

“Lawful Judgment”
Pastor John Bronson

John 7:53-8:11

April 29, 2012

Order of worship for 4/29/12, Youth Sunday, (John 7:53-8:11),

Ministry Moment: (?)

Call to worship: 1 John 4:9-21

(Kari: normally the youth select the music for Youth Sunday. You will want to check in with either Ken Butler or Mark Lundberg. They often will also provide the special music.)

Message title: “Lawful Judgment”

Message text: John 7:53-8:11

Sunday Evening in the Word
Psalms of Ascent 132-134
5:30 pm to 7:00 pm in the Music Building
(Sunday May 20th we will begin a study of the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5-7)

“The Prayer Closet”

April 29, 2012

“Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.”
(Colossians 4:2a)

This week let us be united in praying that:

1. **Sheryl Jackson at William Carey Academy, Daka, Bangladesh:** (Contact the Hurts for this)
2. **President Obama:** the Lord will bless him with physical, mental and spiritual good health, protecting his wife and children as well; the Spirit will convict him of the truth and instill a deep desire to secure peace and freedom at home and internationally
3. **Youth Ministry:** the Youth Ministry Staff will remain strong and focused in the transition from the school year to summer; the summer ministries will serve to build the outreach of the Youth Ministry; staff and youth both will cultivate a vibrant spiritual life together
4. **Military or Public Service Personnel of the Week: Matthew Basner, SFC, Army**
(son of Randy and Lou Basner):

Young Adult of the week: Matthew Cook, graduate of International Academy for Design and Technology, Sacramento (son of Joel and Virginia):

For the [message] today the title is “Lawful Judgment” and the scripture passage is John 7:53-8:11. I will begin by simply reading the passage. I suspect that as soon as I do so many will say, “I am familiar with this.” Even if you are not familiar with other parts of John’s Gospel, this is a portion which is often known.

Early in the morning [Jesus] came again to the temple. All the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst they said to him, ‘Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?’ This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him. 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. But 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. 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.’”

Please pray with me: Our Father as we bring ourselves to Your Word, not just our minds, but our hearts, as we open ourselves to the examining and instructing light of Your Spirit through the Word, we pray our Father you will grant to us the gift of understanding [and] the courage to live according to the truth that we receive. We pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

The first thing I want to do is, if you look at your scriptures [you will find that] almost every single translation today indicate that there is a question about this passage. I want to address that, because it is so widely recognized and sometimes we are not sure how to respond to that. I want to address that briefly. This is the question of the status of this portion of John.

What we know from scholarship is that this section, 7:53-8:11 in some of the oldest and most trustworthy manuscripts it doesn’t appear at all. In other of the manuscripts it appears in different places. If you look in the [margin notes of the] English Standard Version it says that one of the [ancient] copies of Luke’s Gospel has this section included. So what are we to do about this? There are some obvious and reasonable questions that arise when we realize that this is the case. We might ask ourselves if this is really inspired or is it just something somebody wrote and stuck in? That then raises a broader and more troubling question regarding the whole issue of the inspiration of the Bible. [What are we to make of parts and pieces that stuck in and struck out?] What are we to think about this?

Virtually no scholars other than those scholars who doubt everything doubt that this section is actually a portion that is taken directly from Jesus’ life. It is authentic by all scholarly research. So the issue is not whether this is a valid part of the witness or testimony regarding Jesus. The question only regards its placement.

Now I want to cast a little light on that question. It is important for us to remember that all ancient writings were, of course, by hand. Consequently you don’t have them running off the press in the hundreds, thousands and hundreds of thousand copies. That is the first thing to remember; they were valued, precious and relatively rare. Further, in the first generation of the church the gospels themselves and the letters were copied as individual writings. In other words they were not assembled in a single great volume. Instead they appeared as you might imagine they were written. There was one here and one there and the churches shared them back and forth in order that they would gain an appreciation of all of the writings that established themselves in the churches as authentic. The churches read them and received them and recognized that the Spirit of God was speaking to them through those portions. Now not only were the different books and letters written separately, but many parts and pieces of the Gospels were written separately. The parables would appear separately; the accounts of the miracles would

appear separately, and people would say, “O, did you see that I recently got a copy of the Good Samaritan!” as a separate writing. When you look at that, you realize that what you want to understand is that when any historian sets about to recapture and to talk about events in the past, particularly if he wants to reach back and obtain a witness from original documents of the time, inevitably you pull the stuff together and you assemble it into a running narrative. That is what historians do. From an historian’s point of view, the remarkable thing about the Bible that we have is the absolutely overwhelming manuscript evidence for the authenticity of all that is written in here. There is no document, no book, nothing that comes remotely close to the amount, the overwhelming amount of manuscript – this is ancient writings – evidence that the Bible as we have it is the way it was written in the first place. The outstanding piece of information about this is the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Dead Sea Scrolls were found and we know that were written about 200 some odd years before Christ. In them there is a full copy of Isaiah. In that copy of Isaiah there are exactly 12 places where there is any degree of variation whatsoever from the copies that we use as the basis of our own translations, and those twelve touch on no basic issue whatsoever. Well, folks, I can tell you flat out that is miraculous; it is simply miraculous that that degree of accuracy, consistency and correctness is found in the scriptures. So it is simply not an issue in the minds of any reasonable person as to whether or not this is accurate. The issue is, you have to be reasonable.

If you were here last week – now we are going to [today’s] text – you know that in His conversation that Jesus is having with the Pharisees, He is dealing with people who are determined not to know. How many are familiar with “The Jesus Seminar”? Those of you are need to meet with me on that because it was a disaster. A group of scholars got together in southern Oregon, Eugene Oregon I believe, and here is what they did. They said to the world, “We are serious scholars. We are serious scholars of the Bible. We are serious about wanting to know what Jesus said.” Now I kid you not, after their thorough examination of all of the evidence and all of the scriptures, they decided that the only authentic record of the words that Jesus spoke was a small portion of the Ten Commandments; all the rest was made up and you can’t believe it. They said that even though, as I just got through saying, there is more evidence for the accuracy and authenticity of the scriptures than any other document in the world all the way up through the seventeenth century. You tell me, do those scholars want to know the truth or not?

The Pharisees: We recognize in this passage that this is not the first woman with whom John presents Jesus in dealing with her. The first woman is the Samaritan woman. I want our minds – this is in chapter 4 – I want our minds to go back there and pick up something I didn’t deal with the first time around. In chapter four we met with the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well outside the village of Sychar. You might recall that Jesus is waiting there alone at the well. The disciples have gone into the town in order to get food. Jesus is resting. She comes out with her water pot in order to draw water out of the well and she encounters Jesus there. Jesus asks her for some water and then draws her into a remarkable conversation. I think we rarely understand how remarkable that conversation was. I want us to grasp this. What He talks with her about is the nature of true worship. He informs her that very soon where you worship will make no difference at all.

Now I want you to imagine that you are a Jew, and you know that it has been a major issue for over a thousand years that the people of God will worship in the right way at the right place. Where were they to worship? [It was to be] at the temple in Jerusalem. They were not supposed to make sacrificing or offering in any other place because God said, “I will meet with you here. Furthermore I will meet with you here on the mercy seat over the Ark of the Covenant. Furthermore I will meet with you here on the mercy seat on the Ark of the Covenant as you have sacrificed on the altars that I have specifically told you to create so you can enter My presence.” So how would a Jew respond when he hears that Jesus says, by the way it won’t make any difference where you worship? You and I don’t get that. We think, “Yeah, well OK.” But that would have been a shock. You need to understand that if you are going to follow the unfolding of what John tells us Jesus does with the Jews.

What is really astounding about this conversation is not just its content. Jesus talks to a woman, not a man. That was absolutely forbidden. Not only does he talk to a woman, but she is not even a Jew. Not only does He talk to a woman who is not a Jew, but when you read the story you know that this woman's life is a disaster. And it is not just a disaster like some of our lives – you know if you went into my office you would think that I was a disaster (background laughter in response to preacher's wife agreeing, to which the preacher responded by suggesting a recess!) – but this woman's life is a disaster because she is a woman of low moral character. She has had four different husbands and the man she is living with now is not her husband. Now how many of you think this would be the obvious choice for talking about the true nature of worship? But Jesus did. Do you remember Isaiah chapter six? Do you remember the opening of Isaiah chapter six? Isaiah lifts up his eyes; he sees that the Lord is enthroned in the temple and he hears the cherubim and they are crying out, “Holy, holy, holy!” He says that the threshold of the temple trembles, and Isaiah, confronted with the awesome majesty of the perfection of the holiness of God, cries out, “I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips.” That Lord now comes and speaks to a woman who was a Samaritan and has low character and has lived an immoral life, and He says, “Let's talk about true worship.”

It is wise for us to remember that the purpose of all of the Gospels, and most particularly of John because he states it, is to give to us a clear picture of who God is. One of the realities that we come to grips with is that as we begin to learn more and more about who God really is, how He is, how He deals with us sinners, the light of truth is cast upon us. To put it in very simple terms, how many of us would have talked with this woman about the true nature of worship? Or how many of us like a Pharisee would have taken the skirts of our righteous robes, stepped away from her dirty presence, distanced ourselves and hoped we could find someone else? That is the nature of scripture and its truth, and that is the reason for the enlightening presence of the Holy Spirit, to reveal to ourselves who we are. Prejudice closes the ears of our hearts to the Spirit and it blinds our eyes to the Word; we cannot understand, like the Pharisees.

That is the Samaritan [woman]. It is good to recap and go back and say to yourself, did I get that message, did I understand that, did that come through to me. Spirit of God did you lay that truth on my heart and is that truth now reorganizing the way I live?

But I want us to go now to this chapter, chapter 8 of John's Gospel. Here we see Jesus with another woman. When you read through [this section] in all honesty this woman almost [seems] incidental. You get the picture really quick that the drama here is not between Jesus and the woman; it is between Jesus and these Pharisees. You pick that up as you go through and you read that section. Jesus is teaching in one of the temple courts. [It is] early morning. In the days before clocks, and [with] almost no artificial lighting people, lived according to the sun. How many of you saw the sunrise? See, you're a bunch of lazy Americans! That's because you all stayed up last night long after the sun set! How many of you went to bed after the sun set? Don't even tell me, I don't want to know! The rhythm of life is very different in these kinds of cultures. They depended on animals. How many of you raise animals that you have to feed every morning? That is the nice thing about cats, you don't have to feed them sometimes. What I am trying to say is that just because it is early in the morning doesn't mean there is nobody there. It is not that this is a small and very limited gathering. There were probably quite a few people up and about in the morning, out and doing the things they do.

Jesus, we are told, is teaching and a group of scribes and Pharisees, the people who say to themselves, “We are the masters of the law,” bring in this woman. They interrupt His teaching. Jesus doesn't accuse these men of a set up but it has the flavor of that doesn't it? How amazing that they found this woman in the act of adultery and then they are able to drag her in there and present her in front of Jesus. I wonder why the man wasn't brought in as well. Jesus raises no questions either of the absence of the man or anything else. He listens to the accusation. Then we are told He bends down and He writes something in the dust. To me this is compelling. Here is the Lord Jesus Christ,

Son of God incarnate; He squats down to the ground. He had to do that because He had to be low enough to get His hand down in the dust and He is writes something. He doesn't say anything. You can imagine there is a huge amount [of curiosity regarding what He wrote.] What did He write in the dust? We are never told. It is not indicated whether the scribes or the woman or anyone else saw what He wrote. But there is a possibility that makes good sense, and that is that He wrote Deuteronomy 22:23-24. You might want to turn there. Deuteronomy is the fifth book in the Bible, after Genesis: Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. You need to know that Jesus cited the book of Deuteronomy more than any other Old Testament book. It is a certainty, quite aside from the fact that He is the Son of God and knows the entirety of the Word, that He would have known and He prized this book. This is what it says in Deuteronomy 22:23-24, *“If there is a betrothed virgin, and a man meets here in the city and lies with her, then you shall bring them both out to the gate of that city, and you shall stone them to death with stones, the young woman because she did not cry for help though she was in the city, and the man because he violated his neighbor's wife. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.”* There are some things you want to know because it is helpful to know [them], and this is probably the most helpful thing to know. This is the only occasion, the only time in which stoning is prescribed in the Law for adultery. Deuteronomy was the summary and the heart of the law, of the Torah. You can be absolutely certain that those scribes and Pharisees knew exactly what was written in Deuteronomy. You and I might be a bit uncomfortable with this, thinking this is a bit extreme. [But] in those villages in ancient days you were virtually never alone. There were no windows that had glass. Many of the “doors” were only curtains hanging. So if a person was assaulted within a village or city, and they cried out, they had every reason to expect someone would come running, unless, of course, the meeting, in this case between the man and the woman, was by design. That is why this kind of punishment is laid out on them.

But what you and I need to ask is, “Where is the man?” Notice again what it says: “you will stone the woman and the man.” But he is not present.

John [does] indicate that this event was set up by the Pharisees in order to put Jesus in a trap. What was the trap? The trap was very simple. Roman law reserved the right of capital punishment to Rome. But Biblical Law says that in certain events capital punishment needs to be exercised by those who were the accusers. The question is, what the Pharisees are actually saying to Jesus is, “OK Jesus, are You going to stand behind Roman Law or are you going to stand behind Biblical Law? If You honor one you dishonor the other.” So they were persuaded that they had Him trapped and He would lose His standing [in the eyes of the people]. I think it is exceedingly important for us to understand that Jesus decides to defy Roman Law. He endorses the death penalty. Jesus says, “Stone her.” So now Jesus has passed judgment in support of the Law of God. But of course He does not Himself execute that law. He expects those who brought the accusation and have all the evidence they need to assure everyone that in fact it is accurate: He says, go ahead, execute the Law.

He gives a stipulation, and how well we all know this stipulation. What He says is, the one who throws the stone first must be sinless. Now that is not a specification in the Law. On the other hand, every single person present knew full well that all men are sinners, so that is not the point either. Often times we look at this as if Jesus was try to get the Pharisees to realize that none of them were perfect. They knew that they were not perfect. That is not the issue. They understood the universal sinfulness of mankind. What, therefore, is the purpose [Jesus is pursuing]? The weight of Jesus' challenge does not lie with the general fact of human sinfulness but with the guilt of those men in using, or rather misusing the law in their attempt to destroy Jesus. Jesus is looking at them and He is saying, “You are using the Law for unjust ends.” The object in this case is not the woman. The object is not the honor of God's Name. The object is not to uphold the standards of righteousness and truth. The object is to destroy someone you don't like. That is made clear because they did not even follow the Law. There was no man. I hope you understand now why that is so significant. They did not follow the prescription of the Law itself though they claimed to be the upholders of the Law. They twist and use the Law according to their desire and preference, not according to the Law's own command. They are not submissive to the Law.

Obviously, as Jesus stands there waiting in silence, not a single man is able to remain. So we might recall once again in John 3:20, *“Everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed.”* The light of God’s truth is shining in the Lord Jesus Christ as He stands there in the midst of those wicked men and they cannot endure, and they run.

That, however, is not the end of the story. Far too often we assume that it is. This is how the episode ends. Jesus is alone with the woman. *“Jesus stood up and said to her, ‘Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?’ And Jesus said, ‘Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.’* Watch what Jesus does because this is the way God deals with us. He affirms the fact that all of her accusers have left. Realize, of course, that during this process He is silent. What I want you to do is get inside the head of the woman. From her point of view, she has heard Jesus say, “Stone her.” And He has not changed His words. He is standing there silent. What’s going through her mind? When she was brought there having been caught, she knew if she knew anything her situation was hopeless. And Jesus by affirming the Law has confirmed that horrible judgment. What did she think as she watched one man after another, after another, after another? With what agony of disbelief, with what agony of hope, and now every man is gone except the one who said “Stone her.” I believe that if you do not get inside of that experience you cannot begin to understand what it must have meant to that woman when He said, “And neither do I condemn you.” I think she must have staggered; it must have been like a body blow! Because she knew she was dead! Freedom! Release! Joy!

But all of that gladness would be compromised. It is easy for us to become trapped inside the narrative and forget the larger reality of her life. She has been caught in adultery. I imagine that all that she wanted to do was to escape, to be gone from that place, to run, to have all of its association, all of its shame, all of its burden, all of its terror removed from her mind so that she could run free and be disentangled from all the entanglement that her own behavior has brought upon her. Though she may not be stoned she has fallen under the condemnation of the Law. And what would she say as she walked into the presence of her family? This is not a parable; this is an event. It is essential for us to recognize that she is not innocent even though she is not condemned. That is what pulls us to the last words of this event. What Jesus says is, don’t ever do that again!

We are not told what happened to this woman after this. She had been defiled. But we can scarcely, I can scarcely, imagine that our compassionate God would bring her so close to Jesus and leave her enslaved. The apostle John later would write in I John 4:16-18, *“So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love.”* This is what I think. Only Jesus can remove the rightful condemnation for sin. Jesus says, I do not condemn you. When Jesus says I do not condemn you, that condemnation has been removed. You at that moment are embraced by the love of God. The love of God is drawing you to Himself, and He wants you to know that you are free from that condemning judgment. When we accept the embrace of God’s love, regardless of the sin – recognize that the sin of adultery by a virgin engaged is about as bad a sin as you can imagine – but when God’s love embraces us with the words, “I do not condemn you,” then we should let that love wash away the fear that can so easily grip, hold, distort, twist, and bind us, [so] that our souls rise in the sunlight of His accepting love. We recognize that the intention of God, by removing condemnation and pouring out His love, is to give us the inner strength to say no to sin the next time round. May the Word of God accomplish His gracious purpose in the lives of all of us.

Let us pray: heavenly Father, this is a deeply sobering passage. I am sure there are none here who but once having allowed themselves to let these words come alive would not be moved with compassion for this woman, and by

analogy for any of us who find that we have fallen into sin. How we prize Your forgiving love. How our hearts yearn to hear those words, “There is now therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” O precious indeed. So may we by Your grace receive these gifts of love. May our hearts become free from the fear that can bind us. And may we therefore receive the strength of Your indwelling Spirit and stand against sin in all of its seductive forms. We pray this, our Father, giving thanks in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Questions for Understanding and Application:

1. Islam claims the Quoran was dictated verbatim to Mohammed as he sat alone in a cave in the desert. The Bible claims to be fully inspired by God working through at least 40 different authors over 1500 years in numerous different cultural settings. What do you see as the advantages or the weakness of each as regards confirming their claims?
2. Based on what we read of her in John 4, what would you guess would be the Samaritan woman’s major issues and difficulties in life? What would be the hurdles she might encounter if seeking to become active in our church? How might we best help her?
3. What do we know of the woman caught in adultery? (See John 8:1-11)
4. According to Deuteronomy 22:23-24, who was to be stoned for adultery? Knowing this is the only time the Law commands stoning for adultery, what is odd about the scene in John 8?
5. In His response to the Pharisees’ challenge, which system of Law does Jesus support, the Mosaic or the Roman?
6. Why do you think every man amongst the woman’s accusers finally faded away without casting a stone, knowing that the Jews knew all men are sinners in any case?
7. How do you think the woman felt when she heard Jesus tell the men to stone her?
8. What do you think went through her mind as she waited for the first stone to be thrown and the men gradually walked away?
9. Which of the final two statements by Jesus do you think sounded most loudly in the woman’s ears, “neither do I condemn you” or “go and sin no more”?
10. Why are forgiveness and love more effective than pain and fear in helping people to resist sin?