

Drop that Stone

John 8:1-11

We cling to the hope that the courts and judicial bodies that convene throughout our land are the best in the world. Unfortunately, we are too often bombarded by examples that give us pause:

The parents of a young lady who drowned after driving her car into Galveston Bay, Texas are suing Honda for making a seatbelt that is not easily unlatched when one is drunk and underwater.

Earlier this year, a group in Santa Fe, New Mexico alleged that they are allergic to the wireless internet fields in public buildings and are threatening to sue the city for discrimination under the *Americans with Disabilities Act*. Grass, pollen, animal hair – those allergies are so yesterday.

In 1997, when a man was charged with first-degree burglary in Los Angeles for breaking into an occupied dwelling, his lawyer appealed. He argued that because the only occupant had died of natural causes mere minutes before the man broke in, technically and legally the residence was unoccupied. An appeals court agreed and reduced the charge to second-degree burglary.

At first glance, our text this morning appears to be a pursuit of justice, or, at least a pursuit of an explanation of what justice should look like. A woman caught in the act of adultery is dragged before Jesus. The Law of Moses condemned her to die. Would Jesus think this was fair? Of course, we don't have to dig very deeply to discover that justice had little to do with this ruse.

Before we explore the text, however, we should briefly examine the editorial notes in each of your Bibles that question whether this passage even belongs here. I didn't put those entries there, so don't shoot the messenger. Most New Testament scholars do not believe that this story should appear at this precise point in John's gospel. It is not in the oldest Greek manuscripts of John, but that does not make the story inauthentic, for the same scholars agree that it clearly reflects the wisdom and originality of Jesus. They are simply not sure where it ought to be placed. In any event, the story was circulated very early, and the early church always embraced it as authentic

We don't have to know where this passage originally fell into the Gospel narrative to be sure that it is reliable. It is a beloved text for a very good reason. It reveals vividly the grace of Jesus.

I. Jesus Recognized an Insincere Pursuit of Justice (1-6a)

A. This Whole Scenario Was Steeped in Hypocrisy verses 1-5

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?"

Sometimes, hypocrisy is hard to detect; sometimes, not so much. During divorce proceedings, an actor with a Beijing opera troupe, attacked his wife in the courtroom and bit off her nose. He claimed that his action was a desperate attempt to save his marriage, reasoning that if she was disfigured no one else would want to marry her. Kind of romantic when you think about it.

A woman was "caught in the act of adultery," and Moses was quite specific that execution was in order. Why, then, did her accusers, "teachers of the law and the Pharisees," legal experts all, care what this itinerant preacher named Jesus had to say? This was a no-brainer as a legal call, so we can be sure that these pious men had more up their sleeve than just gleaning a legal opinion.

It is true that Moses commanded the death penalty for adultery, but the Jews hadn't carried it out in years. In fact, at this point in history, the Jews could not have killed her even though they may have wanted to. Throughout the empire, the Romans did not allow the locals to execute anyone. Only Roman officials could make such a call. This is why Jesus would be turned over to the Romans when the chief priests wanted Him to die, accusing Him of something the Romans would care about - insurrection. The Jews did stone Stephen in Acts 7, but that was a case of mob frenzy. We can assume that someone got in deep trouble over that incident with the Roman authorities.

When we actually look at Mosaic laws on adultery, we quickly notice that one party is missing. Moses took the position that it "takes two to tango" and called for the deaths of both adulterous parties, so where was the man? He may have been in this crowd, for the scribes tended to slant the Law in favor of men. For example, Moses allowed for divorce in the event of a wife's "indecency" which implied some sexual misbehavior. But, by Jesus' day, "indecency" was so broadly defined that a man could validate a divorce by charging his wife with any petty complaint, send her on her way with a certificate of divorce *AND* keep her dowry, leaving her with nothing. Then, he might remarry some pretty young thing. Jesus called such men who divorced so as to remarry, adulterers.

In his book *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis makes an interesting statement. You may not agree with his categorization of bad and least bad sins, but hear him out so as not to miss his point:

"If anyone thinks that Christians regard unchastity (sexual sin) as the supreme vice, he is quite wrong. The sins of the flesh are bad, but they are the least bad of all sins. All the worst pleasures are purely spiritual. The pleasure of putting other people in the wrong, of bossing and patronizing and spoiling sport, and backbiting; the pleasures of power, of hatred. For there are two things inside me ... they are the animal self and the diabolical self; and the diabolical self is the worst of the two. That is why a cold self-righteous prig who goes regularly to church may be far nearer to hell than a prostitute. But of course it is better to be neither!"

B. The True Motive Was to Gather Ammunition for another Day verse 6a

... ⁶They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.

The true deviancy of these men is revealed in how they shamelessly used this woman as a mere pawn in their ploy to "trap" Jesus. His enemies would resort to almost anything to bring Him down. There were times when natural theological or political rivals would join forces to seek a basis for accusing Jesus. Once, the Pharisees joined with the Herodians to ask Jesus whether it was right for Jews to pay taxes to Caesar. Ordinarily, Pharisees despised Herodians and hated taxes. They saw themselves as patriots and those tax-loving Herodians as political opportunists in bed with Rome. Other times, in order to corner and embarrass Jesus in something He might say, the Pharisees, conservative religious purists joined ranks with the Sadducees, who were theological liberals.

“Accusing” in verse 6 refers to a “judicial accusation”. The word suggests that the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees were fishing for something they could take back and report to some judicial authority, such as the Jewish Sanhedrin or the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. “How do you see it, ‘rabbi’?” They thought they had Jesus trapped. He might say “Yes! We are sovereign Jews. We have the right to enforce the death penalty that *YAHWEH* handed down to us through Moses!” Of course, that little sound-byte was sure to make its way back to Pilate who would say, “Just try it.”

Or, Jesus might go all “bleeding heart” and talk about “looo-ve and forgiveness.” Then, they could run to the Sanhedrin and say, “Jesus dismisses Moses.” No name was more honored among the Jews than that of Moses the Lawgiver. The Sanhedrin could ruin Jesus’ reputation as a rabbi.

His enemies thought they had Jesus in a corner. Whatever He might say, these men could pit Him either against Rome or against Moses. But, Jesus always had a masterful way of shifting the burden for sticking one’s foot in one’s mouth back upon His adversaries and away from Himself.

II. Jesus Responded with an Instructive Postponement of Judgment (6b -11)

A. Jesus Confounded His Accusers verses 6b-9

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 ...

Whatever Jesus was doing as He knelt and wrote in the dirt with His finger intrigues us. What was the Lord communicating by this behavior? Speculating is allowed, because that’s all John leaves us with. Perhaps, Jesus was just collecting His thoughts. He may have been so ashamed of this whole scenario that He was composing Himself emotionally. Consider two other possibilities.

The word translated “to write” was the word typically used for entering a record of something. Some have suggested that Jesus was jotting down select passages from the Law. Others suggest that He was listing some specific sins, none as heinous as adultery, but still sins against the recorded Law that struck a bit too close to home for some in this crowd. As long as we’re speculating, perhaps, after Jesus said, “If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone ...” He resumed His writing by putting names next to those sins. Don’t tell me that wouldn’t quickly disperse a pious pack of puffed-up, holier-than-thou, moralizing judges.

Then again, the significance of Jesus writing in the dirt may rest less in what He wrote and more in the gesture itself. *The Pulpit Commentary* on this text cites a man named O’Neil in a book entitled *Palestine Explored*, who tells of seeing a young boy play a prank on an old man. When the man finds him so as to scold him, the boy is found writing in the dirt as though he is in his own world. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, mister.” As late as the 1890’s, this gesture was a typical means in the middle-East for “deliberate inattentiveness,” an unobtrusive means of ignoring someone.

Anyone with children understands the various devices of “deliberate inattentiveness.” These are what you get when your kids won’t make eye contact while you’re trying to press home a point. Instead, they watch TV or fiddle with their text messages. This statement of “I’m trying to ignore you” may be evident in body language. I tell my grandson, “Do not do such-and-such again, okay?” That boy will absolutely not say, “Okay.” He’ll say “yes,” “sorry,” – anything but “Okay.” There is nothing sadder than a battle of wills between a three-year-old and a 51 year-old.

Through this gesture of writing in the dirt, Jesus may have simply been putting this self-righteous crowd in a position where they could either drop the issue or just keep pushing it. They chose the latter. Verse 7 says, "... they kept on questioning him." Jesus stopped and answered them with one challenge powerful enough to silence them: "Whichever one of you experts in Moses' Law has never failed at any point of it, throw the first stone. Have at it." Then, He tuned them out again.

Whatever His writing in the dirt meant, Jesus had a masterful way of diffusing these hypocritical attempts to trap Him. "Is it right to pay taxes?" "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" "Whose wife will she be at the resurrection?" None of these were honest requests for His opinion, but thinly-veiled ploys to trip Him up. With a single word of wisdom, Jesus could tear down strongholds of deception, hypocrisy and ignorance. This crowd dissipated one by one, starting with the oldest. Eventually, all the woman's accusers slithered away. Only she and Jesus remained.

B. Jesus Challenged the Accused verses 10, 11

... 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."

"Condemn" refers to the final stage of a judicial process, the pronouncement of a sentence on one who has either been found guilty or who was caught in the act as in the case of this woman. Jesus refused to do this, and after He was done with them, no one in this crowd felt qualified to judge her either. But, if being without sin was the criterion for throwing that first stone, there was one Person Who could start loosening up in the bullpen, but He said, "Then neither do I condemn you."

Jesus did not condemn the woman, but neither did He acquit her. He did not promise that He would never condemn her or that she could never be condemned. He would not and could not condone her sin. Whether or not C.S. Lewis was right that sins of the animal self are not as serious as sins of the diabolical self, know that there is as much of the diabolical as there is of the animal in adultery, for it violates and disregards covenant. Jesus could never take the position that what this woman and some man had done, as consenting adults, did not matter. That would be an affront to His Father's holiness.

This woman had sinned, but she could not repair her sinful status. Sometimes, restitution for the things we have done is impossible. Jesus only told her to do all she **COULD** do to avert condemnation: "Go now and leave your life of sin." In other words, "Repent, and knock it off!" This is so relevant in this church age. Easy believism and cheap grace have greatly weakened the visible holiness of the church. Someone once said of Christians, "Many people use mighty thin thread when mending their ways." A true Christian hates his own sin. We must restore an understanding among the people of God that a life of repentance is prerequisite to a reliable assurance about one's relationship with God.

The world is rapidly arriving at a point, where soon, no sin will be worthy of unambiguous societal condemnation. Our reluctance to make moral judgments is putting us back into what more and more people are calling a "Moral Stone Age." Smoking is a bigger societal scandal than sexual promiscuity. Littering the planet invokes more hysteria than littering minds with filth. Protecting children against spankings seems more important than protecting them from being terminated before they are born.

Of all the things Jesus ever said, the only thing the world seems to hear and embrace are His words: “Judge not!” If a Christian dares to identify anything as deviant sin, someone invariably throws “Judge not!” back in his face as though Jesus’ own words should render him ashamed to call any behavior a sin. God Himself has already called sin, “sin” and He has spelled out a number of behaviors that qualify. His people have no choice but to accept His assessment of such things.

However, if we are to be like Jesus, such conclusions compel us to carefully pursue restorative remedies, not condemnation. The modern church has become rather adept at ignoring sin in the body of Christ while pleading, “Judge not, lest ye be judged”. That is neither compassion nor love. It is heartless indifference and an irresponsible cop-out. There is a world of difference between judgment in the spirit of the scribes and Pharisees, which Jesus roundly condemned, and judgment in the spirit of Jesus that calls sin what it is, but offers a way to God’s forgiveness.

Randy Frazee, a Fort Worth, Texas pastor, shared this story forgiveness:

I remember seeing a picture of a husband and wife in a gentleman’s office. I said, “Nice picture.” I turned around and looked at the man, and he had tears in his eyes. So I asked him, “Why are you crying?”

He said, “There was a time in our marriage when I was unfaithful to my wife, and she found out about it. She was so deeply hurt and injured she was going to leave me and take the kids with her. I was overwhelmed at the mistake I had made, and I shut the affair down. I went to my wife in total brokenness. Knowing I did not deserve for her to answer in the affirmative, I asked her to forgive me. And she forgave me.

“This picture was taken shortly after that. When I see this picture, I see a woman who forgave me. I see a woman who was willing to stand with me in this picture. So when you see this picture you say, ‘Nice picture.’ But when I see this picture I see my life given back to me again.”

Every Christian has a similar picture to remind him or her that forgiveness has restored his or her life. I know that the cross as a symbol of Christianity has been romanticized, commercialized and sanitized to the point that its stark brutality and reality are usually missed. Still, aren’t you glad that the symbol of our faith remains a cross and not a set of scales – that our reward from God is not determined by what we have earned as brilliant keepers of His law, but by what has been freely secured according to what Someone was willing to do for us?

Now, Jesus says, “Not only do I not condemn you, but a way has been made so that God’s forgiveness can come to you. May we always respond, “Thank you, Jesus, for the cross.”

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