the wrong reasons can ultimately lead today to not following at all.

It doesn't have to be that way with your story. Perhaps you once prayed for forgiveness of sins and came to faith in Jesus. You began to follow him, and believe in His love and power. But somewhere along the way you came face to face with, as it was with Simon, the reality of a deeper problem at work that needs His redemption. Just as Paul wrote in Romans, the good that you know to do and want to do can make being good all the more difficult. It's too easy to settle in to routines and patterns, to blend into church life, to give the impression that you're on the right track, when really you continue to rule your own life. The heart of sin --- status, stuff, and sway --- means that self-sovereignty, self-sufficiency, self-dependency --- may still rule.

When your story is told in years to come, what will be its climax? For Simon, the ending was not a good one. But for you, it can be very different. Jesus calls you to take up his cross, make the choice to die out to self, and to become a living sacrifice --- to surrender to His plan and priorities for your life, the reason for which you were created and redeemed. Love Him with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and in doing so you will find that His cleansing work in your heart will make Him, and continue to keep Him, as your focus --- the true Savior and Lord of your life.