

Week 2 – The Woman Caught in Adultery – John 7:53-8:11

Scripture Reading: Matthew 7:1-6

Introduction

As we continue with our series on evangelism according to Jesus we come this morning to another account that is likely familiar to most, if not all, of us – the account of the woman who has been caught in adultery

It's an interesting passage to consider when looking at the subject of evangelism because we can't say for certain that the woman in question was saved as a result of this encounter with Jesus

There are those who believe that this woman was, in fact, Mary Magdalene and some who believe she might well have been the woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears and dried them with her hair

And it would make a great ending to the account and it would be quite satisfying if we could identify this woman as one or the other because clearly both of those women became followers of Jesus

But the truth is; we just don't know who she was or what happened to her after this event because Scripture doesn't say

In fact, all we really know about this are the facts surrounding her adultery

Of course, the defining difference between adultery and fornication is that if at least one of the participants is a married person then the act is adultery

But we don't know if she was married or if the man she was caught with was married or if both were married

We can assume that she is a Jewish woman because of the interest of the religious leaders because they wouldn't have had any jurisdiction over a Gentile

So, while we don't know much about this particular woman and we can't say for certain that she became a believer, the account of her interaction with Jesus can still tell us some very important things about how to evangelize

Because the adulterous woman was an obvious sinner and how Jesus handled her shows us how we too should handle those around us who are also obvious sinners

We live in a day when it's popular to declare "only God can judge me" as a defense against any sort of lifestyle criticism whatsoever regardless of how far removed from what God desires that lifestyle might be

And the passage before us this morning along with others in the Bible are taken out of context and misconstrued to support the false narrative that Christians aren't supposed to judge anyone or condemn any type of behavior

While in reality what Jesus shows us in this passage is even harder than withholding all judgment – especially when dealing with those who are engaged in behavior that God's Word clearly tells us is reprehensible

In light of our commission to witness to the lost and see them become true disciples of our Lord, just how does God want us to react to their lifestyle and what should our interactions with them look like?

How should we interact with the person who is **openly living in a same-sex relationship**?

How about the heterosexual neighbor who is **living with their partner without the benefit of marriage**?

How should we approach **the woman who has had or is about to have an abortion**?

How would God have us approach the person who is **habitually abusing their drug of choice** or the person who uses **coarse language** or the person who **cheats in his business dealings** or the **gossip** or the **slanderer** or the **idolater** or any number of other sins that people are deeply engaged in all around us?

The passage before us shows us how Jesus handled a case very much like ones we will face when we get serious about reaching out to those who need to meet the Savior

If you're taking notes, we will first look at **the predicament** in these verses, then we will see how Jesus handled the situation as we look at **Jesus' practices**, and lastly, we will look at how to apply what we see Jesus do in **our prescription**

Please open your Bible to John 8 and follow along as I read our passage –

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.”

This passage presents a predicament that Jesus was faced with and as we begin we will notice four things that are important to our understanding of the passage

I. The Predicament

The first thing we want to notice is that the religious leaders were trying to trap Jesus

Look with me again at verse 6 [John 8:6] –

This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him...

Jesus was teaching publicly in the temple when these religious leaders thrust this woman before him and posed their question

This matter didn't require such urgency and it certainly could have been dealt with privately but they designed their approach to put Jesus on the spot before an audience in the hopes of entrapping him before a group of witnesses

The people have been flocking to Jesus in order to hear his teaching and the religious leaders are beside themselves

In their eyes, Jesus doesn't have the proper credentials to be a teacher so I think we can read they're calling him “teacher” as having more than a little sarcastic tone to it

After all, Jesus had no rabbinical training and he didn't seek the approval of the religious elite for who, what, or where he taught

Then, in the estimation of the religious leaders, Jesus was soft on sinners; after all, Jesus was known to be the guest in the homes of sinners and he entered into intimate table fellowship with the wrong kinds of people –

In their minds, Jesus wasn't qualified to be a true teacher of God's Word so they concocted this scenario to try to convince others and so rid themselves of him once and for all

And as we will see as we continue, they weren't really all that concerned about upholding the Law of Moses

But still, there were **three indisputable facts** that they thought put Jesus into a corner that he wouldn't be able to wiggle out of

First, **the woman was guilty**

After all, as our text says in verse 4 [John 8:4] her adultery wasn't just according to some report she had been caught in the act

Under Mosaic Law [Deuteronomy 17:6] the testimony of at least two witnesses was required before inflicting capital punishment

And the witnesses had to have seen the actual act itself – just seeing the two together, even in bed, was not enough

So we can assume that this requirement has been met in this case although we aren't told just how that happened and, given the nature of adultery, it seems highly unlikely unless the situation had been set up for this very purpose

Still, there seems to be no doubt of the woman's guilt and, as everyone knew, **the Mosaic Law said that adultery was a capital crime**

From all indications, it seems that by the time of Jesus, the Law in the case of adultery wasn't followed to its full extent and since adultery is a relatively private sin leading to a lack of witnesses, no one was actually executed for it any longer

But here the woman was guilty and the Law of Moses said she must be stoned – a fact that the religious leaders were quick to spell out for Jesus and the people around him [**John 8:5**]

And after stating the requirement of the Law they throw out their challenge to Jesus – *So what do you say?*

Obviously, if Jesus says, "Let her go," he would seem to be breaking the Law of Moses and the religious leaders would have discredited Jesus in the eyes of the people

But the religious leaders were really quite crafty and the dilemma they posed was even more involved because Jesus was also in a bind if he agreed with them and said that the woman should be executed for her crime

Because **Roman law said only Rome could carry out capital punishment**

The Romans had stripped the right of execution for religious offenses from the Jews

You will remember the dual trials that Jesus faced on the night he was arrested as he first appeared before the high priest, Caiaphas, to receive a sentence of death and then before the Roman governor, Pilate, for a legal determination

If the Jews could have killed Jesus on their own volition they would have but they didn't have the authority

If Jesus' verdict was, "Execute her as the Law says," the religious leaders could rush to the Roman authorities and claim that Jesus was an insurrectionist who was flouting Roman law

As I said, the religious leaders were crafty and they had planned their challenge well

They thought they had hoisted Jesus on the horns of a dilemma from which he couldn't escape

The woman was guilty, the Law demanded her death, yet Roman law forbids her execution

What was Jesus to do?

Before we take up the specific things Jesus did in response to the challenge issued by the religious leaders we notice that he stooped down and began writing or drawing on the ground

Many trees have given up their lives and gallons of ink have been spilled by people speculating about what Jesus wrote and why he took the time to write in the first place

It would certainly be nice to know the answers to those questions if only to satisfy our curiosity but the simple fact is that there is no way to know so it must not really matter –

If it mattered, I believe God would have revealed it to us because God's Word says we have everything we need to be fully equipped for everything he wants us to do

So rather than spend time in fruitless speculation, we will notice the effect that Jesus pretending to ignore the religious leaders had on them

Look with me at verse 7 [**John 8:7**] where we see that they continued to press their case until they forced a response from Jesus

Negotiation experts will tell you the more people want to close a deal the more they will talk and the more they talk the more they reveal about themselves and their position, their motivations, etc.

I believe that Jesus' feigned indifference to their question would have puzzled the leaders and likely would have angered them just a bit and our text tells us they continued to press him for a response

And in doing so they likely revealed more than they had originally planned

Now let's look at **four specific things** Jesus did

II. Jesus' Practices

First, Jesus didn't deny the fact that the woman was guilty as charged and **he regarded her activity to be sin**

We see that clearly in the last verse of our passage [**John 8:11**] where Jesus tells her to stop sinning

The reality is that Jesus didn't need the religious leaders to reveal the woman's sin to him because he already knew it

And because God is just he can't deny the presence or nature of sin and Jesus didn't deny the sin of the adulterous woman standing before him

Then, we see that Jesus knew all about the woman's accusers and **he took their intentions and actions into account**

We just considered how the religious authorities likely revealed more of themselves than they originally intended as they continued to press Jesus for a verdict

But we also know that, as God, Jesus didn't require such details to be revealed any more than he needs for our sins to be revealed

So the revelation was more for the benefit of those who were witnessing the exchange and for the religious leaders themselves

Look with me at verse 7 [**John 8:7**] where we see Jesus' response a response that is one of the most misused passages in the Bible –

“Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.”

This is another one of those statements often found in Scripture, like the statement we looked at last week that said Jesus had to go through Samaria, that seem so clear on their face that we miss what is actually being said

Jesus is not saying that anyone who has ever sinned, which is everyone, by the way, is disqualified from carrying out justice

If that were his meaning then we have to question all of the places in the New Testament where it shows us how to deal with the sins of others

Passages such as **Matthew 18:15-20** where Jesus tells his disciples how to confront a brother who sins; **Acts 5:1-11** where we see the account of Ananias and Sapphira; **1Corinthians 5:1-13** where Paul gives instructions on dealing with the man who was having relations with his father's wife and many others

Clearly, Jesus can't be saying that acknowledging sin and executing justice is outside the province of the church

But to understand what Jesus *is* saying we have to go back and look at the Law of Moses which the religious leaders were using to test Jesus

The scribes and Pharisees stated that *“the Law of Moses commanded us to stone such women”* and that's a true statement but it's also an incomplete statement

Let's look at what the Law of Moses actually says about adultery in **Leviticus 20:10** (**Deuteronomy 22:22** also says the same thing in a slightly different way) –

*If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, **both the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death.***

Notice that both parties involved are to be put to death and yet the religious leaders didn't see fit to bring the man involved before Jesus – they were actually in violation of the Law by their actions

And remember that they were insincere in this whole inquiry because they were only doing it to test Jesus in the hope of finally having some concrete charge to bring against him

They were malicious accusers and witnesses and the penalty for a witness that was shown to be malicious was the penalty that would have befallen the accused – in this case, that would have been the death penalty

Let's look quickly at where the rules for witnesses are spelled out in **Deuteronomy 19:15-21** which reads –

A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established. If a malicious witness arises to accuse a person of wrongdoing, then both parties to the dispute shall appear before the Lord, before the priests and the judges who are in office in those days. The judges shall inquire diligently, and if the witness is a false witness and has accused his brother falsely, then you shall do to him as he had meant to do to his brother. So you shall purge the evil from your midst. And the rest shall hear and fear, and shall never again commit any such evil among you. Your eye shall not pity. It shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.

And after reviewing the case and taking everything into account, Jesus did the only thing that he could do – **he upheld the Law**

But when he did he called for the Law to be fully followed as he said, “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her”

In Jewish law, the accusers had to begin the stoning as we see in **Deuteronomy 17:7**

And since none of them was without sin in bringing this charge against this woman; none of them could be a lawful witness and none of them dared throw the first stone and they all walked away

When only Jesus was left with the woman he finally addressed her and asked if there was anyone left to condemn her to death for her sin

And when she said there was not; Jesus again did the only thing he could do under the Law and he let her go her way and said he also didn't condemn her to death for her adultery but admonished her to cease her life of sin

In the final analysis, we see that **Jesus showed mercy and grace to everyone involved** when it came to applying the Law

He didn't turn a blind eye to sin – either the sin of adultery or the sin of attempting to pervert justice

But neither did he condemn those involved

Instead, he confirmed their sin and then showed them mercy in not punishing those sins and grace in giving the sinners the opportunity to see things as they were and to change

What we cannot rightly conclude is that Jesus refuses to judge or condemn sin and so because Jesus doesn't do those things then neither should his followers

The truth we need to remember is this; Jesus knew that this woman and her accusers would one day stand before him again as judge

And on that day if they had not recognized their sin and accepted his payment for it; they would be eternally condemned

But he showed them truth and mercy and he gave them time to change their ways and to accept him as Savior

So what can we take from Jesus' approach to apply to our evangelism when it concerns the obvious sinners around us?

III. Our Prescription

First, Jesus never asks or expects us to ignore sin or to call sin anything other than sin

But if we want to evangelize like Jesus we need to recognize that Jesus never condemned unbelievers

In fact, in **John 3:17** we read that God *“did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him”*

Had Jesus condemned the adulterous woman standing before him he would have been going against the very purpose for which his Father had sent him into the world

So why is it that so many people who call themselves followers of Jesus Christ act as if their God-given purpose in life is to call out and condemn the sins of those around us?

Folks, we need to learn to cut those who are not yet Christians some slack if we want to have a chance of winning their souls for Christ because judgment is a terrible strategy for evangelism

I want you to take a moment and consider how likely you are to be friendly with or take advice from those who make no secret of the fact that they disapprove of you and the way you live

Unless they are masochists people don't generally line up to be judged so if you want to continue to be ineffective at building relationships with the lost and reaching those who need the Lord keep on judging and condemning them

Because criticizing, judging, or condemning non-Christians for their behavior completely undermines the very purpose and nature of the gospel and the work of Christ

But if you want to seek to reach people as Jesus sought to reach them; try loving them instead of judging them

And true love doesn't ignore things that are harmful – again, God doesn't ask us to ignore or excuse sin - but he does want us to handle the sin of others in the right way

And the account of the woman caught in adultery shows us that when it comes to addressing sin in others we are wise if we do so while **reflecting on our own sins**

Not in the sense of the moral equivalency that is being trumpeted today that says if anyone has ever done wrong they lose their right to speak against anyone else's wrong-doing

But in the sense that recognizes just how much each of us has been forgiven and how much we still need to be forgiven each and every day

No matter what face we try to show to those around us God knows just how guilty we are

There are no private sins where the Lord is concerned and even if we think no one else on earth knows about some sin or some pattern of sin; God knows and we are all “caught in the act” by him just as this woman was caught by her accusers

According to **Matthew 22:39**, the second great commandment after fully and completely loving God is to love our neighbor as ourselves

And what we desire from God and from other people when it comes to our own sin is grace and mercy just as Jesus extended to the woman in our account – and really, to her accusers as well because he didn't deal with their sins right then and there either but let them walk away to consider what had been revealed to them

Jesus dealt with everyone in the account before us with love and mercy and he demonstrated grace toward them not just in spite of their sin but because of their sin so that they might come to repentance

Last week we saw how we cannot be isolationists but that we need to intentionally go to where unbelievers are

And when we do we will be confronted with all manner of sinful behavior so let's consider quickly how we should handle those instances when they arise in light of what we've seen in this account today

When the blatant, obvious sinner presents themselves we should acknowledge their sin but not condemn them for it
We should continue to interact with them with love and mercy and build a relationship with them so that they know we have their best interests at heart

We are called to show people who God is by our lives and when we are open about being followers of Jesus and are judgmental and harsh those we are interacting with will see God as also being judgmental and harsh

We will have failed to show them God's love and when they don't see practical evidence of that love in our lives; they will be hesitant to listen to the message of the gospel we would like to share

I have found it rather amazing in my life how unbelievers will begin to modify their behavior in my presence without me ever having to say a word or otherwise show disapproval of them

Simply being willing to be around them without criticizing them and still living as I know pleases God in their presence has usually had a profound effect on them

Eventually, the day will come when we have won the right to speak to them about their sin

Some crisis will arise in their life as a result of sinful choices or something else will tell us that the time is right to point out the reality of their sin and to urge them to obedience

Just as the near-death experience in the adulterous woman's life gave Jesus the opportunity to acknowledge her sin, show her love and mercy, and to implore her to go and sin no more

It's true that the gospel requires that people be made aware of their sin so that they will acknowledge their need

But, as the old saying goes, you can catch more flies with honey than you can with vinegar because no one wants to listen to a scold

The bottom line is we are to make the gospel attractive to all and Jesus shows us in this account how we can accomplish that without compromise

Conclusion

Was the woman saved during this encounter?

I would like to believe that she was but I simply don't know because the biblical account doesn't tell us

I do have to believe, though, that she was affected deeply by Jesus' attitude during the encounter

But even that is speculation on my part

What I do know is that Jesus showed her his love as he acknowledged her sin and he gave her the space to come to him for salvation

I also know that we dare not think that this account means that we aren't to judge anyone or that we're forbidden to say that their actions are sin because Jesus did both of those things in perfect righteousness

But there is a world of difference between recognizing a person's sin and saying that they are a sinner who needs to come to repentance and condemning them for their sin

No one is beyond redemption until after they have drawn their final breath so it behooves us to refrain from pronouncing a premature "death sentence" upon them either by our words or our actions

And when we recognize that Jesus waited to address the woman's sin in any way until he was alone with her and had gained her trust in a very profound way and how when he finally did address it he did it in a very loving, low-key way we see a pattern that we should follow in our dealings with obvious sinners

There will come a time when a person's sin must be addressed if we hope to lead them to repentance but we should only do so after we have earned the right to speak with them

And when we do speak it should be as a fellow traveler who is very aware of their own sin and our words should be accompanied by palpable love and concern for them and their spiritual well-being

I doubt there are many who are converted by someone who is openly denouncing them for living according to their nature

Jesus was known as the friend of sinners and his heavenly Father sent him into the world to live among his enemies and show them the way to salvation

And while Jesus never compromised concerning sin, he kept the lines of communication to the lost open by refusing to condemn them while there was still a chance they could be saved

And Jesus has sent his followers to do the same even for the most obvious sinners

Let's pray