

The Making of a False Teacher **Acts 8:4-24**

Today marks the 40th anniversary of what's known as the Jonestown Massacre. Some of you may remember hearing about the bizarre and terrible events that unfolded on that day. A man named Jim Jones had convinced over 900 Americans to end their own lives in a mass murder-suicide that took place in the Jonestown compound in Guyana, South America. I want to tell you a little bit about this man. From the time he was young man, Jones was a charismatic leader and dynamic speaker. He had a passion for economic and racial equality and was a champion for socialism and communism. In observing churches, he realized that a church would be the perfect place to raise money and have a platform from which he could promote his beliefs.

So, he became an ordained minister and eventually founded a church in Indiana which became known as the People's Temple. He quickly attracted large crowds through his powerful speaking ability and outspoken beliefs. He also drew attention by performing miraculous healings, which turned out to be a fabrication. With all the money and popularity he received, he became an egomaniac and started to claim he was divine. He also became fascinated with the need to survive nuclear holocaust and became very controlling of his followers, demanding allegiance and using violence and fear to manipulate people.

Eventually he decided he had to move the People's Temple to the San Francisco area where he thought they'd survive nuclear fallout and his church grew rapidly. He was seen as such an influential community leader that government officials would often meet with him and partner with him for support. But eventually some defectors started talking and there were accusations of physical and sexual abuse, so Jones and about 1,000 of his faithful followers moved to a remote location in Guyana and built Jonestown. It was supposed to be a euphoric community of love and equality.

But more accusations of abuse surfaced and the relatives of some of the Jonestown members convinced U.S. Congressman Leo Ryan to investigate. He flew to Jonestown to check things out and as he was about to board the plane to return home with a group of defectors he and 4 others were gunned down. That

set in motion the terrible events of November 18, 1978. Jones knew the local authorities would soon invade Jonestown, so he gave the order to have everyone drink juice mixed with cyanide – something they had talked about many times before. The vast majority of adults drank willingly and also made the children drink. And by the end, there were 918 dead – over 300 of whom were children. Jones' body was also found having died from a gunshot wound to the head which was believed to be self-inflicted.

It's staggering to think about that much loss of life – such a waste. How could so many people be so deceived? And these weren't ignorant, uneducated people – you watch the interviews of the few survivors and defectors and they are average Americans like you and me. They believed in what they were doing; they believed in a cause, and they believed in the man who spoon fed lies to them for many years.

This morning we are going to look at the making of a false teacher. We're up to chapter 8 in our sermon series on Acts and there's a story in Acts 8 about a man named Simon. We know from this story and other historical accounts that this man was a notorious and highly influential false teacher in the 1st century in Samaria. The Reformation Study Bible says, "Simon Magus the sorcerer is frequently mentioned in ancient writings outside the Bible as the archenemy of the church and one of the leaders of the Gnostic heresy. Justin Martyr (died A.D. 165), himself a Samaritan, says that almost all the Samaritans considered Simon the highest god. Irenaeus (died A.D. 180), who wrote extensively against the Gnostics, regards Simon as one of the sources of their heresies."

The story we're going to look at today gives us a unique look into this man's life when he was first introduced to Christianity and in it we will see some of the things that characterized his life – characteristics eerily similar to what you see in Jim Jones and many Bible preachers and teachers today – men and women that are hugely popular and whose books we have in our homes and whose sermons we watch and listen to online or on t.v. My hope is that as we look at the making of a false teacher we will be equipped with what to look for in order to identify one and we will ask ourselves if some of our favorite authors and preachers match these characteristics. False teaching is one of the most serious threats to the church and as we seek to be the church God wants us to be, we need to be able to identify and reject false teachers and teachings.

The story about Simon begins soon after Stephen was murdered and intense persecution broke out in Jerusalem at the hands of Saul. Many Christians were scattered into Judea and Samaria and preached the word as they went. One of these was a man named Philip – not the apostle Philip, but another man known as “Philip the Evangelist” in Acts 21:8. Philip went to Samaria and great things happened.

Read Acts 8:4-8.

⁴ Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. ⁵ Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. ⁶ And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs that he did. ⁷ For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. ⁸ So there was much joy in that city.

So Philip preached the gospel to Samaritans and because of what he said and the signs he performed, people paid attention. This was a big deal in that area because of who Philip was competing with – a dynamic and highly influential speaker in that area.

Read Acts 8:9-11.

⁹ But there was a man named Simon, who had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he himself was somebody great. ¹⁰ They all paid attention to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, “This man is the power of God that is called Great.” ¹¹ And they paid attention to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic.

The first characteristics I want you to see in Simon is that he was a charismatic and dynamic speaker and powerfully influential leader. He was not some amateur sideshow that you hire for a birthday party. He was a professional. He was good at what he was doing. So good in fact that he was also able to convince people that he was higher than everybody else – someone who was divine. All the people in that area were tuned into him and believed he was God.

A false teacher is someone who has powerful charisma, a dynamic personality that people are drawn to. They are a gifted leader and able to influence and

persuade people. There's a wow-factor to their speaking. They have to be like this or nobody would follow them. If they're boring and awkward it doesn't matter if they're a false teacher because no one is going to listen to them anyway. But if they have charisma, they do. For some reason people think that if someone is a bold and powerful speaker, they must be speaking the truth, but that's not always the case, so we need to watch out that we don't automatically think that way about our favorite speakers. We have to test what they're saying with a healthy level of criticism. Every false teacher out there that has influence is going to be a great speaker. And, like Simon, they will also elevate themselves above others – especially critics. They will criticize and demean any who stand against them, and claim to have greater knowledge and insight that others lack. Be careful of these preachers. Be careful of the preachers whose speaking connects with you like no one else's. They are the ones we are most vulnerable to.

The second characteristic of a false teacher is in the next few verses.

Read Acts 8:12-13.

¹² But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.

¹³ Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed.

At first this seems like a conversion, but we learn later on it's not. What we see here is that false teachers look and act like Christians. Simon believed in Jesus, he got baptized, he followed Philip, he was amazed by miracles. For this brief time in his life he was part of the Christian church. False teachers are almost always the same way. They use the Bible, they talk about Jesus, their sermons are 'biblical' – "straight from the Bible," I've heard many people say. And they are, but false teachers can pull anything out of context and make it mean anything they want it to mean.

Just because your favorite author or speakers' messages are "biblical" doesn't mean they're speaking truth. False teachers have been twisting Scripture for 2,000 years. It's what they do to get us to follow them. There's got to be more than that to make them a credible teacher of truth. And even though they are biblical, a discerning ear will be able to hear that something's not quite right.

Something's different in what they say than a legitimate preacher and we see that in the next few verses.

Read Acts 8:14-19.

¹⁴ Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, ¹⁵ who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, ¹⁶ for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ¹⁷ Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸ Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, ¹⁹ saying, "Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit."

Here we see that Simon had a fascination with something related to Christianity, but it wasn't a fascination with Jesus or the gospel. It was a fascination with signs and wonders and the giving of the Holy Spirit. You can see the contrast between him and Philip. In verse 12 you can see that Philip's focus was preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ. Simon on the other hand was fascinated with the new power he was witnessing. He saw it in Philip and the miracles he did, but then he saw in Peter and John that it was a power that could be passed on to others and he wanted it bad. He desperately wanted that kind of power and I believe he wanted it so that he could manipulate and control people – the same thing he had done with his magic. So he tried to buy the secret to that power for himself.

This I believe is one of the most telltale signs of a false teacher. You can be a dynamic speaker and influential leader and not be a false teacher, and you can look and act like a Christian and actually be a Christian. Those characteristics don't make someone a false teacher. But this is where I think false teachers reveal their true colors. They have a fascination with something other than the gospel and Jesus Christ – something that their teaching, though 'biblical' always comes back to as the center, rather than the gospel. It could be signs and wonders and the power of the Holy Spirit; it could be healing and casting out demons; it could be a fascination with end times prophecy and prophetic fulfillment; it could be a fascination with health, wealth and prosperity. For Jim Jones it was racial and economic equality. These things take center stage in a false teacher's ministry and begin to shape their theology and twist their doctrine and soon the gospel they

preach isn't the gospel at all. If your favorite preachers and teachers have a ministry that continually elevates something other than the gospel, be cautious.

For Simon, it would have been the Holy Spirit's power and signs and wonders if he could have obtained it, but when he offered Peter and John money for it they responded to him like we need to respond to false teachers.

Read Acts 8:20-24.

²⁰ But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! ²¹ You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. ²² Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. ²³ For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity." ²⁴ And Simon answered, "Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me."

Peter saw right through him and confronted him to his face. Simon demonstrated some remorse, but went on to show that it wasn't true repentance. He led many people astray, just like Jim Jones.

There are all kinds of false teachers out there to varying degrees. Some will just be a distraction, keeping you fascinated with what they're fascinated by and not centered on Christ and the gospel. Others will have a huge influence on you and you will invest huge amounts of time and money on pursuing their ministry and their cause. You will even teach your kids to follow them and hang on their every word. And even though not every false teacher may convince you to drink Kool Aid mixed with cyanide, their influence will still have a poisoning effect.

My hope is that as we've seen some of the characteristics in Simon, the Lord will help us to be more discerning of the people we listen to and read and will allow us to actually put our favorite authors and speakers to the test. Some of us have books of false teachers on our nightstand right now and podcasts on our phones. I don't want us to go on a witch hunt and accuse every great and influential speaker of being a false teacher like some people do, but I do want us to seriously ask ourselves, "Who is this person that I'm so impressed by? Why am I so impressed by them?" I want us to put them to the test using the characteristics we see in Simon.

I want to close by reminding us of something Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 3:4-7 – something to help keep us from ever elevating any human speaker or author too high: “For when one says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not being merely human? ⁵ What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. ⁶ I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷ So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.”