

The Hypocrisy of Self-Righteousness
John 8:1-11

Introduction

Hypocrisy is when you pretend to be what you are not in reality. The word “hypocrite” means “two-faced” and comes from the Greek theater where the actors would use different face masks to play different characters. Even in ancient Rome the hypocrite was despised. Cicero wrote, *“Of all villainy, there is none more base than that of the hypocrite, who, at the moment he is false, takes care to appear most virtuous.”* Hypocrisy comes in many varieties, but the worst kind is self-righteous hypocrisy. What is even more tragic about this kind of hypocrisy is that the practitioner is often not even aware of it.

Self-righteousness can sometimes display itself in almost humorous ways such as in the following story. A pastor and his assistant were practicing for a service. In order to make his point dramatic, the preacher fell to his knees, beat his breast and said, *“I am nothing. I am nothing!”* The associate was so moved by this that he too fell to his knees and cried, *“I am nothing. I am nothing!”* The janitor heard and saw this and was so moved by it that he too fell to his knees and cried, *“I am nothing. I am nothing!”* When the minister heard the janitor, he turned to his associate and said, *“So look who has the gall to think he is nothing.”*

The obviousness of this makes it humorous, but the reality is that such hypocrisy is, as John R. W. Stott described it (*Sermon on the Mount*), a *cancerous killing agent*. He went on to say, *“Unfortunately, hypocrisy is also addictive. And even though Jesus reserved His most severe words of condemnation for the hypocrite, we still seem to prefer that lifestyle to truth and authenticity.”*

This morning’s text gives a clear example of the self-righteous hypocrisy of the Jewish religious leaders as they try to entrap Jesus. He not only avoids their trap, but He also exposes their hypocrisy, though in a relatively gentle manner. Turn to John 8:1-11. Let us take warning from this passage the danger of falling into the hypocrisy of self-righteousness and also learn how to be gracious in dealing with both hypocrites and those entrapped in sin.

Before we can begin our study of the text, let me briefly address a textual problem. Many you have Bibles that mark John 7:53- 8:11 in some way indicating that it may or may not belong here. There is a lot of discussion in some of the commentaries about this issue while others ignore it and the text. I don’t care to get into a long technical discussion about this here, other than to say there is strong evidence both for and against including this text as part of John’s original gospel account. What I found interesting is that even among those who argue that the story is does not belong in John’s gospel text, there is general agreement that this is a genuine story of an incident in the life of Christ. Papias, a disciple of John, makes reference to a story of a woman accused of many sins before the Lord which may explain its addition into later copies of John’s gospel account.

I am going to treat the passage as belonging here because I would rather error on the side of including it than excluding it and even more so since the evidence backs it up as a genuine incident in the life of Christ. The passage fits in with the flow of John’s presentation here and it teaches a valuable lesson on how to deal with people.

The Context - John 7 & 8:1-2

This incidence appears to have taken place at the conclusion of the Feast of Booths. Recall from our previous studies that Jesus had come down from Galilee to Jerusalem sometime during the middle of the feast. He came without drawing attention to Himself, but after He arrived He continued His normal practice of teaching the people. While He was teaching, some of the Jews that are hostile to Him made disparaging remarks which in turn led to Jesus challenging them about their plot to kill Him. By the time

the debate is over, there is a mixture of beliefs about Jesus among the people. Some think He is the promised prophet of Deuteronomy 18 who would be like Moses. Some think He is the promised Messiah. Others claim Jesus cannot be the Messiah and is a deceiver of some kind, and most of the religious leaders have rejected Jesus and have joined in plotting to kill Him.

The end of John 7 records that the Pharisees were so upset that they were belittling everyone that disagreed with them and making false outrageous claims. They who claimed to be the keepers of the Mosaic Law and teacher of God's word were breaking it and continued to do so even when Nicodemus, who was a Pharisee, specifically pointed out their infraction.

John 7:53 concludes with everyone returning to their own homes. John 8:1 states that "*Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.*" This is a favorite place for Jesus to go and it is also a logical place for pilgrims to be stay. The restrictions placed on travel during a Sabbath made the Mount of Olives, which was just opposite the Kidron Valley from the temple, a good place to camp.

Verse 2 begins, "*Early in the morning He came again into the Temple.*" The word here (ο[ρθρο] / orthros) actually indicates the dawning or "daybreak." If the previous day, which was the "great day of the feast" (7:37), was the seventh day of the feast, this would be the eighth day which was a prescribed Sabbath day that followed the Feast of Booths (Numbers 29:35). There are a large number of pilgrims still in Jerusalem as well as the native inhabitants. Verse 2 continues, "*and all the people were coming to Him; and He sat down and began to teach them.*"

Jesus continued His ministry of teaching people about God and the Scriptures. This was the ministry He began several years earlier and had continued ever since (Matthew 4:23f). As the morning progresses more and more people are coming to the temple and are joining in the crowd listening to Jesus teach.

Just as on previous occasions, the religious leaders are not happy when someone else is getting the attention they want. They are a jealous lot and they do not like Jesus. However, they have rapidly developing problem. As Jesus gains respect and popularity by His teaching, they will have a harder time arresting Him without arousing the anger of the people. They have to find a way to discredit Him. They have already tried the direct approach by disparaging Jesus and mocking Him for not having the right credentials to teach (7:15). They had tried arresting Jesus the day before (7:32), but that did not work either for the officers refused to do so for they were so impressed by Jesus' teaching, commenting, "*Never has a man spoken the way this man speaks*" (7:46). They will now attempt to discredit Jesus through a test case designed to trap him so that they could accuse Him.

The Test - John 8:3-6

John 8:3, *And the scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery, and having set her in the midst, 4 they said to Him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in adultery, in the very act. 5 "Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women; what then do You say?" 6 And they were saying this, testing Him, in order that they might have grounds for accusing Him*

It is interesting to note here that the scribes have joined in with the Pharisees in this plot. The scribes were the religious lawyers, and since Judea was a religious society, they were very powerful. Theologically, the scribes tended to be Sadducees. The Sadducees were the liberals of the day who denied the miraculous along with Angels and Demons. They approached life from a rationalistic perspective. Usually the scribes and Pharisees were in opposition to one another, but here they join forces because Jesus has become a common enemy to both.

Judea was under Roman rule and Roman law as the final authority in the nation with a Roman governor (or procurator) present to enforce it. Yet, the Roman government gave the nations and local governments under them quite a bit of control over the daily affairs of society. The Sanhedrin was the ruling council of the Israel. It was made up of seventy elders, most of whom were either scribes or Pharisees. Both needed to cooperate for this test because it should have been brought to the Sanhedrin. They had counseled together to set the case before Jesus first as a means to entrap Him.

The scribes and Pharisees bring a woman before Jesus and then take on the role of prosecutors. Their design is to discredit Jesus in front of the people, but there is the risk of it backfiring for it places Jesus in the role of judge, an acknowledgment of Jesus' importance as a teacher. The fact that they are risking this shows their self-confidence in finding a ground of accusation against Jesus that would severely damage His reputation and enable them to persecute Him and perhaps even bring Him to trial.

The case appeared to be straight forward. They publically accuse the woman of adultery claiming to have caught her in the very act. They then cite the relevant part of the Mosaic law. Leviticus 20:10 states, *"If there is a man who commits adultery with another man's wife, one who commits adultery with his friend's wife, the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death."* It does not matter whether this woman was married or not, though the specific accusation indicates she was married, for the sin and penalty were the same. The usual method of execution for adultery was stoning which was also the prescribed method for fornication (Deuteronomy 22:21).

Their purpose in bringing this matter before Jesus is clearly stated in verse 6. They were testing Jesus so that they might have grounds for accusing Him. They were looking for a way to bring an official charge against Jesus so that He could be condemned by the Sanhedrin. They were familiar enough with Jesus' teaching to know both His compassion and how He would forgive people their sins (Luke 5:20; 7:48). They expected that Jesus would end up being in opposition to the very clear and direct command of Moses. This would be their charge against Him. It has been pointed out by some that the common people were not very favorable to stoning for adultery, but what sinner is in favor of a punishment they may suffer? Perhaps that thought was in the back of their minds as sort of a "win - win" situation. If Jesus advised she not be stoned they would charge Him with opposing the law of Moses, and if He advised stoning her, then Jesus would lose some popularity with the crowds. However, the text is clear that their effort was to find grounds for accusing Him.

This may be the reason they did not bring the man with them. Note again in verse 4 that the woman was caught in the very act of adultery. That means the man was also present. Some have suggested that he ran away and they were only able to catch the woman. I find that idea to be a bit of a stretch since there is an emphasis that they were caught in the very act of adultery. The hypocrisy of these Scribes and Pharisees is demonstrated in the fact that the man is not present, yet they are prosecuting the woman. Even if the man had run away, what was to prevent them from finding him and then charging him too? But this is in keeping with their hypocritical character. They are not interested in carrying out the Mosaic Law themselves. Their interest is only in trying to entrap Jesus and they do not need the man to do that. In addition, perhaps they thought that Jesus would have more compassion on a woman than a man and thus more likely to end up opposing the Mosaic law. Simon the Pharisee was present when Jesus had on a former occasion forgiven a prostitute (Luke 7:39-50).

The Solution - John 8:6-11

Jesus' response is not one they could have anticipated. The end of verse 6 states, *"But Jesus stooped down, and with His finger wrote on the ground."* There is no indication as to what Jesus was writing, who He was writing to or why He was writing. Basically, Jesus ignores them and their demand for a judgment. His silence toward them was probably deafening. Imagine being in a court room after the case is presented and the judge suddenly becomes silent and seems preoccupied in writing something. It is possible, if not probable, that Jesus was writing something directed to them, but verse 7 indicates that they were not paying attention to it if He was. They wanted an answer to their question.

7 But when they persisted in asking Him, He straightened up, and said to them, "He who is without sin among you, let him [be the] first to throw a stone at her." 8 And again He stooped down, and wrote on the ground."

Jesus is busy writing something on the ground with His finger and you can almost hear the desperation rising in their voices as they persist in asking what should be done to the woman. It would

have been a demand for attention from someone who was seemingly ignoring them. Keep in mind that it is the superior that can ignore the inferior and not the other way around. Jesus will answer in His own timing and not theirs.

When Jesus does answer, it is in a way that again demonstrates His superiority to them. In courtesy and majesty He stands up from being stooped over and writing on the ground and addresses them, and then He goes back to writing on the ground. He gives His decision and then returns to what He had been doing before. Jesus' charge to them was shocking. *"He who is without sin among you, let him [be the] first to throw a stone at her."*

They never expected such an answer from Jesus. It gave them nothing with which to accuse Jesus as being against the Mosaic Law and it put the responsibility right back on their shoulders with a condition that none of them could meet. That Jesus told them to carry out the requirement of the law should not have been surprising. Deuteronomy 17:6-7 clearly states how capital punishment was to be carried out. *"On the evidence of two witnesses or three witnesses, he who is to die shall be put to death; he shall not be put to death on the evidence of one witness."*⁷ *"The hand of the witnesses shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people. So you shall purge the evil from your midst."*

Executions under the Mosaic Law were not affairs removed from the public to some hidden place and carried out by a government official using some quick means of death. Executions were carried out in public by the public starting with those who witnessed the crime, and stoning was a dreadful way to die. Since these scribes and Pharisees were accusing the woman and claimed to have caught her in the act. They were both the prosecutors and witnesses, so it was their responsibility to start the execution process. Her blood would be on their hands. I don't know if that in itself would have bothered them so much. They certainly had the blood of many others on their hands and they were trying to find a way to kill Jesus. What bothered them was the condition Jesus placed on them. The execution was to begin by whoever was without sin among the accusers casting the first stone. They could not meet that condition and they knew it.

Jesus returned to writing in the dirt with His finger. Again, there is no indication what He was writing. Perhaps it was a list of various sins they had done. Perhaps it was aspects of the Mosaic Law they had broken. Perhaps it was doodling or figures of some sort. We do not know what Jesus wrote, but we do know the immediate effect of what Jesus said and was doing had on the scribes and Pharisees.

John 8:9, *"And when they heard it, they [began] to go out one by one, beginning with the older ones, and He was left alone, and the woman, where she was, in the midst."*

Some have suggested that the reason that they left one by one starting with the oldest was that the oldest was the most aware of their own sins. Perhaps that is possible, but I don't think that is what is happening because I have found that older people who continue in sin become more hardened in it. These men demonstrated both before and after this event that they were very hardened in their own sin. I am not even sure that these men are leaving because they are convicted of their own sin, but more that they realize that Jesus has escaped their trap and that if they push any farther on this it is going to go from bad to worse for them. Jesus had already publically accused them of plotting to kill Him and many of the Jerusalemites were aware of this plot (7:19, 25). They did not personally meet the criteria and if they stayed around any longer they risked this accusation being brought up again by a man to whom they had just given tacit approval as someone whose judgment was worth seeking. The charge of adultery is serious, but not nearly so as a charge of plotting a murder.

I think their manner of departure has more to do with the older ones recognizing the defeat first and the decorum of the younger showing respect for those who are older. In fact, the term "older" here is "elder" (presbuvteroV / presbuteros) and could even refer to those who were part of the Sanhedrin. The younger let their superiors leave first as a sign of respect.

The Application - John 8:10-11

A point generally overlooked in this is Jesus' manner of dealing with these opponents in a gracious manner. While Jesus does not give any deference to the scribes and Pharisees, He is still generally courteous to them. Jesus quickly took the superior position in this incident, yet He did not use it to strike out against His opponents. Jesus' statement is confrontational, but He could have been very direct in exposing their hypocrisy by bringing specific charges against them for the various aspects of the Mosaic law they were breaking, chief among them the plot to kill Him. Yet, Jesus is gracious and gives them room to retreat.

Our human desire for vengeance would have driven most of us to take advantage of the situation to humiliate our opponents. Jesus gives grace. Be honest, if it had been you, would you have enjoyed the opportunity of damaging your adversary? Jesus gave grace. It is a point for each of us to consider and follow Jesus' example.

Psalms 145:8 declares, *"The Lord is gracious and merciful; Slow to anger and great in lovingkindness."* This is the character of Jesus. It is also to be a character each of us is called to emulate. Consider the following Scriptures: Proverbs 16:32, *"He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, And he who rules his spirit, than he who captures a city."* Proverbs 14:29, *"He who is slow to anger has great understanding, But he who is quick-tempered exalts folly."* Proverbs 15:1, *"A gentle answer turns away wrath, But a harsh word stirs up anger."* 2 Timothy 2:24-26, *"²⁴ And the Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, ²⁵ with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, ²⁶ and they may come to their senses [and escape] from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will."*

We do not win people to the Lord by debate and backing our opponents into a corner. We win them through being examples of Jesus Christ. If you are having a discussion with someone, do not back away from the truth for Jesus did not, yet do not to seek to destroy your opponent either, for that is also Jesus' example. Give them some room to retreat with some dignity. They may not take it, as we will see in future studies in John's gospel, but you can at least make an escape route available if they will take it. This works with your children too. Certainly you are to be clear and direct in teaching them right from wrong, but when they have done something wrong there is no benefit in berating them. Give them some room to retreat with some dignity still left. If Jesus could do that with these hypocritical Scribes and Pharisees, then we can do it with our children and also our opponents.

The scribes and Pharisees retreated leaving Jesus alone with the woman in the midst. The indication here is that these religious rulers had left, but the crowd Jesus had been teaching remained. The woman is in the midst of this crowd, but alone with Jesus in the sense that Jesus is left alone to deal with her. Again we find Him to be most merciful and gracious.

John 8:10-11, *"And straightening up, Jesus said to her, "Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you?" ¹¹ And she said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go your way. From now on sin no more."*

After the Scribes and Pharisees left, Jesus stood up again and addressed the woman directly. Jesus' question to her was not whether anyone had accused her, but whether anyone had condemned her. Jesus had heard the accusation, but none of those who accused were willing to condemn with the conditions Jesus had placed on them. As I pointed out earlier from Deuteronomy 17:6, condemnation required two or three witnesses. One witness was insufficient. And in this case, there were no witnesses left.

What an example of grace given to a sinner. All who would doubt that God could forgive them can have those doubts removed here. God is gracious to the humble. It really does not matter what sins you have committed, forgiveness can be found in Jesus Christ. Adultery, fornication, lying, coveting, stealing, envy, hatred, murder, idolatry, blasphemy - whatever you have done or failed to do. Jesus Christ can forgive you leaving none left to condemn you. What a beautiful truth this is as expressed by the

Apostle Paul in Romans 8:1 which wonderfully proclaims, *“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”*

Salvation from sin is a gift of God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Ephesians 2:8-9 states it this way, *“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, [it is] the gift of God; ⁹ not as a result of works, that no one should boast.”* You don’t deserve it and you cannot earn it. It comes simply by placing your faith in Jesus Christ which we have pointed out before means to believe Jesus’ claims about Himself and what He has done. He is the eternal creator God in human flesh who lived a sinless life and then died a sin sacrifice as your substitute and then rose from the dead the third day. He ascended to heaven and is preparing a place for His followers, and He will return to receive us to Himself.

But I must point out lest there be any misunderstanding of what such a belief requires. It means a sinner is forgiven. It comes while you are still a sinner. You cannot clean up your life enough to be worthy of it. But it will change the way you live from that point on.

Notice in verse 11 that while Jesus does not condemn the woman, neither does He ignore her sin. His charge to her, *“from now on sin no more,”* is a very direct recognition that she has sinned and that she needs to stop. But that is what salvation is about. It is not fire insurance, though escaping hell is a wonderful benefit. Salvation is from sin. It is about a change of masters from sin, self and Satan to the Lord Jesus Christ (see Romans 6).

Do not trample on the precious blood of Jesus which was shed for you by thinking that you can merrily continue in your sin after salvation. Yes, you will struggle against sin after salvation, but it is no longer master. If your life has not changed and you are not fighting against sin, then there is good reason to question what you really believe. Examine yourself to see if you are in the faith, that Jesus Christ is in you - unless you fail the test (2 Corinthians 13:5). If you have doubts, a purpose of the church is to help you walk with Christ. Talk to one of the leaders or someone you know and let us help.

There is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus. Are you in Him? 1 John 5:12 declares, *“He who has the Son has the life, he who does not have the Son does not have the life.”* Do you have the Son? Those who have the Son have changed masters (Romans 6:22). What master does your life indicate you are serving. (Romans 6:16).

An unknown author wrote the following thought provoking poem describing self-righteous hypocrisy.

You call Me Master and obey Me not,
You call Me Light and see Me not,
You call Me Way and follow Me not,
You call Me Life and desire me not,
You call Me wise and acknowledge Me not,
You call Me fair and love Me not,
You call Me rich and ask Me not,
You call Me eternal and seek Me not,
You call Me gracious and trust me not,
You call Me noble and serve Me not,
You call Me mighty and honor Me not,
You call Me just and fear Me not,
If I condemn you, blame Me not

If you believe the truth about Jesus, then your life will change to conform to those beliefs. Don’t not be a hypocrite like the scribes and Pharisees described in our text today. God resists the proud, but He gives grace to the humble (James 4:6).

Sermon Notes: THE HYPOCRISY OF SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS

John 8:1-11

Introduction

Hypocrite - “_____” - pretending to be what you are not in reality

Self-righteousness when joined with _____ is a cancerous killing agent

We will treat John 7:53-8:11 as belonging in text since the evidence points it to being something _____ said

The Context - John 7 & 8:1-2

Jesus has been teaching during the Feast of Booths and there is great _____ about His identity

John 7:53-8:1 Jesus spent the night on the Mount of Olives and returns to the Temple the next _____

Jesus continues to teach in the _____ which continues to irritate the Jewish religious leaders

The Test - John 8:3-6

The Pharisees and scribes, who are normally _____ toward each other, join together in this plot

The woman should have been brought before the _____, but they go to Jesus as a means to entrap Him

They risk publically acknowledging Jesus’ _____ out of confidence they can damage His reputation

Leviticus 20:10 - the _____ for adultery is the same as for fornication - stoning (Deuteronomy 22:21)

If Jesus advised against stoning, He would be against the Mosaic law. If He favored it, He loses _____

The couple are caught in the act, but they bring _____ the woman to Jesus - perhaps to increase sympathy?

The Solution - John 8:6-11

Jesus _____ their question & writes on the ground without statement of what, to whom, or why

Verse 7-8, the people _____ Jesus’ writing & persist in questioning Him

Jesus’ answer was unexpected by them, but it was exactly what Deuteronomy 17:6-7 _____

Executions under the Mosaic Law were carried out by the public with the _____ throwing the first stone

The religious leaders were stopped cold by Jesus’ _____ that the one starting the stoning be sinless

Jesus returns to writing in the dirt - _____ textual indication of what, to whom or why

These were men _____ in their sin, but without basis for accusing Jesus, they have lost and leave

The older would recognize the _____ first and the younger let them leave first out of respect

The Application - John 8:10-11

Jesus is direct with the religious leaders, yet He is still generally courteous and gives them room to _____

Jesus was _____ instead of vengeful

Psalm 145:8; Proverbs 16:32; Proverbs 14:29; Proverbs 15:1; 2 Timothy 2:24-26

We win people by being _____ of Jesus Christ - be firm on truth, but allow them to retreat with dignity

John 8:10-11 - Jesus addresses her directly - with _____ left, she could not be condemned

God is gracious to the _____ - and there is no condemnation to those in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1)

True belief / faith requires a _____ who is forgiven - and such faith changes the way you live

She was to "*sin no more*" - which is the _____ of salvation (Romans 6)

Christians _____ with sin, but it is no longer the master

Who is your _____ as demonstrated by your manner of life?

Don't be like the hypocritical and self-righteous scribes and Pharisees - be _____ and receive God's grace

KIDS KORNER

Parents, you are responsible to apply God's Word to your children's lives. Here is some help. **Young Children** - draw a picture about something you hear during the sermon. Explain your picture(s) to your parents at lunch. **Older Children** - Do one or more of the following: 1) Write down all the verses mentioned in the sermon and look them up later. 2) Count how many times the Jewish religious leaders are mentioned. Talk with your parents about what made them to be self-righteous hypocrites

THINK ABOUT IT!

Questions to consider in discussing the sermon. What is hypocrisy? What is self-righteousness? Why is the combination of both so deadly to the soul? What is the context of John 8:1-11? Why were the Jewish religious leaders against Jesus' teachings? Why was it unusual that the scribes and Pharisees would cooperate with each other? Why should have the woman caught in the act of adultery been taken before the Sanhedrin? Why did they bring her to Jesus instead? What did they risk by doing this? What did the Mosaic law require as punishment for those caught in adultery or fornication? How did they think this test case could be used against Jesus? Why didn't they also bring the man who was caught in this adultery? Why did Jesus respond by stooping and writing on the ground? Is there any indication what, to whom or why he was writing? What was the reaction of the religious leaders to this? Why did Jesus stoop down again to write on the ground after answering their question? Is there any indication what, to whom or why he was writing? How did Jesus answer match the Mosaic law (see Deuteronomy 17:6-7). Describe the procedure for stoning under the Mosaic Law? Why didn't they stone the woman? Could they have met Jesus condition for stoning the woman? Why did they start leaving? How was Jesus' answer a firm rebuke? How did Jesus' answer allow them a way to retreat with dignity? What do the scriptures teach regarding seeking vengeance and being merciful and gracious? What is the importance of following the example of Christ in order to win people to Christ? Why didn't Jesus condemn the woman caught in adultery? Could He have condemned her under the Mosaic Law? Explain. What is the basis of salvation? How is it applied to the sinner? What is the importance of "*sin no more*" for the Christian? How can you know you have the son and are not a self-deceived hypocrite?