

MEGA MAN

ACTS 8:5-25 JANUARY 15, 2020

If you want to start an argument, pick a sport and poll people about who the greatest player in that sport's history is. Whether it's basketball, golf, baseball or boxing, there are always different ideas.

There's really only *one* sport I can think of where we'd probably have consensus on who the greatest of all time is, and that's swimming. Michael Phelps has won 23 gold medals, broken numerous world records, and singlehandedly changed his sport. It's hard to put anyone in the same category as the *most decorated Olympian of all time*. On the *other* hand, his status might not last forever. Just this past summer *two* of his world records, both in his signature stroke (butterfly) were broken by up and comers. In July, 19 year old Hungarian swimmer Kristof Milak beat Phelps' time in the 200 meter butterfly by more than 3/4 of a second.¹

Commenting to the press, Phelps said: "As frustrated as I am to see that record go down, I couldn't be happier to see how he did it...It happened because there was a kid who wanted to do it, who dreamed of doing it, who figured out what it would take to do it, who worked on his technique until it was beautiful and who put in the really, really hard work that it takes to do it. My hat's off to him."²

In competitive athletics there will always be the unending pursuit of *greatness*. And new generations of players are constantly studying, evaluating, learning from the great ones around them. Caeleb Dressel, the 23 year old who broke Phelps' *other* butterfly record in 2019, has spoken of watching Phelps swim his historic 2009 race "plenty of times," looking at the race strategy.³ He even swam *with* Phelps as a teammate in the 2016 Olympics.

For sports, this is all well and good. But tonight we'll see this mentality of personal ambition and the quest for 'greatness' trying to make its way into the Church. The results aren't pretty. Along the way, we see the kind of faithful humility that God *does* use to accomplish truly great things.

We begin in verse 5 of chapter 8. A tidal wave of violent persecution has forced most Christians *out* of Jerusalem and into the surrounding regions. Luke zooms in on one of those Christians, Philip.

Acts 8:5 - 5 Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah to them.

Luke calls Philip a "herald" in this verse. Heralds were the means by which sovereigns got the word out, serving as messengers and diplomats. Philip is in the Kingly service and has a very important message, but there's a lot stacked against him. He's got Saul, the vicious murderer on his trail and he finds himself in a Samaritan city. Not the most welcoming location for a Jew who has a religious message. Most of you are familiar with the deep, cultural and religious divides between Jews and Samaritans. And yet, here is Philip, proclaiming the Messiah to them.

This on its own is a remarkable reminder that Jesus Christ is the Savior of all men. He wasn't just a Jewish Messiah. He would save Jews *or* Samaritans. The New Testament lays it out clearly: Free or slave. Rich or poor. civilized or barbarian. Men, women or children.

¹ <https://www.cnn.com/2019/07/26/sport/michael-phelps-swimming-regan-smith-caeleb-dressel-trnd/index.html>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/24/sports/kristof-milak-michael-phelps-record.html>

³ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uErCfk_U0OY

In Norse Mythology, Valhalla is only open to men and only to men who have died in combat. And, of those who died in combat, Odin only chooses *half*. The rest go elsewhere.⁴

Imagine Philip coming with a message concerning the eternal, Jewish King. But *this* King is not a racist or respecter of persons. He doesn't see the Samaritans as mongrels or half-breeds, but as dearly loved children, who He wants to invite into a full share of His Kingdom.

Acts 8:6-7 - ⁶ The crowds paid attention with one mind to what Philip said, as they heard and saw the signs he was performing. ⁷ For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed, and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed.

Philip didn't launch any initiatives or raise any start-up money or do anything strategic. He preached and the Holy Spirit anointed the message and blessed the work with signs and miracles. This city was suddenly in the middle of a genuine revival. While this sort of awakening doesn't *always* happen, it is a helpful reminder that the Gospel actually makes a difference in life. The Gospel actually has power to transform lives and change communities and set people free. God's message to the world is not just sent for psychological comfort or some other feel-goodery that is so often peddled today. It's sent so that people can be released from the captivity of sin and be made whole by the power of Jesus Christ, the coming King.

Acts 8:8 - ⁸ So there was great joy in that city.

Real ministry is more than hype. It's more than marketing. It's the real power of God at work which produces real joy. Imagine what it would be like to have the people you know who are sick or injured or dying to be made well. And for all your neighbors to have the guarantee of forgiveness and everlasting life. These must have been such wonderful days in the marketplaces and house to house in this city. We pray the Lord would do something like this in our own town.

Acts 8:9 - ⁹ A man named Simon had previously practiced sorcery in that city and astounded the Samaritan people, while claiming to be somebody great.

Luke uses a fun word when describing Simon here. He says, Simon claimed to be MEGA! He was the original *Mega Man*. What the extent of Simon's powers and practices were, we're not sure. Sorcery can refer to fortune telling, black magic, drug use, all sorts of things. What we know is that sorcery is condemned in both the Old and New Testaments. And, it seems from how he's described, Simon was more than a simple conman or snake oil salesman. He had hung around this area for quite some time and here's what their assessment of Simon was:

Acts 8:10-11 - ¹⁰ They all paid attention to him, from the least of them to the greatest, and they said, "This man is called the Great Power of God!" ¹¹ They were attentive to him because he had astounded them with his sorceries for a long time.

So, Simon let everyone know that he was a great, MEGA man. And he had some sort of satanic power backing him up. He was so effective, he was known as the 'Great Power of God.' But, when the lame limped by him, they stayed lame. Some of his fellow citizens were tormented by the demons he had sold his soul to. The power of God only seemed to benefit Simon and no one else.

⁴ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Valhalla>

Acts 8:12 - ¹² But when they believed Philip, as he preached the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized.

Now we have the dramatic contrast. A table waiting refugee arrives talking not about his *own* greatness, but the greatness of His King. A King they had probably heard about, named Jesus, who once sat down for a talk with a woman at a well. A King who didn't make Himself great by taking advantage of others, but rather took anyone who was willing and made a place for them in His Kingdom. And, while it's true that Philip was performing miracles, Luke is clearly putting the emphasis on the *message* that was being preached, which was *good* news indeed.

Acts 8:13 - ¹³ Then even Simon himself believed. And after he was baptized, he went around constantly with Philip and was astounded as he observed the signs and great miracles that were being performed.

While Luke presents the people as focusing on the *message*, he presents Simon as being obsessed with the *miracles*. And here, he is found, somewhat creepily, following Philip, taking notes, observing like a spectator trying to figure out how the trick is done. Penn and Teller have that show *Fool Us* where other magicians come on and try to perform a trick that they can't figure out. If you play an instrument, you've probably watched someone else play and started watching how they formed chords or how they moved their hands. In that moment you stop really listening and, instead, are more like doing reconnaissance.

But, doesn't it say that Simon believed and was baptized? Well, it's going to become pretty clear that Peter receives a word of knowledge and marks him as an unsaved individual, on his way to hell. So was Simon, who is sometimes referred to as Simon Magus, just a *liar* or what was going on?

The Bible is clear that sometimes the Devil plants counterfeits among God's people in order to try to disrupt God's work from within. Jesus talked about him being an enemy sowing tares among the wheat. We also know that there are people who *think* they're in right standing with God, but are, in fact, lost. Jesus said that, in the end, many will say, "Lord! Lord! We did this and that and worked powerful things in your name!" And He will reply, "I never knew you." In the book of James we're given an important verse:

James 1:22 - be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.

So, whether Simon was just faking it or whether he had even tricked himself, we're not quite sure. We know that the Bible says, "even the demons believe." That certainly doesn't mean they're saved.

Acts 8:14 - ¹⁴ When the apostles who were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had welcomed God's message, they sent Peter and John to them.

One of the sub-themes we've been trying to notice in these studies is how un-strategic the disciples were in this period of time. Philip doesn't send a message to bring in the big guns or anything like that. He's just doing his thing. The apostles hear it through the grapevine. And so they send Peter and John to check it out. They're not going to try to keep Philip from becoming too popular or anything like that. It seemed good to go down and witness this remarkable work, and it's a good thing they did, for the Samaritans' sake.

Acts 8:15-17 - ¹⁵ After they went down there, they prayed for them, so the Samaritans might receive the Holy Spirit. ¹⁶ For He had not yet come down on any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ¹⁷ Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

Couple of issues here. Let's get the easier one out of the way. Was Philip baptizing contrary to what Jesus had said after His resurrection? He told the disciples to baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Is that why there was a problem with the Holy Spirit coming on the Samaritans? There's no reason to think that. In fact, the same phrase "baptized in the name of Jesus" is going to be used in chapter 10 when Peter baptizes Cornelius and in chapter 19 when there are found believers who had only received *John's* baptism. So, no reason to fault Philip here.

So why *hadn't* the Holy Spirit come down on them? Luke doesn't make it altogether clear. The best reason that commentators put forward is that something very new was happening: The Gospel was, for the first time, going outside of Israel and outside of Jewish communities. The Samaritans and Jews did not have dealings with each other. Had there not been an apostolic connection, it's very possible that two, *separate* churches would've developed from the beginning. Not just 2 churches in 2 cities, but a Church divided by race. That was going to be a nagging issue, especially once Paul is on the scene, and so, it seems God waited to send the Holy Spirit until these Jewish apostles came and put their own hands on these previously separate Samaritans, acknowledging that they were one in Christ, that they were one Body, one Church, brothers and sisters together.

I believe there was another benefit to the apostles being there at the time, and it has to do with what follows:

Acts 8:18-19 - ¹⁸ When Simon saw that the Holy Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, ¹⁹ saying, "Give me this power too, so that anyone I lay hands on may receive the Holy Spirit."

Simon had made a profession of faith, but it's clear he had not turned away from his idols of power, selfish ambition and a desire to rule over others. He felt that position and authority in the Church was for sale. And, it's clear that when the Holy Spirit came upon some, it did not come upon him. He didn't see the Holy Spirit as a Person, but as a power to be wielded for personal benefit.

Now, who would the Samaritans have put in charge of the church once Philip moved on? They already thought Simon was a great, spiritual man (he had told him that much himself). I think that, without this apostolic intervention, Simon would've becoming the leader of the church in this city. An unregenerate, power hungry, self-aggrandizing, greedy man. It would've been devastating.

From time to time we hear unseemly stories about influential people "buying" ambassadorships to cushy postings. That doesn't sit well with any of us, nor should it. But it should bother us *much* more when people think they should receive some sort of prominence or priority within God's Church because they made some contribution. That's what Simon was attempting here. Only, he didn't just want position, he wanted to be a gatekeeper between people and God the Holy Spirit. When, all along, Philip and the apostles were preaching the message of grace - of free access to God's wonderful gifts.

A few years ago I was watching the video of a church. It wasn't the Crystal Cathedral. It wasn't some notorious prosperity ministry. But the church and the pastor had been moving more and more into

that style of Christianity that is so popular today, where everything is about hype and image and swagger. Well, at the end of a message about serving God and giving Him your best gifts, the pastor drew everyone's attention to the front of the stage where giving boxes had been set up. And he said, "This is going to be a special, spiritual time...and if you need prayer for what you're asking God to multiply in your heart or if you're sick and you wanna be touched so you can be healed...then you come up and ask them to pray for you after you've given your gift."

That's a lot more like Simon Magus than Simon Peter. God doesn't charge a toll because the price has been paid.

Here's what Peter thought of Simon's idea:

Acts 8:20-23 - ²⁰ But Peter told him, "May your silver be destroyed with you, because you thought the gift of God could be obtained with money! ²¹ You have no part or share in this matter, because your heart is not right before God. ²² Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. ²³ For I see you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity."

Peter demonstrates a word of knowledge here, as God gives him a glimpse inside the heart of Simon. What's most remarkable was that the door of forgiveness was *still* open to this man. A man who wanted to buy the power to stand between God and others. A man who, some historians say, had claimed to be the messiah. A man whose whole life was a tree bearing the evil fruit of jealousy and wickedness. God would forgive *even this* if Simon would truly surrender and repent. Sadly, Simon still wasn't really listening.

Acts 8:24 - ²⁴ "Please pray to the Lord for me," Simon replied, "so that nothing you have said may happen to me."

Peter had just told him that there was no go between. That he was free to pray to God directly and ask Him for forgiveness. But Simon is still bound up by his fleshly mindset. "You pray for me. You undo the hex you just pronounced on me."

And that's where his story ends, as far as the Scripture is concerned. Some early church fathers wrote that he did not repent, but went further into heresy, but we're not totally sure what happened.

What we know is that, in his quest for greatness, he completely missed the work of God and the opportunity to be a meaningful part of it. It's not a strategy. It's not a system. It's not for sale. It's accomplished by having a real relationship with God and being full of His Holy Spirit. That's not reserved for a few elites who go around telling everyone how great they are. Access is given to anyone who has been born again.

The section closes out with Peter and John's trip home:

Acts 8:25 - ²⁵ Then, after they had testified and spoken the message of the Lord, they traveled back to Jerusalem, evangelizing many villages of the Samaritans.

You know what I love about this? The apostles take a page from *Philip's* book and herald the message to the little neighborhoods they come across on their walk home to Jerusalem. They don't try to take over what God was doing in the city. They just *leave* Philip and the Holy Spirit there to do

their thing. All around, as you watch these 3 disciples (Philip, Peter and John), there's no one-upmanship, no jockeying for position, no jealousy and no lust for numeric success. There's just faithful heraldry.

There are a few countries who still have an active heraldry. The UK, Ireland, Canada and South Africa. In the United Kingdom, most heralds are full-time employees of the sovereign and are called "Heralds of Arms in Ordinary."⁵ In the days of chivalry, heralds would often wear clothing decorated with the coat of arms of their master. The practice still continues today in Britain. The website internationalheraldry.com gives some information about the right to wear a coat of arms. They write: "Coats of arms belong to individuals...For any person to have a right to a coat of arms they must either have had it granted to them or be descended in the legitimate male line from a person to whom arms were granted or confirmed in the past. Simply adopting someone else's arms is the height of boorish bad taste - and guaranteed to impress people for the wrong reasons."⁶

Our position in God's Kingdom and ministry should have nothing to do with how great we think we are. It should simply be the duty we've been personally assigned by our Sovereign.

In applying tonight's text we might think in 3 different ways. We're not apostles, but we can put ourselves in the place of Philip. If so, the application is to do the work of an evangelist. Proclaim your King and remember that He loves *all* people, no matter their heritage, ethnicity, or any other differentiator.

A person could put themselves in the place of Simon Magus. Perhaps you're trying to buy your way into spiritual influence. That sort of behavior has no place in God's church. Or, perhaps you've never really turned from some of the idols in your life. Check to be sure that you've been born again and that you haven't simply deceived yourself.

Or, a person might put themselves in the place of the Samaritans. The audience in our text. They at one point, are attentive to Simon. A man who claimed to be great and seemed to have some power. They're also shown giving their attention to Philip and his message of truth. There are a lot of voices out there vying for your attention. Many of them claim to be 'the power of God.' Just remember this: The Lord doesn't swagger and neither did His apostles. Neither did Philip. They didn't withhold access to truth or ministry until you coughed up some money. They didn't parade themselves as being 'great.' They were humble and servant-hearted. They were constantly decreasing so that the Lord could increase. When you're being taught by a podcast or a video or some book or an instagram account or whatever it is, take a look. Is the person speaking presenting themselves to you as a Mega Man? If so, they're Simon Magus, not Simon Peter. Be careful out there.

⁵ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herald>

⁶ <http://www.internationalheraldry.com/faqs.htm>