

Studies from the Gospel of John

The Adulterous Woman – Chapter 8:1-11

1But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. 2At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. 3The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group 4and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. 5In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?"

6They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger.

7When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her."

8Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. 9At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. 10Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"

11"No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

In his book *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis says,

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!

In the beginning of chapter 8 of his Gospel, John shares the event, when Jesus confronts a band of cold, self-righteous "prigs" and a woman who was guilty of open sexual sin. Jesus handles both with such wisdom and grace that the story has become a favorite of many.

The story actually begins with the fifty-third verse of chapter 7.

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

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There are three remarkable contrasts in this story which make it a striking event.

1 - The first contrast is that of the great popular teacher who in spite of who he is, has no home but is living in the open evidently on the sides of the Mount of Olives. Following the dialogue in chapter 7 of John everybody "went to their own homes but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives." This passage and others confirm that he spent many nights alone on the mountainside. Even his disciples had homes they could stay in, but Jesus was often left entirely alone on the Mount of Olives.

If this event is properly placed in John, it occurred in early October. The nights at that time of the year in Jerusalem at that altitude are very chilly. Remember the account of the young man who told Jesus he would follow him wherever he went, and Jesus said, "Foxes have holes, birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head," (Matt 8:20, Luke 9:58). It is moving to think of the Savior of the world huddled in his robe under an olive tree, sleeping alone at night on the Mount of Olives!

2 - The second contrast is that of the judges.

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?"

It is clear their intent was to get Jesus and they feel they have him trapped in the situation. If Jesus forgives the woman, he goes against the Law of Moses and if he agrees to stone her, he shows no forgiveness for her sin.

It is difficult to read this account without asking, "Where is the man who contributed to this act of adultery?" They had been caught "in the very act," and yet only the woman is brought before Jesus. Some commentators suggest that perhaps the accusers knew the man -- he may have been one of their very own -- and they let him go. There is nothing in the scripture to suggest this, but the entire story shows that a double standard existed in those days, just like it does today.

These scribes and Pharisees referred to the law in the book of Leviticus in which God, speaking through Moses, had said that adultery was to be punished by stoning. They knew that Jesus was "The Friend of Sinners," that he was always on the side of the unfortunate and that he spent his time, not with the righteous, the wealthy or the respected, but with publicans and sinners. They obviously expected him to turn this woman loose. If he said that, he would be contradicting the Law of Moses and they would have him. They thought surely they had him trapped.

Not one of them could have remotely anticipated how Jesus would solve this. What he did was to stoop down and begin to write with his finger on the ground.

How much would you give to know what he wrote? The question of what Jesus wrote has intrigued scholars and students through the ages. How we wish we knew what he wrote! Many have guessed at it.

Perhaps he wrote from the words of the prophet Jeremiah.

**O Lord, the hope of Israel,
all who forsake thee shall be put to shame;
those who torn away from thee
shall be written in the earth,
for they have forsaken the Lord,
the fountain of living water. (Jeremiah 17:13 RSV)**

Whatever he wrote, the scribes and Pharisees apparently misunderstood him or ignored his actions. Perhaps they thought he was stalling for time and they kept pressing him, asking him again and again to answer them and tell them what he would do. So, standing up, Jesus looked them right in the eye and uttered these famous words, "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone." Actually the word he uses is "sinless," "let him who is sinless..." This is the only time Jesus ever employed this word in the New Testament: "Let him who is sinless cast the first stone."

The result is almost humorous. They are stunned. Speechless! He has taken the wind right out of their sails. They were sure he was going to let this woman go, but instead he completely upholds the Law of Moses. He says, in effect, "Yes, she must be stoned. But I am going to appoint the executioners." They are dumbfounded at his words.

It is very important to notice that Jesus does uphold the Law. Many people take his later words to the woman to mean that adultery is but a minor problem.

But Jesus does not indicate that. He upholds the Law. Adultery is sin. It violates marriage. It destroys society when it spreads and becomes commonplace. It wrecks homes; it injures innocent children; it is incredibly hurtful and attacks everything that God holds dear!

In the eyes of strict justice as stated in the Law of Moses it is deserving of death, and Jesus upholds that fact, much to the surprise of the scribes and Pharisees. But that is not all Jesus does. He also sees the hearts of these men. What he says, in effect, is, "Are you any better off than she is? Aren't your hearts filled with murder and hatred?" Malice gleamed in their eyes as they sought to exploit this woman's unfortunate situation in order to get at Jesus. But he read their hearts, and what he saw was worse even than her sin.

Someone has said, "If the inner thoughts of a man were written on his forehead, he would never take his hat off!" It is certainly true that God, who reads hearts, knows what is going on inside the hearts of both men and women.

While these scribes and Pharisees were standing there, stunned, Jesus stooped down and began to write. Again, we are not told what he wrote. When we realize that these are the only two times recorded in the Scriptures that Jesus ever wrote anything, we cannot help but wish that someone had preserved what he wrote.

Maybe he began to list the names and sins of those accusers who were standing in the crowd.

Maybe he wrote the four words, written once before by the finger of God, in the history of Israel. In the book of Daniel there is the story of King Belshazzar who put on a great feast and drunken revels and debauchery of every type was going on. Finally, the king resorted to the ultimate blasphemy of using in the revelry the sacred vessels that had been taken from the temple in Jerusalem. Suddenly a great hand appeared and wrote four words on the wall. The king turned ashen, and all the lords and courtiers were stunned and silent. They did not know the meaning of the Persian words, "MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN," which appeared, so they called in the prophet Daniel to interpret them. His interpretation was, "You are weighed in the balance and found wanting," (Dan 5:25-29).

We do not know what Jesus wrote, but the effect of his words is very clear. Verse 9 says,

9 At 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.

When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the eldest. Apparently the oldest one (the one with the longest record of sin) suddenly remembered that he had a previous appointment. The next one thought he heard his wife calling. Another had a sudden fit of coughing and had to leave. Another felt it was time for lunch. They disappeared one by one until no one was left but Jesus and the woman alone.

3 - That brings before us the third contrast in this story: The guilty woman who found herself forgiven.

10 Jesus 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."

What a beautiful picture! Notice how Jesus calls her attention to the fact that she has no human accusers. He has dismissed the jury; their malice has disqualified them to serve. Even today if a person is arrested for a crime, and nobody appears in court to accuse them, the judge will dismiss the case. So Jesus tells the woman, "Neither do I condemn you." He alone had the right to condemn this woman. He was the Sinless One, the only One who fulfilled the qualifications to stone. But he did not do so.

It is reasonable to ask why.

It was because he forgave her sin. Without forgiveness, justice must be satisfied. God never waves his hand and dismisses sin as though it is of no account. His own truth - His law - His holy character demand that any deviation from righteousness be punished. Justice must be satisfied -- unless sin is forgiven. So it is clear that the basis on which our Lord said these words is that he had found a way to forgive this woman her sin.

A legalist may protest at this point, "How could he do this? There was no basis for it. In fact, she doesn't even confess her sin, or repent of it, or even say she's sorry. Didn't Jesus himself go about preaching, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand'?" What do you say to that? The answer has to be, "Yes, there must be repentance." God is not a loving, grandfatherly type who says, "That's all right. Forget it. I won't hold it against you." That is never found anywhere in Scripture. That idea of God is a figment of someone's imagination which has been imposed upon a God of truth and justice. It is totally out of character. God never does that.

What he requires, of course, is an acknowledgment of evil. There must be repentance. Even God cannot forgive sin which is not acknowledged. When you say, "Yes, I did it, and it's wrong. I agree with you," that is repentance. Then forgiveness can come. "But where does this woman do that?" someone says. The

answer, of course, is, "Within her heart!" Remember we are dealing with One who knows the hearts of men. He knows what is going on in the inner life, the inner thoughts. He knew her heart. Somewhere in the course of this incident she had repented.

It is difficult to accurately picture what was going on when she was brought before Jesus. Perhaps she was pulled in, red faced, her hair in disarray. She may have been angry, upset, rebellious, and bitter, perhaps striking out against her accusers. She certainly was frightened. But when she sees how Jesus handles this crowd of hypocritical judges, and feels that his sympathies are with her, somewhere the mercy and love that was in his face and voice began to touch her. Hopefully, she realized how wrong she was, that she had sinned, and she repented. When she did, Jesus forgave her, obviously anticipating his death upon the cross for her.

The cross is always an eternal event in the mind of God. The sins of the people who lived in Old Testament days were also forgiven on the basis of the death of Jesus on the cross. There is no other way that God can forgive sin. In anticipation of that cross, Jesus forgave her sin. The proof of it is in the words he next said, "Go, and do not sin again."

Those are the words we need to remember. If we have acknowledged our guilt, and heard God's words of forgiveness, spoken by his son. Jesus is saying to us, "Go, and do not sin again."

When Jesus says these words to this woman it is clear that she has the possibility of fulfilling it. He never tells anyone to do something that he does not enable him or her to do. He does not forgive us in order that we might go back and continue in our sins. The Apostle Paul wrote these wonderful words to his son in the faith, Titus, "He gave himself for us, to redeem us from all iniquity, and to purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds," (Titus 2:14 RSV).

This story brings us to that place. We understand that when our sins are forgiven it is to free us that we might begin to live a different lifestyle; never to go back to the things that we have left behind. Sometimes we may. Sometimes we are weak, and need again the forgiving grace of God. But forgiveness is always designed to set us free. That is why it is given. When our Lord forgave this woman that is what he did: He set her free to be a different kind of person than she ever was before.

Perhaps no individual in history has illustrated this as well as John Newton. Newton was once a wild and sinful man, a slave trader who ran slaves from Africa to England. But God saved him. He was converted in the midst of a storm in the Atlantic when he thought he was doomed. He became a great preacher, and a great hymn writer in England.

We all know Newton's most famous hymn, the description of his own experience. He puts it this way,

Amazing grace! how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

Those are probably the sentiments that this woman kept in her heart throughout the rest of her life.