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theme: Should these people be saved? (Acts 8:4-25)

materials: Bibles, news story, youtube video (link below)

welcome

Who are the worst criminal offenders that you can think of? What justice do they deserve?

Watch this youtube video on the final interview given by Ted Bundy one of the worst serial killers in American history. Watch until the 5:10 mark: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nxEN29iWfcw>

What is the difference between the world's justice, and Christ's justice? Did Ted Bundy deserve to die? Did Ted Bundy deserve to be saved by Jesus? Could you consider him your brother in Christ?

Bring in a news item about your neighbourhood, city, country or world that you can discuss with the cell. Where do you see God in this story? Ask other members of cell to bring in stories to discuss in subsequent weeks.

worship

Where have you seen God this week? Where have you experienced divine community this week? This week, pray for someone or some group of people that you would not normally associate with, maybe people you have been taught to dislike, or fear, or even be disgusted by. Let's pray that we would overcome our biases and truly desire that we can be brothers and sisters in the Lord with these people.

If you are in Canada, check out the "Prayer Cast" called "This Prayer Hour Has 22 Minutes" on Tuesday nights, 11:11 Eastern Time, at www.24-7prayer.ca

word

Read **Acts 8:1-25**

Why were the Christians forced to scatter?

What were the benefits of this scattering?

What was the big deal about the gospel going into Samaria?

How did Philip evangelise in Samaria? Is this how we should be evangelising? How do we evangelise?

Why did the new Samaritan converts not receive the Holy Spirit until the apostles came and laid their hands on them? (*see the Leader's Guide on this vital question.*)

What damage has prejudice done to the witness of the Church, in your knowledge or experience?

How do we work to overcome prejudice in our Churches today?

How can we know if someone is claiming faith in Jesus legitimately, or only to further his or her own agenda, like Simon Magus? What kind of advantages might someone get today by claiming to be a Christian?



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witness

Where is our “Samaria” today? Where does the Holy Spirit want us to take the Gospel? Are there any groups of people that Christians perhaps don’t wish to associate with, but amongst whom the Lord wants to spread his message? Is there any one or any group that would not be accepted inside your cell or Church if they came to the Lord? Answer that question in your cell, then pray about it, and then begin to make plans for how you can speak the Gospel to those people in your neighbourhood or city.

action points

Fearlessly examine your own prejudices this week. These tend to be stuck pretty deep inside of us, and can be awfully hard to shift. But they cannot be allowed to stand in the way of the gospel, and we are not permitted to see fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, or even potential brothers and sisters in Christ, through the lens of our own biases. It isn’t that differences don’t exist (there are poor and there are wealthy in the world, for instance), but that we should be longing for everyone, even our worst enemy to come to know Jesus as Saviour so that we can share eternal fellowship with them.

leader’s guide

After Stephen’s execution, Saul begins ravaging the Church, going door to door and dragging men and women off to jail.

The persecution of the Church, while painful and tragic, was possibly the best possible thing for the spread of its mission. The (primarily Greek speaking) new Christians were forced out of Jerusalem into areas such as Samaria that welcomed the Gospel readily. It would have been a very difficult decision for the Church to start evangelising in Samaria, had it not been for this persecution which practically forced it upon them. Even though Jesus had prophesied / commanded that the apostles be his witnesses in Judea, Samaria, and the whole world, there may very well have been strong resistance to spreading the Gospel there.

Samaria and Israel had been enemies for a thousand years, starting when the monarchy of Israel (and the country itself) broke in half. Ten of the tribes of Israel went North and made Samaria their capital city, and two of the tribes stayed in the South, with Jerusalem as their capital. The South had kings in the line of David, while the Northern Samaritans were ruled by a new line of kings. Samaria was eventually overthrown and many of its inhabitants were deported and replaced by foreigners who intermarried with those who remained. Later, the Samaritans built their own rival Temple on Mount Gerizim, cementing for the Jews to the South that they were impure in both religion and ancestry. After the Temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed, the Jews from the South refused Samaritan assistance to rebuild it. They considered Samaritans to be incredibly “unclean”, filthy, disgusting. Jews simply did not associate with Samaritans, nor did the Samaritans like the Jews of Judea.

So for Philip to begin evangelising in Samaria was a really, really big deal. The Samaritans weren’t really Gentiles; they were lapsed and heretical Jews, “un-chosen by God”, in the minds of Jews in Jerusalem. They had dismissed all of the Hebrew Scripture except the Pentateuch, and yet still did believe in the coming of a deliverer (see Jesus’ interaction with the Samaritan woman in **John 4:25**). This could be one reason that Philip’s message found such a good response: he was bringing what the people had actually been waiting for. His preaching was also accompanied by healings and exorcisms. This shows that these types of signs were not restricted either to the apostles or to the territory of Judea only. The Holy Spirit could work through whom he wanted, wherever he wanted. This suggests, of course, that the Holy Spirit can continue to work today in our



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cities, through us, exactly as he pleases. This does not mean that all evangelism must be accompanied by signs, healings and exorcisms. But it does mean that our evangelism today *can* be accompanied by those things, because that is up to the Holy Spirit, not us. Our part is to preach the word, to proclaim Christ, wherever we are scattered.

Now onto a somewhat tricky question. Why did these Samaritans not receive the Holy Spirit upon believing in Jesus and being baptised? Didn't Peter say in **Acts 2:38-39** that the gift of the Spirit comes to anyone who repents and believes? Doesn't Paul affirm that if someone doesn't have the Spirit of Christ, then they don't belong to Christ? (**Romans 8:9**). And wasn't it the normal Christian experience up to that point that new believers received the baptism of the Holy Spirit along with the baptism of Christ? Why then did this happen in two stages for the Samaritan believers?

Luke doesn't seem to suggest that the Samaritans were not genuine in their belief when they were baptised (aside from Simon Magus, who is singled out), and it seems unlikely that Philip would have baptised them if he thought they were. Some have said that the Samaritans actually did receive the Holy Spirit when they were first baptised, and the later laying on of hands just provoked charismatic manifestations in them. But this doesn't really square with the fact that the Jerusalem Church sent Peter and John specifically to the Samaritans that they might receive the Holy Spirit. They had *only* received the baptism of Christ, which tells us that it was unusual that they had not *also* received the Spirit. Something was amiss, and two apostles were sent to figure it out. And they didn't add to Philip's teaching, as if he had missed something. They simply prayed for the Spirit to fall.

One quick answer here is to remember that the story of Acts is, in fact, a story. It is telling us what happened and why, but it is not necessarily setting everything up as prescriptive. That is, things don't always have to happen today in the exact same way as they are portrayed in Acts. Sometimes weird things happened, and weird things still happen, and we don't always know why.

But there may be something quite profound going on here that we *can* know, and that can speak into our current circumstances with great power. Remembering just how much hatred and disgust existed between the Jews and Samaritans, this new mission into Samaria was both terrifically exciting and terrifically dangerous. The Samaritans believed what Philip said about Jesus, and wanted into the new community. According to Jesus, salvation, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and citizenship in the new kingdom community was available to them. If they repented and believed in Jesus Christ as Lord, they would be accepted by God. But would they be accepted by the Jewish Christians? Or would the old divisions emerge in the new Church? Already the apostles were compelled to deal with a possible division between Hebrew and Hellenistic Jews (**Acts 6:1-7**), and very soon they would be faced with the question of what to do with lots of new Gentile believers. It may have been thought that Hellenistic Jews like Philip would be more likely to accept the Samaritans into the fold than would Hebraic Jews like the apostles. For this reason, both John Stott and I. Howard Marshall suggest that God *withheld* the gift of the Spirit for a time. God wanted the entire Church to welcome these new believers in, to openly and without prejudice share the Holy Spirit of God with them. The two apostles from Jerusalem were required to lay hands on the new believers as a symbol of this unity. The Samaritans would not be separate but equal Christians, not second class Christians, but full members of the one new people of God. Common faith in Jesus Christ was sufficient to overcome even the most ancient of hostilities and prejudices, and God was ensuring that his new community of believers was declaring this with their words and with their actions.

We are simply not permitted to allow worldly distinctions and divisions, which are spiritually irrelevant before the grace and mercy of God, to create distinctions and divisions within the people of God. Race, gender, class, age, old grudges, etc...all of these must be subjected under the feet of Jesus. It is an offence against God to raise any of these worldly issues to a higher place than the gospel. This passage asserts in no uncertain terms that there is no one, and no group of people, who are beyond the gospel. For the Jewish Christians, if the Samaritans could be saved, then anyone could be saved. And we will see as the story of Acts progresses, that anyone and everyone – even Gentiles - *did* start getting saved.