

15. Jesus and the Woman in Adultery

John 8:1-11

The Gospel According to John

John 7:53 to John 8:11 is not found in a number of the earliest manuscripts, and so this passage of Scripture has brought some controversy. Some scholars doubt its authenticity by John. It is for this reason that, in some of our English translations, it has been put in between brackets with a note at the bottom of the page. When I read this passage, I am convinced not only of its authenticity but also of its place in Scripture. It has the ring of truth to it. It is the kind of attack that Jesus endured at the hands of His enemies, and it is the kind of answer that Jesus would have given. It would be difficult to go from John 7:52 to 8:12 if it was spurious. It would leave us with questions as to the timing, the place, and to whom, due to verse 12 starting with: “**Again Jesus spoke to them** [Who would be the “them?”], **saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life”** (John 8:12). I will leave the argument as to its authenticity or its placement to the scholars.

As we walk through this study of the life of Christ as told by John, I find it somehow fitting that these verses have come under such scrutiny since Jesus’ actions here provoked such a response. My focus is to be an onlooker and observe all that I can about the heart of God as revealed in this passage. I believe it is here for a reason, and God has watched over His Word to draw our attention to this encounter. Here’s the passage:

⁵³Then each went to his own home. ¹But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. ²At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. ³The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group ⁴and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. ⁵In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" ⁶They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. ⁷When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." ⁸Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. ⁹At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. ¹⁰Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" ¹¹"No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin" (John 7:53-8:11).

The Gathering Storm

In the previous chapter of John’s Gospel, we have seen how the Jewish religious leaders had banded together to seek Jesus’ life (7:1; 19; 30; 32). In their minds, He had become a threat that had to be faced. When Jesus courageously stood up on the most important day of the Feast of Tabernacles and shouted out that He was the One who would give and be the Water of Life to the Jewish people (John 7:37-39), the religious leaders had had enough. They formulated their next plan of attack. Amid their scheming against Him, what did Jesus do? When all the followers of Christ went to their homes, He did as He usually did and retired for the evening by sleeping

out under the stars on the Mount of Olives (v. 1) at Gethsemane (the Place of the Olive Press). The One who made the world had no place to lay His head (Luke 9:58). Why did He do that? Why not go to the home of His friends, Lazarus, Martha, and Mary, just on the other side of the Mount of Olives? Perhaps, it was because He did not want to endanger others by sleeping at their house. Knowing that the Jewish ruling elite had put out the word that Jesus was to be arrested brought a genuine fear that struck the ordinary people that loved Christ. (7:13). In all things, we see Jesus thinking and caring for others.

In the morning at dawn, He rose from His sleep under the stars and headed across the Kidron Valley, entering one of the eastern gates and making His way up to the Temple Courts. There, He sat down and began to teach the early morning worshipers as the morning sacrifice was offered on the altar. As soon as He sat down, verse 2 tells us that, “**All the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them.**” I can only imagine the jealousy of the Scribes and Pharisees when they saw all the people in the temple courts coming to listen to Jesus' morning devotions rather than listen to them. □

They had failed the day before in getting the temple guards to arrest Christ (7:45), so now they tried an attack from a different angle. Without waiting to talk with Jesus privately, they interrupted Him as He was teaching. Into the midst of the listening crowd came the teachers of the law and Pharisees with a woman whom they made to stand in view of them all. They spoke about her being caught in the act of adultery. How ashamed she must have felt! She was, perhaps, weeping as she stood before them all. The woman knew the consequences of her situation. Her life was on the line. She was guilty of adultery, and for that sin the penalty was death:

If a man is found sleeping with another man's wife, both the man who slept with her and the woman must die. You must purge the evil from Israel (Deuteronomy 22:22).

The *Mishnah*, the Jewish codified law, stated that the penalty for adultery is strangulation, and even the method of strangulation was laid down:

The man is to be enclosed in dung up to his knees, and a soft towel set down within a rough towel is to be placed around his neck...Then one man draws in one direction and another in the other direction until he is dead. The *Mishnah* reiterates that death by stoning is the penalty for a girl who is betrothed and who then commits adultery.¹

Question 1) According to Jewish law, if a couple was caught in the act of adultery, both of them were to be punished by death. So, where was the man? Why wasn't he also brought before Jesus to be judged? What were His enemies hoping to accomplish by this trap?

So, where was the man? We are told in verse 6, that this was a set-up, a trap to catch Jesus in whatever decision He made, i.e., to stone or not to stone. This incident was not about justice or righteousness; the woman was just being used as an instrument to make a point and create a dilemma, a trap for Jesus. The plan was likely premeditated. When the trap closed on the poor

¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, vol.2, The Daily Study Bible Series, (Edinburgh, Scotland: Saint Andrew Press, 1956), p.2.

unsuspecting woman, the religious leaders had burst in and caught her, I suspect, in bed with someone who was a co-conspirator in this entrapment. The co-conspirator was not brought along for judgment with the woman.

In the leader's minds, this entrapment was justified. The act of catching the woman in the act of adultery would put Jesus in a situation where He would not be able to satisfy both the Law and His teaching. It was an evil scheme performed for the "greater good" since, in their belief, Jesus was a false prophet and a breaker of the Sabbath by healing people. Of course, they let the man go because it was all part of the trap. He could not be judged and stoned. □

With the woman forced to stand in front of Jesus, they thought they had Christ, saying, "**Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. ⁵In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now, what do you say?**" (verses 4-5). Author A. W. Pink has a great comment about the dilemma Jesus was put in:

Had He said, "Let her go," they could then accuse Him of being an enemy against the law of God, and His word "Think not that I am come to destroy the law or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill" (Matthew 5:17). But if He answered, "Stone her," they would have ridiculed the fact that He was the friend "of tax collectors and sinners." No doubt they were satisfied they had Him completely cornered. On the one hand, if He ignored the charge they brought against this guilty woman, they could accuse Him of compromising with sin; on the other hand, if He passed sentence on her, what became of His own word, "For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved" (John 3:17).²

The Jewish people were living under Roman rule at the time, and Roman law reserved execution for the Roman court system. The Jews did not have the authority to stone the woman without Roman permission. To honor God's law and stone the woman, Jesus would bring upon Himself the wrath of Rome. The religious leaders knew that Jesus was one that upheld the law and that He was bound by God's law to judge the woman as guilty and condemn her to death. If He did not, they could sideline Him by saying that He did not uphold the law and, in fact, taught things contrary to the Law of Moses. They thought that many people would fall away from Him if He freed the woman.

What was He to do? If He were to uphold the law and pronounce her guilty, then He would fall into their cruel trap, and unrighteous men would have executed the woman for their selfish ends. If that had happened, you and I would have no hope left at all, for we are all guilty of breaking the Law of Moses. None of us are without sin; all of us stand condemned by a guilty conscience before a holy and just God. We would not have the confidence that God would forgive us for our sins.

The Lord saw the motives of the men who brought her to Him. The enemy of Christ (Satan) was using men to his ends to cause division between Christ and the ordinary people. Jesus saw the brokenness and shame the women had endured at the hands of these self-righteous men who cared nothing for her. To them, she was just an object. The woman had no name, no feelings, and

² A. W. Pink. *Exposition of the Gospel of John*, Published by Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI. 1975. Page 420.

to the religious leaders, no soul. She was only a woman whom they knew was someone that they could seduce into their plot.

Many are guilty of the same kind of sin. We may have never sinned by committing adultery, but what about the sin of promiscuity? It is laid down in the Law of Moses that on a woman's wedding day, if the sign of the covenant, i.e., the breaking of the hymen, did not happen on the wedding night, and the blood of the covenant could not be produced on the sheets the next morning, the woman was to be stoned to death by all the town's men (Deuteronomy 22:20-21). They were to purge the evil from Israel. □

In this woman, many of us see ourselves, i.e., guilty before the law of God and needing grace and mercy from God. Others among us have been like these religious leaders, i.e., guilty of using people for our ends to satisfy our desires and wants. They didn't care about this broken, sobbing woman; she was just a victim of their trap. They were quite happy to see her stoned to death. The use of people for one's sinful ends angers God. Jesus was well aware of their real motives and intentions. He was also aware of the brokenness and shame that filled the woman's heart. Brokenness and humility will always beckon to God's grace and mercy. □ □

Guilt Should Not be Ignored □

We do not know what event had led up to this situation in this woman's life. How long had people been aware of her reputation? Had she heard the words of Jesus before this encounter? Perhaps, there were areas in her life or spiritual needs that she had put off getting right before God. Many of us have secret sins that we hope no one sees. However, there is always One who sees. God sees, and He longs for your deliverance from shame and a guilty conscience. We cannot ignore the guilt and shame that is a tactic the enemy employs to significant effect. The feeling of guilt is but a warning that something is wrong within. □

While living in England many years ago, I went on a short-term mission trip with Sandy, my wife, and five others, driving through France, Spain, and Portugal. We were visiting different churches, doing street evangelism and leading people to Christ as we went. While driving through the rural parts of France, the red engine light on the car's dashboard came on, and we were hundreds of miles away from home. We couldn't afford to break down; the consequences were too significant if the warning light was ignored. We had to stop and wait until the morning to find someone nearby to check the light and fix the problem. We didn't want to be stranded in the middle of nowhere with a blown-up engine. To carry on without addressing the issue would have been foolish and potentially catastrophic if we broke down miles from any help. What would have happened if we had ignored the light? It is foolishness to continue to drive while a red warning light is on in one's car.

I think of guilt as the red warning light of the soul. Guilt weighs heavy on the dashboard of your soul. It's time to stop and ask yourself if you ever really got things right with God over something that happened many years ago. Is it something that keeps popping up in your mind? If it does, perhaps it's because you have never genuinely repented and forsaken that particular sin. If it is a person that continues to come to mind, there may be an issue of forgiveness that you need to address. There is also such a thing as false guilt that the enemy lays on us, i.e., accusing

us of something that we have sincerely brought to the Father and confessed and forsaken. You need to know within yourself whether it is God dealing with you, or if it is the enemy. The clue to who is reminding you of your sin is to ask yourself when you feel guilty, do the thoughts drive you to Christ or away from Christ? If it is the enemy that is condemning or accusing you concerning your sin, he tries to get you to abandon your faith entirely by pointing to your sin in an accusatory way. When the Holy Spirit convicts, He always reminds us of the provision of the sacrifice of Christ for our sins. Repentance, and sometimes restitution when it is needed, and the forsaking of our sin, restore the relationship to God. □

Grace to Cover Our Sin

Question 2) Why do you think Jesus stooped down and was writing in the dust? What do you think He was writing?

The Greek word used in John 8:6, *katagrapho*, literally means, “to write against.” We have no idea of what He wrote, but it is possible that He stooped down and was writing their sins in the dust. It might also have been that He avoided looking at them and was using the time to let the Spirit convict them of their sin. It is also possible that in His heart, He was praying and asking His Father for wisdom as to what to do.

Here we see complete dependence on the Father. We would be well advised to do the same when under pressure. Many of us are too busy to take the time to listen to the Father during stress. How many moments passed, we do not know, but the Jewish authorities increased the pressure by pushing for an answer. Jesus stood up, looked around Him at those accusers, and said, “**He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her**” (v. 7). What a bombshell statement! This kind of response was not what they were expecting at all! There they were, stones at the ready, either to throw at the woman or Jesus for teaching things contrary to the law and instead of getting the chance at stoning either of them, Jesus stooped to the ground again and continued writing in the dust.

Christ wisely puts the responsibility back on the religious leaders. He reminded the woman's accusers that the witnesses of the act should “**be the first in putting that person to death, and then the hands of all the people. You must purge the evil from among you**” (Deuteronomy 17:7).

Question 3) What do you think went through the mind of the woman as she heard Christ's words? Why did the older people first begin to go away?

I wonder if the woman had her back toward her accusers and stood braced for the first stones to begin hitting her. Instead, she heard rock after rock drop to the ground behind her until there was complete silence from the crowd of onlookers. Slowly, perhaps over several minutes, every one of her accusers had dropped their stones and walked off, beginning first with the eldest. Why did most elderly leave early? The older we get, the wiser we get, and the more sins we have for which we are liable. All of us have made mistakes. None of us are without guilt as to something we have done in the past. We must all take the log out of our eye before we seek to help others with the sliver in their eye (Matthew 7:3-5). How can we throw stones at others when we have all have sinned ourselves?

What a spectacle this must have been to all in the temple courts who were there for their morning devotions. Here, they saw not only the Law of Moses upheld but also the grace and truth that came through Christ. The Scripture says, “For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17). This expression of God's mercy should encourage every one of us who have sinned. There is grace to cover every sin. If you have ever been involved in the act of sexual immorality outside of marriage, or have ever committed adultery, or any other wrongdoing, then there is grace enough to cover your sin if you will sincerely repent, abandon it, and receive the person and work of Christ on your behalf.

Question 4) Why did God place such a stiff sentence on promiscuity and adultery in the Old Testament? Is it any different in the New Testament time? What do you think?□

The New Testament exhorts God's people to holiness and purity in all things. Paul the Apostle summarizes God's vision for our sexual lifestyles: “But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving” (Ephesians 5:3-4). Some might say God's standards are strict, and they are. However, God knows what's best for His children, and He expects obedience. Sexual immorality is very personal to God because it is linked to our identities in Him. To sin sexually is to sin against God as well as against oneself. In another place, Paul wrote, “The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body” (1 Corinthians 6:13). Therefore, it is against our body's nature to act impurely.

The act of sexual intercourse, i.e., two people becoming one flesh, is sacred. It resembles our union with Christ. Paul the Apostle explains how our bodies are members of Christ. By uniting our bodies with someone for sexual gratification outside of a covenant of marriage, we sin not only against God but also our spouse (present or future), the individual with whom we are involved, and ourselves. Our bodies are temples for the Lord.

Paul went on to say:

Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually, sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own (1 Corinthians 6:18-20).

All sin has consequences, but sexual immorality brings especially damaging results, and God wants to protect us from it. Some of the effects of sexual sin may include the following:

1. We grieve God.
2. Our soul is linked spiritually to the one with whom we have sex (1 Corinthians 6:15-16).
3. We quench the Holy Spirit's activity in our life.
4. Our relationship with our spouse is damaged.
5. Our memory filled with sexual images for future temptation.
6. We may contract a sexually transmitted disease.
7. Our thoughts corrupted by evil (Romans 8:6).
8. We open the door to all types of confusion.

9. If a baby is conceived, what then? There is a responsibility to raise the child. □

What a beautiful spectacle it must have been to watch and listen to the conversation that went on between the woman and Christ. She stood before the judge of all the earth, and gracious words emanated from His lips, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" "No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin" (John 8:10-11). I don't know what those words meant to the woman, but I know the effect that they have had on my life. Oh, the wonder of being forgiven of one's sin! My sin had incurred the penalty of death and, with it, separation forever from God, but God has sent His Son to pay the debt that I owed. Paul wrote about the grace that covers our sin: "But where sin increased, grace increased all the more" (Romans 5:8).

Christ did not disregard or overlook her sin. He could look forward to His imminent death on the cross and deal with the woman according to grace because His death was a substitute for her and in her place, not only for her but also for you and me. He told her to go and leave her life of sin. We don't know what happened to her after meeting with Jesus, but we know that in all things, "Mercy triumphs over judgment" (James 2:13). My prayer is that all who read these words would find mercy triumphing over judgment. He waits for you to ask, that you may receive. □

Prayer: Father, thank You for the mercy and grace You have displayed in this passage not only to the woman but also to each of us, too. Thank You for the hope that we have in You. Amen!

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