

“The Woman Caught in the Act of Adultery”

John 8:1-11

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This morning, I would invite you to turn with me to the New Testament, to the fourth gospel account, to the book of John, to John 8, so that we can consider an eye-witness account of what happened when Jesus had a profound run-in with a woman who was caught in an extremely embarrassing situation. As we lead up to this, I would suggest that very few of us have ever really felt as exposed and vulnerable and humiliated as this woman was. In fact, I would like for us to imagine having our deepest, darkest private sin paraded for the whole world to see, because that is exactly what happened in the opening verses of John 8. In our pew Bibles, the passage is found on page 1670. I am referring to the account of the woman who was caught in the act of adultery—John 8:1-11.

As we turn in our Bibles to John 8, I should point out that some translations have a special note on this paragraph. We will not go into a detailed discussion on this matter, but in our pew Bibles, you might notice a footnote on the very last verse of John 7 (down there at the bottom of the page). The footnote says, *“Later manuscripts add the story of the adulterous woman, numbering it as John 7:53-8:11.”* The New King James points out the same difficulty but also points out that the passage is found in more than 900 manuscripts of John. The English Standard Version says that, *“The earliest manuscripts do not include...”* this passage. However, it is interesting that in spite of the difficulties, this passage is still in our Bibles, and the reason is: Most conservative Bible scholars believe that this account is an accurate record of an event that actually happened in the life of Christ. So why the controversy? Well, some (even in ancient times) have suggested that the story was removed very early on by some over-zealous scribes who believed that the account could be used (or misused) to sanction adultery, and so they simply took it out of some of those early manuscripts. Well, I don’t know if we will ever really know why this account is not in most of the oldest copies of the Bible, but we will be working on the assumption that this is an accurate record of something that actually happened in the life of Christ.

As we look at these 11 verses, as with every passage of Scripture, we need to ask ourselves: What does this passage mean for us today? And even more specifically: What does it mean to me? In other words, this is not a passage that we should be trying to apply to other people, but this is a passage that we should try to be applying to us personally. What are some basic lessons here that will change the way that we live? If we fail to answer that question, then this passage might as well not even be in the Bible. Let us please, then, look together at John 8:1-11...

¹ But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. ² Early in the morning He came again into the temple, and all the people were coming to Him; and He sat down and began to teach them. ³ The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery, and having set her in the center of the court, 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 They were saying this, testing Him, so that they might have grounds for accusing Him. But Jesus stooped down and with His finger wrote on the ground. 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 Again He stooped down and wrote on the ground. ⁹ 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 center of the court. ¹⁰ Straightening up, Jesus said to her, "Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you?" ¹¹ She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "I do not condemn you, either. Go. From now on sin no more."

As we look back over these 11 verses, I would like to suggest five basic ideas that make this passage relevant in our lives today.

I. And the first thing I would like for us to consider is that the passage reminds us that there is A DIRECT CONNECTION BETWEEN SIN AND DEATH.

Of course the Scribes and the Pharisees have some terrible motives (and we will get to that in just a minute), but one thing they have right is that this woman deserved to die for what she had done. We look in the Law of Moses, and we find that when anyone was caught committing an act of sexual intimacy outside of marriage (either before marriage or with someone who was married), the penalty was death. Of course they had to have the proper witnesses and they needed to handle it in an appropriate way, but the penalty for adultery was death. And so we are reminded this morning that there is a direct connection between sin and death. This goes all the way back to the beginning, in the Garden of Eden. God told Adam not to eat from that one particular tree, and in Genesis 2:17, God said, ***"...for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die."*** The penalty for sin is death. As the apostle Paul would go on to write later (in Romans 6:23), ***"...the wages of sin is death..."*** Physically, Adam was kicked out of the Garden of Eden, his access to the Tree of Life was cut off, his body slowly wasted away, and eventually he died—his soul had to leave that physical body. But even more tragically, as soon as he sinned, Adam was separated from God. He experienced spiritual death—he went and he hid from God, there was a break in that relationship. But whether we are talking physically or spiritually, we are reminded this morning that there is a direct connection between sin and death.

And in John 8, the Lord never denies this. The Lord never argues that the woman does not deserve to die. I know sometimes we read this passage and we may be tempted to think that this woman is some kind of innocent spectator here, that she was a victim, that these bad Pharisees are just picking on her for no reason. And maybe we go away from this story feeling sorry for the woman. And yet when we look at what the Bible actually says, the woman was clearly guilty and she deserved to die for what she had done. As she first started going down that road, maybe she put that thought at the back of her mind, maybe she thought that she would never get caught, maybe she tried to rationalize what she was doing, maybe she figured that since she was in love with the man that it would be okay. But the bottom line is that she had now been caught in the act of adultery. There is no argument here—she is guilty. Jesus knew it, the Pharisees knew it, and the woman knew it. The penalty for this sin was death. And when we think about it, this remains one of the first steps in God's plan of salvation: That we recognize that we are guilty and that we deserve to die for whatever we have done. First of all, then, the penalty for sin is death.

II. **There is a second basic idea in this passage, and that is: WE FIND A WARNING ABOUT THE DANGER (AND REALLY THE NASTINESS) OF RELIGIOUS HYPOCRISY.**

And for any of us as Christians, we need to be on guard about this. A lot of times maybe we identify with the woman, but for a moment we need to look at this from the other side. We find that the Scribes and the Pharisees come to the Lord with what appears on the surface to be a concern about the Law of Moses. They catch this woman in the act, and then they come to the Lord asking for some kind of ruling. And maybe on the surface, they appear to care about God's Law. However, when we look at what the Law actually says, we start to see through what they were doing, because in Leviticus 20:10, the Law actually says that, ***"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."*** What is missing here? What's missing is the man! We don't know exactly why the man is missing here, but we do know that they caught the woman ***"in the act,"*** which tells us that they were not really interested in carrying out the Law of Moses. If they were truly interested in following the Law of Moses, then these Pharisees would have brought the man and the woman to Jesus together. But as it is, they are ignoring at least half of the Law (by bringing the woman and not the man)! They were hypocrites, therefore, in that they were ignoring the very law that they claimed to be so concerned about.

In fact, their real motive is unveiled for us in verse 6 as John says that, ***"...they were saying this, testing [Jesus], so that they might have grounds for accusing Him."*** In other words, they were not concerned about the Law, they were not concerned about this woman's soul, but they were only concerned about finding some way to get rid of the Lord. We might say that they hated the Lord more than they loved the Law, they hated the Lord more than they loved the woman, and their hatred showed itself in hypocrisy—claiming one thing while doing something else.

As we let this sink in a little bit, we see a warning—a danger that applies to all of us here this morning. Just the fact that we are here says that we have at least some concern for God's Law. I mean, we just finished singing the song, "Give Me the Bible." If all of us sang that song (and I hope that all of us did), but if we sang that song, then we have professed our love for the word of God. Let us not, then, go home and continue being jerks to our families. Let us not go home and go back to making inappropriate comments online. Let us not go home from worshiping God to some kind of sinful relationship. Let us not be like the Pharisees who claimed to be concerned about what God said when really they were not.

III. **There is a third basic concept here, and it comes through a reminder that ALL PEOPLE SIN.**

As Jesus said, ***"Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her."*** And the idea goes back to a basic concept in the Law of Moses that the witnesses of a crime were to be the first ones to take up and throw a stone at the victim of capital punishment. My understanding is that this would emphasize to the witnesses the grave consequences of their testimony. As we might say today, "If the stone doesn't fit, then you must acquit!" Jesus, then, basically reminds the Pharisees: If you really want to put this woman to death, then those of you who found her in the act of adultery need to stand by that testimony, and you need to be the first ones to step forward with the stones. As I was growing up, my grandmother taught me a few manners here and there, and one thing she taught me was to wait for the hostess to take the first bite. In other words, I should probably not finish my dessert before the host or hostess is finished serving! That would be rude. And maybe in a slightly similar way, Jesus is telling these people: If you really want this to happen, then you need to go first.

And the message that comes across is that no one in this situation was truly innocent! As we noted earlier, the Pharisees were not wrong for pointing out the adultery, but they were wrong 1.) for how they handled the Law of Moses, and 2.) for their motives in trying to murder the Lord by accusing this woman of adultery. As the apostle Paul will go on to point out later (in Romans 3:23), ***“...all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”*** All people have sinned. And I should point out that this even applies to us as Christians. The apostle John says in 1 John 1:10, ***“If we say that we have not sinned, we make [God] a liar and His word is not in us.”*** That does not mean that we go around sinning all the time, but it means that even as Christians we still need the grace and mercy of God. And this account in John 8 is a good reminder of that. As righteous as we may hope to be, we will always need the Lord. Our attitude needs to be the same as that of the tax collector in Luke 18:13, ***“God, be merciful to me, the sinner!”*** As Christians, let us never get too far away from that very basic idea. We have a responsibility to admonish and correct each other, but we have to do it only after looking at ourselves first.

As I was doing the research for this morning’s lesson, I ran across one man who said that the world is not divided into those who are sinners and those who are not, but the world is divided into those who admit it and those who don’t! As Christians, let us be among those who admit it, because the Bible clearly teaches that all people commit sin.

IV. Another lesson that comes across here comes as we observe THE AMAZING COMPASSION THAT JESUS HAS FOR THIS WOMAN.

Sometimes we refer to hating the sin and loving the sinner. That is exactly what Jesus did here in **John 8**. The sin of adultery is so serious. It can tear apart a family. It hurts the children. It hurts the innocent partner. It hurts God. It hurts the church. It is so bad, in fact, that it is the only reason why God ever allows a marriage to end. However, we find here that Jesus, even while hating the sin is somehow able to love this woman and is able to treat her with compassion! He treats her with kindness and respect. Unlike the Pharisees, Jesus knew this woman. He had been there when she was created, He knew her when she was being formed in her mother’s womb, He knew the number of hairs on her head, He knew what was going on in her heart, she was the reason why Jesus came to this earth and why He allowed Himself to be nailed to the cross. [Denn Guptill, *Put Down the Rocks*] As the Lord Himself said in Luke 19:10, He had come to this earth to seek and save those who are lost.

And here she is at her worst, in a lost condition, caught in the act, and dragged out in public. We can only try to imagine how she felt as all eyes were focused on her. But then we find that Jesus starts writing in the dirt. That right there is an act of compassion—redirecting the eyes of the crowd from her to whatever He was writing. Of course, the big question most people have is: What in the world was Jesus writing? We don’t know! As I was preparing this morning’s lesson, I was actually shocked at how many theories are out there.

- Some people, for example, think that perhaps Jesus was simply stalling, that He was just doodling, that He was using this time to up with a good reply, or maybe that He was stalling for their benefit, to give the Pharisees a little extra time to think about what they were doing.
- Some have suggested that Jesus wrote the Ten Commandments on the ground as if to say, “Yes, she has broken #7, but how are you guys doing with the other nine?”
- Some think that Jesus was writing the Pharisees’ sins in the dirt and maybe that is why they slowly left from the oldest to the youngest—the oldest could see where this was heading, and they left first. As they pressed in to demand an answer, they looked down on the ground and saw what they had done

in private written down for all to see. Others have suggested that Jesus wrote down their private sins almost as a challenge, “Would you like me to make your sins public just as you have done to this woman?”

- Others have suggested that Jesus actually wrote the names of the Scribes and the Pharisees in the dirt, and then after the pause He went back and wrote down a reference to Jeremiah 17:13, ***“O Lord, the hope of Israel, all who forsake you shall be put to shame; those who turn away from you shall be written in the earth, for they have forsaken the Lord, the fountain of living water.”***
- Legend has it that in the early days of Freed-Hardeman, a preaching student fell asleep during the lecture on this passage, and when he woke up, the professor asked him what he thought Jesus wrote in the dirt. The sleepy and confused student (having slept through most of the lecture) said, “Well, I knew at one time, but I forgot.” Sometimes that answer can get you out of trouble, but not this time!

But the point here is not what Jesus wrote but that He wrote. The finger that wrote the Ten Commandments on the tablets of stone was writing again, the only reference to Jesus ever writing anything during His life on this earth. If the words had been important, John would have copied those words down for us, but he didn’t. And so the point is: Whatever the Lord wrote, the religious leaders started leaving, until Jesus and the woman were left alone. In the eyes of Jesus, this woman was worth defending! The amazing love of God!

And here we find that Jesus did not call for the Law to be ignored; rather, the Lord called for the Law to be followed. Remember: Under the Law of Moses, for any offense involving the death penalty, there needed to be at least two witnesses, and those witnesses were to throw the first stones. Notice then: Jesus does not tell the Pharisees not to throw any stones, but He tells them to go for it! He is basically asking for those witnesses to step forward. In other words, the Lord was saying, “If you really want to follow the Law, then let’s follow the Law!” And with that, the Lord was able to defend both God’s Law and the woman. He was able to show compassion, setting the perfect example for our attitude toward lost people even today. We are to treat them with love and compassion.

V. As we come near the end of our study this morning, there is another aspect of this account that has something for us today, and that is: WE HAVE JUST A SMALL SNAPSHOT OF WHAT IS INVOLVED IN BECOMING A FOLLOWER OF JESUS CHRIST.

“Straightening up, Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you?’ She said, ‘No one, Lord.’ And Jesus said, ‘I do not condemn you, either. Go. From now on sin no more.’” Now, most of us understand this, but Jesus was not saying that He did not condemn the sin of adultery, but His statement was in contrast to the condemnation of the Pharisees. In other words: Just as the Pharisees were no longer standing around ready to cast the first stone, so also Jesus was not ready to stone this woman. But instead, Jesus pointed her in the right direction and with love and dignity encouraged this woman concerning what she could become in the future. The Lord had better plans for this woman, and so He very clearly said to her, ***“Go. From now on sin no more.”*** He encouraged her to make a change in her life, to turn over a new leaf, to start with a clean slate.

Of course some people today have the idea that we simply need to say “sorry” to God and then we are free to go on back to whatever we have been doing in the past. But we find here that the Lord was not necessarily looking for an apology, He was not asking that they “walk the aisle,” but He was looking for a change in behavior, ***“Go. From now on sin no more.”*** She did not need to stay in an adulterous lifestyle. In the same way today, Jesus says to the man addicted to porn, ***“Go. From now on sin no more.”*** To the pedophile, Jesus

says, ***“Go. From now on sin no more.”*** To those who are living together outside of marriage, Jesus says, ***“Go. From now on sin no more.”*** Right now, our city is getting ready for a gay pride parade that is scheduled to begin in about an hour—starting at the capitol, going down State Street, and then ending at the Library Mall. To those who participate in that lifestyle, Jesus says, ***“Go. From now on sin no more.”***

How did this woman react? Did she accept the challenge? Of course, we are not told. I certainly hope she didn't say, “Uh, Lord, no thanks—I kind of like the sin of adultery.” We certainly hope she didn't say something like that. But the reality is that the story of the woman caught in the very act of adultery is not finished, because it continues every time someone reads it...

Conclusion:

For those of us who are Christians, the story makes us appreciate the fact that we have been forgiven. It reminds us that Jesus has something better in mind for us, that the Lord is challenging us to constantly turn away from sin. Even as Christians, is there something we still need to leave behind? Do we need to treat our families better? Do we need to have a little more patience with our co-workers? The story also reminds us not to be like the Scribes and the Pharisees. The story reminds us how the Lord treated lost people. He treated them with the utmost of respect and dignity, but He challenged them to do better.

On the other hand, maybe you are standing this morning where this woman stood. Maybe you know you've done wrong, and maybe you're thinking, “There's no way the Lord could use me.” The message from this passage for you is that the Lord knows that you can do better, ***“Go. From now on sin no more.”*** The Lord knows that the Christian life is a new beginning, a new birth. As Paul wrote in our Scripture reading this morning, ***“Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come”*** (2 Corinthians 5:17). Whatever we've done in the past, Jesus died and paid our ransom so that we would ***“sin no more.”*** No matter what we've done, Jesus died for us so that we can live for Him. He wants us to die and be buried with Him in baptism, baptized into His name.

One thing that really impresses me about this passage is the scene in the middle of verse 9 where the accusers leave and we find that Jesus, ***“...was left alone, and the woman, where she was, in the center of the court.”*** As I see it, the crowds are still there, but the accusers are gone, and as far as this woman is concerned she is alone, one-on-one with the Lord. And that's the way we are this morning. It's just us and the Lord, and the most important thing is that we make sure our lives are right with Him. Later this morning, we plan on singing a song that this woman could have very easily sung herself, ***“I was so lost I should have died, but You have brought me to Your side.”*** That's what Jesus did for this woman, and that's what Jesus does for us today. If you have any questions, we would love to try to set up a time to get together to study. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

I am extremely thankful for the help that was provided by Wayne Jackson's sermon that was preached at the Church of Christ in Stockton, California, on September 30, 1984.

To comment on this lesson: church@fourlakescoc.org