

JOHN – THE SCRIBES AND THE WOMAN

Introduction

Until this point the Gospel has been about reasons for faith in Christ and how people responded to him. When we examine this story closely we find it is about the same matter, though it appears very different.

We can all relate to it because the actions of the Scribes and Pharisees were based on a common assumption – ‘GOD ACCEPTS GOOD PEOPLE; HE REJECTS BAD PEOPLE’. It sounds right, but it ignores the most important matter of all – God’s mercy to perishing sinners through his Son Jesus Christ. The assumption is false.

Christians are often critical of the Scribes and Pharisees, but we should remember the widespread suffering when the exclusivity of marriage is not honoured. It is not surprising that people were concerned to protect society through God’s Law, though the reason for their action turned out to be different.

They brought the woman to Jesus, reminded him that the Mosaic Law called for stoning, and asked if he supported that? What was the issue?

In their eyes the issue was – WILL HE MAINTAIN THE STANDARDS OF GOD’S LAW AND REJECT HER?’ or WILL HE LOWER THE STANDARDS OF GOD’S LAW AND ACCEPT HER?

We can imagine the crowd agreeing with them. It seemed a simple choice. They might even add, ‘It’s obvious – it’s in the Bible’.

But we should ask the question, ‘IS IT AS SIMPLE AS IT SEEMS, OR IS THERE A THIRD OPTION?’

The issue – in their eyes

They were suspicious that Jesus was not maintaining the standards of God’s Law.

He spoke about the love of God, and loving one’s enemies. If we relate to God only on the basis of law that kind of talk seems strange. He even spoke about prostitutes and tax-collectors entering the Kingdom of God.

He accepted people the Scribes and Pharisees would not go near in case they were contaminated or people might think they were like them.

Jesus puzzled them because he seemed to keep the standards of the Law yet he also accepted ‘sinners’ – a seemingly impossible combination. No one could fault him and he showed positive holiness in his practical love for God and man. But they complained, ‘This man receives sinners and eats with them’. That is why he told the parables of the lost coin, lost sheep, and prodigal son, but they still did not see how he could combine the two things.

So they put him on the spot with the woman caught in adultery. Will he accept her (and lower the standards) or will he reject her (and give up the notion of God’s love)? They did not see the third possibility.

At first Jesus ignored them. Then he ignored their question. He was not obliged to answer argumentative people. The matter had already been settled by the Mosaic Law. And it was not his role to judge – ‘The Son of Man has not come to destroy men’s lives but to save them’ (Luke 9:56); ‘God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved’ (John 3:17). His time to judge will come later.

So he addressed the accusers in a manner that led them to depart, then said to the woman, ‘Has no one condemned you? Neither do I. go and sin no more.’

What does this tell us about Jesus? He maintains the standards of the Law but he also receives sinners.

His refusal to condemn her was his way of showing acceptance. At the same time he disapproved of her sin and told her to repent ('sin no more'). In due time he would go to the cross to pay the Law's penalty for sins like hers.

God's Word call us to repent and live well – the Scribes and Pharisees were right up to a point. But 'repentance' implies we were not good before, and Jesus receives people while they are still bad, something the Scribes would not do. An example of this is Zacchaeus. Jesus accepted him while he was still a 'sinner'; it was after that he repented. The Scribes put the cart before the horse.

The incident also tell us about Jesus' attitude to sin and to God's Law. He maintained the Law by his call to repent, but his acceptance of the sinner points us to something else. His crucifixion was the only way he could do both. There he paid in full the Law's penalty for sin; and he did it so sinners would be accepted and transformed.

That is the third option, and the Scribes did not see it. GOD MAINTAINS THE STANDARDS OF HIS LAW; HE ALSO ACCEPTS SINNERS; AND HE DOES BOTH BECAUSE JESUS FULFILLED THE LAW FOR THEM.

Is that not the kind of God we want? We would not trust a God who did not keep his own standards. And we would not come to a God who did not accept sinners. But in the cross we find the very God we can love, trust and serve.

The real issue

The Scribes had thought the issue was, WILL HE MAINTAIN THE STANDARDS OF GOD'S LAW AND REJECT HER? Or WILL HE LOWER THE STANDARDS OF GOD'S LAW AND ACCEPT HER? It was not. So what was the real issue?

The real issue was, DO YOU ACKNOWLEDGE JESUS AS THE SAVIOUR OF THE WORLD?

The Scribes assumed that God accepts good people but rejects bad people. They also assumed they were good people and that God accepted them for that reason. Because the woman had done something bad they assumed God rejected her. That is why they challenged Jesus – if he accepted her he could not be on God's side, they thought.

Jesus' response was, 'He who is without sin among you let him throne a stone at her first'. Under the Mosaic Law it was the witnesses who had the duty of stoning the guilty person. Jesus did not mention any sin in particular – just sin. And the Spirit does not tell us what sins lay on their conscience.

But some were obvious. One was hypocrisy. The entire performance was designed to show their love for God and his Law. Instead it showed they did not love God and were breaking his Law.

They had no love for the woman whom they humiliated and used as a pawn.

They had no love for God for they were motivated by malice against Jesus his Son. The reason they brought the woman to Jesus was to destroy his reputation and his following.

They needed forgiveness and a Saviour as much as she did, but they refused to acknowledge Jesus as Saviour of the world so they went back into the darkness from which they had come. By contrast the woman remained in the light of Jesus' presence and words. They had not learned that 'there is no difference, for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God' (Romans 3:23). When we find ourselves on the same level as others our attitude changes.

What was the Scribes' problem? One problem was their self-image as righteous people. When conscience spoke they hardened their heart. The other problem was lack of love. They neither loved God nor their fellow human.

When someone acknowledges Jesus as the Saviour of the world all that changes. It implies that we are no longer self-righteous. It also kindles in us a love for God and our neighbour. Jesus' parable of the unmerciful servant (Matthew 18) shows how people recognise that when we have received mercy we ought to show mercy.

If the Scribes had been convicted of sin and found forgiveness they would have acted in love not in malice. Above all, they would have appreciated Jesus as Saviour of the world and longed for others to share his forgiveness.

Conclusion

All who profess the name of Christ are saying they are sinners who depend entirely on Christ for salvation. Most are also saying God has forgiven their sin for Christ's sake. The way they deal with other people is governed by that.

One lesson from this story is that the person and the sin are not the same. The world often accepts the sin but rejects the person (Titus 3:3). Christ and his church reject the sin but accept the person. More than accept – welcome, search for, bring home.

What the Scribes complained about is in fact high commendation for Christ (and for his church) – 'This man receives sinners and eats with them'. It is only after he receives them that he enables them to repent through the help of his Spirit.

There are two things that puzzle Christians. One is when the church (like the Scribes) shows no love for perishing sinners but rejects them instead. Do we scrutinise the newcomer to see if he is 'the right kind' of person? If so, we are out of fellowship with Christ.

The other is when the church accepts the sin as well as the sinner by not calling them to repent. God welcomes the sinner home but he cleanses them after they arrive.

When Jesus commissioned his apostles he told them to preach the gospel to every creature, and to instruct the converts to 'observe all things I have commanded you' (Mark 16:15; Matthew 28:20).

And that should encourage anyone convicted of sin. Jesus Christ welcomes you! He welcomes you the way you are. So come to him now. He will forgive; he will also make you a better person over time.

All who profess Christ's name – it is your privilege to welcome sinners – as they are – and lead them to the One who saved you and who makes the filthy clean.