

# THE WOMAN CAUGHT IN ADULTERY

## John 7:53-8:11

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Jesus stood up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more" (Jn. 8:10-11).

Sometimes we encounter a sin so staggering that it is disgusting to reflect upon the human condition. The Bible recounts numerous such examples. I think of Pharaoh and later King Herod ordering the murder of infant boys to protect their insecure thrones. I think of Jezebel and her cold-blooded destruction of innocent Naboth in order to steal his vineyard. But even in that wretched company, I know of few sins so dripping with evil as the one recorded at the end of John chapter seven.

I am not referring to adultery. To be sure, adultery is a very great sin. If I were to name any one sin that is doing the most damage in our society today, it might be adultery. This is why there are few higher callings for Christians today than our calling to sexual purity.

With that said, adultery is more a sin of weakness than of malice. But the sin that dominates our passage was born of pure hatred. A woman would be destroyed for the sake of bringing down Jesus Christ, because his message, however wonderful and true, was inconvenient to the agenda of those who sought to take his life.

### AN EVIL CONSPIRACY

John chapter 7 recounts the failure of the religious leaders to arrest Jesus during the Feast of Tabernacles. The guards they sent to take him returned empty-handed. Unable to apprehend Jesus, the rulers

resorted to a clever and sinister trap to discredit him. It was an evil plan, but it was also a stroke of genius.

Let's consider the evil first. What we know about ancient Jewish legal procedures makes it clear that this was not simply a case of callous opportunism towards a sinful woman, but rather a conspiracy and a set-up. In the time of Christ, Jewish legal procedures were extremely careful and judicious. This was particularly true in the case of any crime punishable by execution.

Adultery was one of those crimes punishable by death. But according to the Law of Moses, it was necessary for the couple to be caught actually engaging in sexual intercourse (Dt. 22:22; Lev. 20). It was not enough to find them in an inappropriate or compromising situation. One expert in Jewish legal procedures states, "The actual physical movements of the couple must have been capable of no other explanation, and the witnesses must have seen exactly the same acts at exactly the same time, in the presence of each other, so that their depositions would be identical in every respect."<sup>1</sup>

In the apocryphal book *Suzanna*, a woman falsely accused of adultery is acquitted because the witnesses cannot agree on what kind of tree the act supposedly took place beneath. You see the level of detail required to obtain a conviction, and how hard it would be to produce such a situation unless it was a set-up. The witnesses would have to be in place in advance, with planning and coordination of the details.

Furthermore, notice that they dragged only the woman forward. They witnessed the act of adultery but did not produce the man. At the least, they let him get away and the man abandoned her to take the fall. At the worst, the man who committed adultery with this woman seduced her for this purpose. This shows a callous attitude about sin and contempt for human life. This is the kind of abuse that has often embittered women to male leadership in the church.

So this is a despicable plot. It gets worse when we consider their attitude to the Word of God. They treated the law as nothing more than a weapon for trapping Jesus: "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now in the Law Moses commanded us

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<sup>1</sup> J. Duncan M. Derrett, *New Testament Studies*, Vol. 10 (1963-64), 4-5.

to stone such women. So what do you say?” (Jn. 8: 4-5). There was no need for this question. As they state, the law was clear on this point, so the question had only one purpose: “This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him” (Jn. 8:6). This is an ignoble purpose for the Word of God, to say the least.

Even further, if they were in a position to witness the act of adultery, they surely were in a position to keep the sin from happening in the first place. If they really wanted to uphold the law, they would have prevented the sin rather than waiting to exploit it. No wonder Jesus later called such people “children of the devil” (Jn. 8:44).

Indeed, when we compare the behavior of these religious leaders with that of Satan, the similarity is remarkable. We are reminded of the scene in Zechariah 3, where the devil played this very role against the high priest Joshua. Zechariah says, “Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right side to accuse him.” In a striking similarity, the Pharisees act out this same dread pageant, with the same devilish motive. It was not a concern for God or for righteousness that moved them, but it was an evil manipulation for their own hateful agenda.

Of course, Satan always wants to inspire this kind of self-righteous malice, which is why the attitude displayed by the evil religious leaders is so common among mankind. It is the attitude that Satan wants to instill in us, and too often he succeeds. If we are quick to condemn these religious leaders, let us remember how many times we have spoken or acted with similar motives. Here is the human condition in sin laid bare, in all its disgusting depravity.

### A SERIOUS DILEMMA

**W**e have to admit, however, that there was also considerable genius at work in this conspiracy. Their intention was to discredit Jesus and this situation was suitably crafted to that end.

Consider the options presented to our Lord. On the one hand, he could urge forgiveness. This would seem consistent with his preaching of grace, but at the expense of setting aside the law. That would greatly discredit Jesus’ ministry and undermine his credibility.

God is holy and burns against sin. Anyone who just brushed aside the demands of his justice would not be credible as a divine messenger.

On the other hand, Jesus could take his stand with Moses, calling for the woman's condemnation. But that would compromise his teaching of grace. John Calvin explains the dilemma: "Their intention was to force Christ to give up his office of preaching grace, so that he might seem fickle and unsteady."<sup>2</sup>

Imagine Jesus saying, "This woman is guilty and must be punished. Let's gather stones and put her to death." If Jesus had said that, what sinner would ever come weeping to his feet? What poor wretch, overcome by temptation, in sorrow for sin, would ever dare come to Jesus for help? Such a person must conclude, "No, Jesus is a condemner of sinners. He will give me up to judgment and punishment." Arthur Pink expresses the problem well:

The problem presented to Christ by His enemies was no mere local one. So far as human reason can perceive it was the profoundest moral problem which ever could or can confront God Himself. That problem was how justice and mercy could be harmonized... How can mercy be exercised when the sword of justice bars her way? How can grace flow forth except by slighting holiness?<sup>3</sup>

## JESUS' DAUNTING PRESENCE

**A**gainst the backdrop of this terrible and cunning conspiracy, Jesus reveals his mastery over every circumstance. His response to this dilemma was as unexpected as it was remarkable:

Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her." And once more he bent down and wrote on the ground (Jn. 8:6-8).

It is impossible to know for sure what Jesus wrote on the ground, or even what he meant by this action. Some commentators say he was listing the sins of the accusers, others that he was writing out his response before speaking it, as Roman judges did when rendering a verdict, still others that he was writing out the law's condemnation

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<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *The Gospel According to St. John*, vol. 1, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989) p.206.

<sup>3</sup> Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 2:13.

against false witnesses, or the words of Jeremiah 17:13: “Oh Lord... Those who turn away from you will be written in the dust.” Those are all reasonable suggestions, but we have to admit that we simply don’t know more than what John tells us.

But there is something we do know, and that is that Jesus’ personal presence deterred these men from their terrible course. The key was his challenge, “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her” (Jn. 8:7). With those words he disarmed the trap and put the accusers to flight. That statement could not be construed as setting aside the law. At the same time, it protected the woman from harm, since none dared take up his challenge. Just as happened when the guards had tried to arrest him, so also here: Jesus’ presence was overwhelming in overthrowing evil.

One thing we can know is that Jesus was not opposing the law, but rather these men who sought to pervert it. The law required that the witnesses be the first to cast the stones (Dt. 17:7), and that those witnesses had to be free from any association with the crime itself. Most importantly, Jesus lifted the discussion from the procedural to the moral level, and there these wicked men could not stand. Jesus always raises the bar from form to substance, from outward show to inward reality, with the effect that every pretense of self-righteousness stands no chance before him. It is always one thing to talk about what you will say to Jesus, but it is quite another to find yourself in his presence. Has your heart really encountered Jesus Christ? If you have, then you know that, simply put, he is the Lord.

In the glaring presence of the Son of God, these wicked men lacked the gall to press on and cast the first stone. Just as the prison guards had drawn back, unable to arrest him, and just as the soldiers would later fall to their faces when they came to seize him in the garden (Jn. 18:6), so too did these men fall back from the Lord. John’s account is understated, “When they heard it, they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him” (Jn. 8:9). James Boice observes:

Obviously, there was something in the gaze of the Lord Jesus Christ, or in the tone of his voice, or simply in the power of his presence that got through to these men, unrepentant as they were, and left them powerless. Think of the efforts they had gone through! Think of the plotting! Yet

they were destroyed in a moment when they were confronted by the God who masters circumstances.<sup>4</sup>

Jesus' response to this situation does not mean that there can never be justice on the human level. This does not mean that no jury can ever condemn a criminal since the jurors are not perfectly sinless. As Calvin states, Christ is not forbidding sinners "to do their duty in correcting the sins of others. But by this word, he only reproveth hypocrites, who gently flatter themselves and their own vices, but are excessively severe and even savage judges of others."<sup>5</sup> We are, however, put in mind of the merciful attitude we as forgiven sinners must show to others who have sinned, even if it is right for them to be punished. As Jesus taught, we must pray, "Forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven our debtors" (Mt. 6:12).

## MERCY AND JUSTICE KISS

**T**here is the greatest contrast between the way Jesus treated this sinful woman and the way the scribes and Pharisees treated her.

It is always sad to find people using God's Word not to proclaim grace for salvation, but to destroy people in pursuit of their own agendas. Even where Christians are bound to denounce evil – we might think of Christian opposition to homosexuality or abortion today – our agenda must always be redemption through grace.

Moreover, Jesus never treats people as tools or mere "things." He cared not just about his reputation or about the situation. Jesus cared about this woman. All through John's Gospel – in Jesus' meeting with Nicodemus by night, with the woman by the well, with the paralytic by the pool – Jesus cares for people one-by-one. He understands not just the type of situation, but the individual. He knows what is going on in our individual lives. He sees behind the pretense and deals with us in grace and truth. He was not naïve about this woman's sin, but that did not make him callous or cold. As Psalm 103:4 says, "He know our frame; he remembers that we are dust."

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<sup>4</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1985), 516.

<sup>5</sup> Calvin, 208.

Second, Jesus showed compassion for her desperate condition. Jesus always looks with compassion on the lost. As Matthew wrote, “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Mt. 9:36). This compassion is born of his great love, a love that neither has nor needs an explanation but is of his own very nature. “God is love,” says 1 John 4:8, and Jesus came to reveal God’s love to the world.

Therefore, Jesus extended forgiveness to the sinful woman. There he was in the sudden quiet of the temple courts, the accusers having fled one-by-one. Standing up before her, Jesus asked, “‘Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?’ She said, ‘No one, Lord.’ And Jesus said, ‘Neither do I condemn you’” (Jn. 8:10-11). What an encouragement for us to stop hiding our sin before God, but to come humbly to Jesus, confessing our sin and seeking the forgiveness he so freely gives and we so greatly need.

It occurs to me that Jesus might have avoided the trap without going out of his way to save this woman. When they asked him to choose between justice and mercy, he might very well have referred them to the Sanhedrin, the body entrusted with such matters. Had Jesus replied, “This is an obvious trap. You are the teachers of the law; you don’t need my help for such a matter,” he would have been safe enough. But to do that would have been to forfeit this woman’s life; it would have been to stand still while an injustice was perpetrated. Even if she was guilty, this was not justice. Jesus’ concern here was not merely for mercy, but also for true justice in God’s sight. In driving away these evil conspirators, he served the cause of both.

I have stated that we cannot know *what* Jesus wrote on the ground. But I think we can know something of *why* Jesus stooped in this way. I believe that Jesus stooped to the ground not to avoid looking at the accusers, but at the accused. He did respect, even love, God’s justice in the law, but he had different plans for fulfilling it than by condemning this woman. Therefore he did not turn to her until the law, with its witnesses, had been driven from the scene. It was only when the demands of the law – represented by these Pharisees – were gone that he turned and said, “Woman, where are your accusers?”

This is the heart of the Christian gospel. Jesus came not to condemn but to save; he says to this woman and to every sinner who comes for

mercy, “Neither do I condemn you.” But in order to speak these words, he must first dismiss the law’s demand for judgment. This was the dilemma with which these men tried to trap him. So we ask, on what basis did Jesus, on behalf of a just and holy God, say the words, “Neither do I condemn you”? It is one thing to intimidate hypocritical legalists, but how does Jesus dismiss the law itself?

The answer is the cross, upon which Jesus would die for the sins of people like this woman. Jesus came into the world to take this woman’s adulterous shame upon his innocent back, to put away her sins and say, “Neither do I condemn you.”

Jesus speaks forgiveness to us not because we are not guilty, and certainly not because God winks at our sin. Jesus is not unconcerned with justice; far from it, it was the work of his life and his death. Jesus can say, “Neither do I condemn you,” because he has driven off the accusers, having exhausted the law’s penalty against the sins he took up for us. It is the cross which solves the dilemma between justice and mercy, to the glory of God in the highest. It is there at Calvary that Psalm 85:10 can be spoken: “Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other” (KJV).

I said before that I know of no sin more evil than the one this passage shows. But of course there is one more evil: when the innocent Prince of Peace was put to death on the cruel cross. That was the darkest sin, the most evil crime, perpetrated by the same men who brought forth this woman. But just as Christ mastered the plot against this woman caught in adultery, so also did he master the crime that was his death. In his grace, he would use this shameful episode to redeem the sinful woman; likewise, the cross became the instrument of our forgiveness, the place where mercy and justice kiss.

#### SIN TAKEN AWAY

I have mentioned the similarity between this episode and that of Zechariah chapter 3. There, Joshua the high priest, representing all of Israel and all of the church, stood in filthy clothes before the Angel of the Lord, who represented the Lord Jesus Christ. At Joshua’s right hand was Satan, accusing him for his sin. What Satan wanted then was to drive a wedge between the holy God and his sinful people, just as he wants to drive you from God by his



accusations against your sins. But the angel rebuked the devil, just as Jesus chased off these accusers. “Now Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes as he stood before the angel. The angel said to those who were standing before him, ‘Take off his filthy clothes.’ Then he said to Joshua, ‘See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put rich garments on you’” (Zech. 3:3-4). This is the great message of the gospel of Jesus Christ, that through faith in him our sins have been taken away and forgiven and the perfect righteousness of Christ is imputed to us through faith. “There is,” Paul writes in Romans 8:1, “now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

Jesus does not stand opposed to the law. He saves us not by despising but fulfilling it – by achieving its demands and exhausting its penalty. In that way he redeems us to a life of fellowship with and obedience to God. The law was once over our heads as a threat, as these Pharisees stood accusing this woman. But now it is under our feet as a guide for godly living. In Zechariah’s vision, the forgiven priest was clothed in white and commissioned to holiness. Jesus also joins forgiveness with a call to new obedience, telling the woman: “Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on sin no more” (Jn. 8:11).

We are forgiven in order that we might become holy. But let us never confuse this order! Jesus does not say, “Leave your life of sin and then I will think about forgiving you.” Were that the case he might just as well condemn us all now. No, he forgives us on the basis of his saving work, which we receive by simple faith. Paul explains, “He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy” (Tit. 3:5). Therefore, if Jesus declares you not condemned, you will not be charged in God’s court. He will send your accuser away by lifting up his nail-pierced hands. Paul asks, “Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died – more than that, who was raised – who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us” (Rom. 8:34).

But not everyone in this encounter went away forgiven. Not everyone today stands uncondemned before God. The religious leaders, so sure of their moral stature because of their outward religion and petty works, departed condemned because they rejected the Son of God and Savior. Does this picture you in reliance on your

works, or your contempt for those in sin and disgrace? If so, then realize that Christ will send you away until you repent and believe; he will leave you to stand before the searching gaze of God in the day of judgment. And there you will not hear from Jesus, “Neither do I condemn you,” but rather, “Whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him” (Jn. 3:36).

Then there was this woman. Perhaps you feel like her. Disgraced by your sin. Wearied by guilt. Fearful of the holy God and his just law. Then look upon Jesus Christ and see your Savior. He died for you, and now he says to all who receive him in humble faith: “Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.” Martin Luther said: “If you have tasted the Law and sin, and if you know the ache of sin, then look here, and see how sweet, in comparison, the grace of God is, the grace which is offered to us in the Gospel.”<sup>6</sup> And seeing that grace, you will not want to sin anymore, but out of gratitude for him who died for you, you will want to live for him.

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<sup>6</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, v. 23, *Sermons on the Gospel of John, Ch. 6-8* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), 318-319.