

John 46 – A Woman Caught to Trap Jesus

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Scripture 1: (Jn. 7:53-8:11 ESV)

[They went each to his own house, but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.

Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst they said to him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now in the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?" This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him.

Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her." And once more he bent down and wrote on the ground.

But when they heard it, they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him.

Jesus stood up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"

She said, "No one, Lord."

And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more."]

Scripture 2: (Deut. 22:22 ESV)

If a man is found lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman, and the woman. So you shall purge the evil from Israel.

Sermon:

Today we are encountering one of the most well known passages from John's Gospel. But, sometimes it is known best for what it is not. Please look at the printed text of your Bible. I am sure that you will find a note saying something to the effect of, “The earliest manuscripts do not have John 7:53-8:11”, and we ought to take a moment to talk about what that does and does not mean.

Remember, we do not have any original manuscripts, known as “the autographs”, for any book of the Bible. Everything we have are copies of copies and there is a whole science devoted to uncovering, with a high degree of confidence, the original and most authentic version of the text; this science is called “textual criticism”. It is done by comparing older and newer manuscripts and identifying where they might differ. Most differences fall within the realm of transcription errors, much like modern typos, with the most common type of differences being misspellings {sometimes word order gets mixed up, other times there may be additions or deletions}. When there are differences between manuscripts, the older copy is generally deferred to as more reliable; however, in the few instances where there are significant differences between copies (such as here), no version of the text is used uniquely or primarily to support any necessary doctrine of the faith; nothing depends upon that passage, alone. Our confidence in this science is why we can affirm the belief that Scripture is both inerrant and infallible in the autographs, because we believe that only the originals are the true authoritative text rather than our copies and translations, which are certain to have different mistakes and errors, and this is why we include significant variants as footnotes.

The oldest recovered and most complete manuscript copy of John's Gospel is known as P66 {Papyrus 66}. It was found in Egypt in 1952 and was transcribed sometime during the late 2nd Century and mid 3rd Century; likely between 150 and 250 AD. {Previously, we tried to discern when the Gospel of John was originally written and concluded that it was the final Gospel composed and likely written between 70 and 90 AD. So, this “copy” could be as close to the autograph as 60 years.} It consists of 156 14.2 cm (5.6”) x 16.2 cm (6.4”) pages, with an average of 15-25 lines on each page. The Gospel text included is: John 1:1–6:11, 6:35–14:26 (excepting 7:53-8:11), 29–30, 15:2–26, 16:2–4, 6-7, 16:10–20:20, 22–23, 20:25–21:9, 12, 17. It is really only missing a few verses, here and there. However, today's passage is absent and there is no noticeable gap within the written text suggesting that it should be present. Meanwhile, the oldest recovered manuscript containing this story is the Codex Bezae, which is believed to have been transcribed around 400 AD. So, scholars conclude that this story was likely not in the autograph, yet they also believe that it may have been a preserved early oral tradition from the time of the Apostles.

What does that mean for us? Did John write it? Does this story belong here? Is this or is this not inspired Scripture? Should we pay attention to it or should we just skip over it?

I would answer those questions as: Probably not; Maybe or maybe not here, but I think it does belong somewhere; It has been received as and used as inspired Scripture since the time of the early church; and, It is still worth paying attention to and it is certainly worth not skipping over. Why have I reached this conclusion and why do I encourage you to share in it with me?

- The story is, at a minimum, “true-ish”. It sounds like what Jesus would say or do, based upon the rest of the Gospel.
- No biblical doctrines depend on it. It has no direct effect upon what we must know and believe concerning Jesus Christ and the salvation we receive by faith in Him, alone.

- Composition by John the evangelist, the disciple of Jesus, is not what makes it Scripture. It is the inspiration and influence of the Holy Spirit that makes it Scripture. The human writer is not the justifying cause for its acceptance, instead it is a text's acceptance and use by the Church.
- Even if it was added to John's Gospel a little later, this story has been used as true, inspired Scripture for the majority of Christian Church history.

This story, and the lessons that we can learn from it, remains spiritually beneficial as it does not contradict or deny anything taught elsewhere, nor does it teach anything new (it offers nothing that is not expressly taught or is able to be interpreted elsewhere in Scripture). Now, let us examine what this received text has to say.

After the Festival of Booths, *“They went each to his own house, but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.”*. Please recall that Jesus was presently living in Capernaum, Galilee and that He had been avoiding Judea over the past while because He knew that “the Jews” were trying to kill Him (John 7:1), but now He shifts His ministry focus from Galilee to the areas surrounding Jerusalem. We see this same location shift emphasized within the Synoptic Gospels after His transfiguration upon the mountain (Matthew 19, Mark 10, probably Luke 10:38-42). After this point, John never again mentions Jesus returning home to Galilee before His passion and death.

It is very unlikely that Jesus would have simply stayed out on the Mount of Olives. He would not have been camping out. The town of Bethany was located on the Mount, or just on the far side, and since we know about Jesus' friendship with Lazarus, it is fair to assume that Jesus probably stayed with him and his sisters, Mary and Martha; yet, that detail is neither certain nor obligatory.

“Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them.” {Recall that the common Jewish custom was for a teacher to sit, while his disciples stood gathered around him. This was a cultural sign and practice of respect.} Even though the Feast was over, a large number of people remained in and around Jerusalem: living, studying and, most importantly, worshiping. It was not a Roman administrative center yet, it was still an important and busy city; therefore, Jesus would easily continue to have a large, attentive, and diverse audience.

Presuming that, as the chronology of the text suggests, this was the day after “*the great day*” (John 7:37) and the day after the Pharisees and priests became upset because the Levite officers had not arrested Jesus as they commanded, and also the day after Nicodemus had suggested Jesus be given a fair hearing before the Jewish leaders, *“The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst they said to him, “Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now in the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?”*”. Although an explanation for their action is given that, *“This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him.”*, there are several things wrong, troubling, and problematic with this account.

- First, the scribes and Pharisees brought to Jesus this woman, whom they were accusing of a religious crime: adultery. Why? Even if they were testing Jesus and trying to trap Him into either condemning the woman or to deny the Law of Moses, bringing her to Jesus and asking His opinion was irrational and unjustifiable. Jesus held no “official” religious authority. Jesus was not a member of the Sanhedrin. He was not a recognized judge of the people. He had neither the right nor the position to answer them.
- Second, they cited the Law of Moses, implying that they have used its authority to already judge this woman and condemn her, declaring what her punishment ought to justly be; so again, they invalidate asking Jesus. Their question was irrelevant because they announced both her crime and punishment,

implying that she had already been tried and that it was something that could not be argued against or appealed. So, Jesus' opinion did not matter.

- Third and most concerning, where was the other guilty party? Where was “the guy”? Why was he not present? Why was he not condemned alongside her? Deuteronomy 22 is clear and straight-forward, “*If a man is found lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman, and the woman. **So you shall purge the evil from Israel.***”. Yet, here she stands accused, condemned, and **alone**. Where was her adulterous “accomplice”?

If what they were doing was true, fair, or right; if it was a legitimate query; if they actually wanted Jesus' opinion, then both accused persons should have been brought to Jesus for judgment. Otherwise, Jesus rightly had nothing to say because the scribes and Pharisees had already said everything necessary under the Law. Now suddenly, Jesus' response starts to make a lot more sense.

How did Jesus respond to their question? “*Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground.*” Jesus simply began to doodle, paying them no mind. He ignored them because they had interrupted His teaching. He refused to validate and affirm their rudeness by dignifying their interruption with an answer. They were acting like unruly, attention-seeking children, disrupting whatever was rightfully going on. So, hearing no question that required a response, Jesus just simply doodled and ignored them, waiting for the Pharisees to finish so that He could resume teaching the people who actually wanted to learn. **Can any of you teachers and parents relate?**

“*And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her."* And once more he bent down and wrote on the ground.” They kept bothering Him until finally, Jesus gave them an answer, but it was not what they hoped for or expected. Then, Jesus returned to His doodling, ignoring them and dismissing them. Jesus responded to them with one of the most well known and often quoted lines of Scripture, “*Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.*” or, as it is commonly paraphrased, {Let he who is without sin, cast the first stone.}. This turn of phrase is quite pithy and very quotable. It is used by people to justify getting away with *almost anything*, proving that many people completely missed Jesus' point in saying it.

This “red letter statement” is very well known but, considering its origin in this passage we must wonder, do we find support for its true sentiment elsewhere? Yes, in Matthew 7, “*Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.*” (Matt. 7:1-2 ESV) {and also in Luke 6, “*Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you.*” (Lk. 6:37-38 ESV)}, same sentiment, just with different phrasing and context. “*Judge not, that you be not judged.*” is also frequently used to justify, excuse, or get away with just about anything that we know we ought not to be doing. None of us want to be judged, especially when we are guilty. So, we try to deflect as a defense: trying to convince others to not do what we do not want them to do, by warning them that if they do, then the same will happen to them. {Don't throw stones! Don't judge me because you don't want to be judged either!} This proves how they have missed the point.

Both expressions are concerned with right, good, and proper judgment. Neither one is a prohibition against righteous judgment. Yet, this expression here in John goes further than just the mere fact of judgment, to also be concerned with the execution of justice; the consequences of judgment. Jesus forces us to consider the question, who is rightfully in a position to condemn?

After Jesus commanded, “*Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.*”, all of the woman's accusers disappeared, “*But when they heard it, they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him.*”. Jesus just reminded them of the Law's requirement, that “*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.*” (Deut. 17:7 ESV). Jesus reminded them that since they judged her, convicted her, and condemned her, then they were duty bound to carry out the sentence. Jesus also applied His teachings about righteous and fair judgment to this declaration, by also reminding them of what the LORD requires from His people, that we “*...do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God...*” (Mic. 6:8 ESV) because God also desires “*...steadfast love [or mercy] and not sacrifice...*” (Hos. 6:6 ESV); just like Jesus had answered a different group of Pharisees in Matthew 12:7.

So, why did they leave? They likely left because they were being convicted of their sin and because they could not deny the truth that Jesus was right. They knew that what they were trying to do was wrong, and they could not deny it, even to themselves. These men were all moral people: they knew the difference between right and wrong. Their hearts were not so hardened by their sin that they were utterly depraved and without conscience. Notice that when they left, it was the older and wiser ones who left first: the ones who knew Scripture better, those who had done the most introspection and, those who were willing to be the most honest with themselves. Everybody left, until only Jesus and this accused woman remained.

Now, the accepted principles of Old Testament biblical justice held that, especially if stoning a person for divine transgressions (for sin), those who accused and condemned someone participated in their execution (Deuteronomy 17:7). The reason for this was multi-layered.

- On the first level, according to Scripture it was a commanded part of how they should “*...purge the evil from Israel.*”. The ordained means of Jewish execution was by stoning for “*...their blood shall be upon them.*” (Lev. 20:27 ESV) since, through the hurling of stones a person was less likely to become polluted by contact with the sinner's blood and, since no one could know who specifically struck the fatal blow no individual would incur guilt and no single person could have been said to have killed them.
- On a second level, participation in the execution was considered as a rejection of that sin. They could not say that they did not know or that they were not warned.
- On a third level, by requiring the accuser to participate, it ensured that if they were false, but undiscovered, then the blood-guilt for condemning an innocent person would surely fall upon them (Acts 7:58-60).

So, since Jesus was the only person remaining and the only person who could possibly accuse her and enforce divine justice, this story calls to mind the words of Paul, “*Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died-- more than that, who was raised-- who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.*” (Rom. 8:34 ESV). The principle which both Paul and the writer of this story are teaching is that in matters of justice, the only ones who possess the right and responsibility to condemn are the righteous, and the only person who is truly righteous is Jesus Christ: the “*one who died*” and “*who was raised*” and who, fortunately for us, is presently defending His people before the judgment seat of God, by cloaking them with the imputation of His own earned righteousness, so that we might first be declared righteous and then become actually righteous through the Holy Spirit's work of sanctification.

Jesus is the only one with the right and authority to judge and condemn anyone (John 5:27) and when He returns, on that great resurrection day, He surely shall judge the living and the dead. He will dispense holy justice with all righteousness (Revelation 20:11-15), separating His sheep from the goats (Matthew 25:31-46)

and sending them on to either eternal life in His Kingdom or to eternal condemnation and torment in the outer darkness (Matthew 8:12) and the lake of fire (Revelation 20:15).

Yet that is the “will be”, what about the “right then”? What did Jesus do once it was just Him and the woman? He stopped His doodling, stood up and asked her, “*Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?*”

She said, "No one, Lord."

And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more."

Did Jesus do the right thing? Was this response and decision made by Christ **righteous**? Of course He did and it was, because He is Jesus. But, on the one hand, it does not seem quite right. How ought we to understand and interpret Jesus' response here or, to put it another way, how can we know that Jesus has “judged rightly” (John 7:24)? Elsewhere Scripture says:

- “*Keep far from a false charge, and do not kill the innocent and righteous, for I will not acquit the wicked.*” (Exod. 23:7 ESV)
- “*The LORD passed before [Moses] and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."*” (Exod. 34:6-7 ESV)
- “*On the evidence of **two** witnesses or of **three** witnesses the one who is to die shall be put to death; a person shall not be put to death on the evidence of one witness.*” (Deut. 17:6 ESV)

So, was this justice? Did Jesus let a guilty person go free? Did Jesus forgive her alleged transgression or, did He just simply give her a pass and ignore her sin? His decision was just, yet it was not justice. It was however, an example of mercy.

Allegedly, this woman was caught in the act of adultery, so her guiltiness and sinful ought not to have been in doubt. We know that God cannot “*acquit the wicked*”, or declare them to be righteous and innocent, if they are not. However, we also know that out of His great store of steadfast love, God is also willing to forgive “*iniquity and transgression and sin*” when someone is repentant.

The key to understanding this is found in Jesus's question to her, “*...where are they? Has no one condemned you?*”. Remember, the scribes and Pharisees intentionally brought this woman to Jesus asking Him to judge and condemn her for her alleged sin. But now that Jesus was ready to listen to her accusers: to hear their evidence against her; there was no one willing to speak against her. There were not two nor three witnesses gathered to speak against her and so, the charge could not be substantiated (Deuteronomy 19:15).

Did everyone leave because they felt convicted by their own sinfulness, and understand that their own lack of righteousness prohibited them from condemning her, as Jesus implied; or, did everyone leave because it was all a set up and the woman was honestly “not guilty” of adultery, as she was charged? Most sermons and interpreters that I have heard speaking about this passage, usually interpret things as the first case; but, in light of the deeper dive we have been doing in John and considering the growing willingness of “the Jews” to forgo “due process” in the case of Jesus (as we saw at the end of John 7), I suspect that they might have been willing to go so far as to try and convince Him to convict an innocent woman.

Now, with no witnesses to speak against her, Jesus rightly and justly said to her, “*Neither do I condemn you...*” because there was no evidence to justify a conviction. Notice however, that although Jesus did not condemn her,

neither did He forgive her for her sins, nor did He wave His hand and ignore them but, the impact of her past sins seems to disappear. She was found “not guilty” in this case, not because she was innocent of transgression, but because there was no longer a charge able to be brought against her. But Jesus does not really deal with her past within this story. Instead, He was more focused upon and concerned with her future, commanding her to, “...go, and from now on **sin no more**.” This conclusion and command are the reason why this story is rightfully included in Scripture.

Consider what this story teaches us about our salvation, specifically to our understanding of justification.

If we assume that the original charge against her was true and, she actually was caught in the act of adultery then, she was “guilty as sin”, deserving to be condemned and stoned. Next, since we all know that each and everyone of us are also guilty of sin: this may be few sins, many sins, big sins, or small sins; and that, each and every sin deserves “God's wrath and curse, both in this life and that which is to come.” (WSC #84), “*For the wages of sin is death...*” (Rom. 6:23 ESV; Genesis 2:16-17); therefore, we are each guilty and we all deserve to be condemned. We are all like this woman, in that sense, sinners.

Now, imagine if you will, that you find yourself standing before Christ's white throne with Satan standing opposite you. The Devil opens up a thick, heavily bound book and begins to read: accusing you publicly by naming off, listing, and proclaiming every sin that you have ever committed. Your head hangs low in shame and disgrace, expecting to be condemned, especially when you glance up and notice Jesus, who is seemingly not even paying attention to the case being argued before Him. Your heart sinks as you wonder what is going on.

Yet while Satan continues to accuse you, another book is opened by an angel and is handed to Jesus with the angel pointing to one line. Meanwhile, you catch a glimpse of the cover, reading “The Lamb's Book of Life”. Then, Jesus raises a hand and silences Satan. Next, He announces before the divine court that your name is written in His book, explaining that, since He has already accepted your guilt for sin, suffered your deserved penalty on the cross, and given you His righteousness and obedience as a gift, that Satan is dismissed.

Finally, after Satan leaves, Jesus asks you, “Where is your accuser? Has no one condemned you? Neither do I condemn you.” He proclaims, “Your sins are forgiven because I have paid your debt (*tetelestai*) therefore, you are righteous in **our** Father's eyes.” Lastly, He commands, “Go, and from now on sin no more.” as He welcomes you into His eternal Kingdom.

Now, back to this woman accused of adultery:

- We do not know whether or not Jesus forgave her sin.
 - But we know that Jesus refused to condemn her without any evidence.
- We do not know whether or not she obeyed Christ afterwards. We do not know whether or not she went and “sinned no more.”
 - Yet we know that she was given a “second chance”; that she was given the opportunity to earnestly repent and to live a changed life of obedient faith in righteousness.

Like her, we all have had “encounters with Jesus” and we have heard the message of the Gospel. We know that Jesus forgives the sin of His chosen people when they repent. We know that the Gospel is offered freely and universally, but also that only the effectually called will respond to it with faith and obedience.

Heeding the command of Christ and responding to the Gospel by {Going and sinning no more.} is not certain or sure evidence that a person has been saved. There are a lot of “good, godless people” out in the world. Many

people are kind, charitable, loving, and moral because those attributes are not unique to Christians. Those attributes are part of the universal moral law: a part of our universal human requirement to “love our neighbor”; especially as understood by the “Second Table of the Law”, the Commandments 5 through 10. But, if a person does not do this, then they cannot be a Christian.

If a person goes out and continues to intentionally, blatantly, and without any sign of repentance or remorse, sin then, that is a certain sign that someone has not been regenerated and redeemed, no matter what they say or claim. “Actions do speak louder than words.” That is why James explains that “...*faith apart from works is dead.*” (Jas. 2:26 ESV), because the truth of what we believe is proven by what we do and do not do. Just because a person once said “The Sinner's Prayer” or, came down to the front of a church during an “Altar Call” or, simply grew up in the church as the child of believing Christian parents does not mean that they are actually redeemed and forgiven. If they are acting according to the principles and standards of the world, acting contrary to the Word of God, then it is nearly certain that they are not a Christian (at least, not yet).

God's mercy and grace does not give us the freedom or a license to sin, instead our sense of obligation and our duty to be righteous is increased because we now know what our sin is: cosmic treason against the divine sovereign; and we now want to live and be right in His eyes. So,

- Although we do not know how this once accused woman responded to the grace and mercy that Jesus is said to have shown her, we are confident that justice will be done in her case and, in every case. Divine justice will be and is satisfied, either in the Person of Jesus Christ: His suffering and death; or, within the guilty person.
- Although we do not know how this once accused woman responded to the grace and mercy that Jesus is said to have shown her, each of us have our own opportunity to choose rightly in response to the grace and mercy that Christ shows us.

So, repent and believe, flee from sin, so that whenever you fail: whenever your old sinful nature gains an advantage over you and the Spirit within convicts you for sinning; then, you may repent and confess your sins and you may ask for Christ's forgiveness confident and certain that He will forgive you. Hear the good and glorious news of the Gospel. If you know and believe that the LORD God has called you to Himself, that Jesus Christ has died for your sins, that He has been raised to bring you into eternal life with Him, that He presently reigns in heaven for your good benefit and is interceding for you before the Father; if you trust that faith in Jesus Christ is your only hope for salvation, redemption, and rescue in life and in death; then, know that your sins have been forgiven; that your moral debt of sin has been satisfied with the atoning blood of Jesus Christ!

Therefore, “...*go, and from now on sin no more.*”. Live life obedient to Christ, according to His Word. Live as the righteous, which Christ has declared you to be and as the Holy Spirit is transforming you to be.

Therefore, this is the command of Jesus Christ: love the LORD, love others and then also, go and sin no more.

AMEN