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Acts 8:22 "Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you."

Our verse today comes from the intense conversation between a new convert, Simon, and the apostle Peter. Simon once kept audiences spellbound with black magic. Philip came to town preaching Jesus. Philip was doing miracles. Many were convinced and converted. Simon was among them. When the apostles came to lay their hands and bestow the Holy Spirit upon some, Simon was impressed. He wanted that power. He offered to buy that power from the apostles. How little did he understand. You cannot purchase the gifts of God. You cannot buy your way into Heaven.

Peter immediately shut this conversation down. He rebuked Simon and told him that his heart was not right with God. He was told to repent and to pray. Get right, is what Peter is saying.

Now, from this springs several interesting thoughts for us:

First, new Christians often don't know. There is much to learn about how the church functions, operates and the pattern God has for His people. Business ideas, marketing ideas, fund raising ideas—may work well in schools and business but not in the kingdom of God. Some do not understand that.

We work hard to bring one to Jesus, but I wonder if we leave them there at the baptistery with so much to learn and understand. Jesus told the apostles to teach those baptized to observe all that He commanded.

Untaught, error is likely to develop. Untaught, one may drift away. In some places, as many come in the front doors, leave out the back doors. Folks simply do not stick or stay long. This is something shepherds must be aware of. Getting new people connected and growing is important.

Second, forgiveness isn't something that God owes us. The words of Peter are, "if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven." We don't say much about the "If possible," part. We tend to think that God will and God has to forgive us. Grace isn't deserved nor earned nor ought to be expected. God doesn't owe you forgiveness. We must keep that "if possible" aspect in our hearts and minds. God is good. The blood of Jesus He promises will wash away our sins, but if not careful, we can become indifferent, careless and assume, "Well, all I have to do is pray and it's gone." Be careful with such attitudes. Abusing the grace of God may find you without any grace.

Third, the pray. Peter says, pray the Lord if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven. Two immediate things we ought to see. First, Simon "didn't actually do anything wrong." He offered to buy the power of the apostles, but no money was exchanged. No papers were signed. Simon didn't run to the ATM and withdraw money. His sin was in his heart. No blood, no foul works well in basketball, but it doesn't work well with God. Simon thought wrong. Simon was wrong. Our thoughts can put us in a wrong place, even though we "didn't do anything." Sin is not just in doing wrong. Sin takes place in our heart and our intentions. Jesus dealt with this in His sermon on the mount. Lusting in the heart. Hating in the heart. Those thoughts may never become actions, but they were still wrong.

The other thing that we ought to see here is the prayer. Simon's actual prayer is not listed. He even asks the apostles to pray for him. There are some prayers that we probably just do not want to pray. This would be one. To pray for forgiveness means that we have disappointed God, we have ignored His word and we have broken His heart. We ought to hate to come to God that way. We ought to hate to have to admit and apologize for the times we sin. Our sin ought to

bother us. It ought to make us feel bad. It ought to make us realize how disappointed we made God. Certainly, He still loves us, but we have hurt Him. All sin impacts our relationship with Him. It's one thing to pray for the sick. It's one thing to pray for growth, the elders, the sermon. Great things to pray about. But asking God to please forgive us is like a child who has done wrong and stands before his father. Head hung down, knowing he may get spanked, and unable to answer why he did wrong, that's us. I'm thankful God allows us to come to Him when we have been wrong. I'm glad God wants us to seek Him, but asking for forgiveness ought to bother us.

How many times do we say in our prayers, "forgive us of our sins," as if we were asking for a glass of water. Nothing to it. Just a statement. Just a plain request. Our sins ought to bother us. They should make us feel terrible. They ought to make us ashamed. They ought to tear us up. They ought to bring tears to our eyes. We have sinned and now we must talk to God about that. And, maybe that's just the problem. We've made sin no big deal and so we don't think about it much. We don't fight it much. We don't worry about it when we cross over the line a few times. And, maybe we ought to make it a big deal.

Peter certainly did. He didn't let Simon off the hook. He didn't give Simon a pass because he was new. He didn't say, "It's no big deal." It was. Peter's words were:

- Your heart is not right before God
- He called it wickedness
- He said that Simon was in the gall of bitterness
- He said that Simon was in the bondage of iniquity

Cutting and harsh words that most wouldn't use today. Peter did. Sin is a big deal. And it ought to nearly kill us to have to ask God again for His grace and mercy.

Finally, Peter cared enough to say something. He got Simon's attention. Simon dropped the idea of buying God's gifts. If we really love someone we will help them. Believing, "It's none of my business," reveals a lack of love, connection and fellowship to one another. We need each other to help each other, even when we have done wrong. Be there. Say the words. Show what needs to be done. Peter did all of those things.

I expect if the words of Peter were used today, some would leave and find a "more friendly church." Some would point the finger at Peter and accuse him of judging and being unloving. Is it the loving thing to do to ignore sin in someone's life? Is it the loving thing to do to worry more about their feelings or their relationship with God? Is it the loving thing to do to tell others but not the person who has done wrong?

Simon was better because of Peter. The words slapped him right on his head, but he needed that. Sometimes, I need that, too. We can be so generic, so polite, and so kind, that we don't do any good. This is not a call to be mean, offensive, rude and harsh. The Bible tells us to correct with gentleness, but even in that, we need to say what needs to be said. Peter did that.

Great things for you and I to think about...