

Lesson 8

The Woman Taken in Adultery

Introduction

This story is found only in John's gospel and some think it was added sometime during the 2nd century.⁵⁸ Just before this, in John 7, Jesus has headed back to Jerusalem from Galilee. The Feasts of Booths is going on. Beginning in 7.14, He begins to teach in the temple telling listeners that He is the Christ and that He was sent from the Father, 7.28-29. Upon hearing this, the authorities try to arrest Jesus. *Yet no one laid a hand on him because His hour had not yet come*, 7.30. By the time we get to 7.37 we are witnessing events on the last day of the feast. Reactions to Jesus' teaching are mixed. Some enthusiastically embrace Him as the *Prophet or Messiah*, 7.40-41a. Others dismiss Him, noting that Jesus was from Nazareth. The Pharisees wanted to arrest Jesus, but the officers refused.

Now as 7.53 begins, we have reached the end of the day. Everyone has gone to their house. Jesus spent the night on the Mount of Olives. Early the next morning, He goes back to the temple and sits down to teach.⁵⁹ How far Jesus got into His teaching is unknown.

What can we learn from the rest of this section (8.3-11)? What is valuable in observing Jesus' encounter with the Pharisees who are bent on destroying Him? What can we learn from how Jesus interacted with the woman caught in *the very act* of adultery? And finally, how can this fill our lives with gratefulness and godly living today?

Three Background Passages

Before we begin, it is very important to consider three other passages that outline Jesus' objectives during His earthly ministry. These principles underly everything about the story:

He came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. As usual, he entered the synagogue on the Sabbath day and stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him, and unrolling the scroll, he found the place where it was written: The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed,

– Luke 4.16-18

⁵⁸ The story is missing from nearly all the early manuscripts and it is not found in the older translations of the New Testament, i.e., the Old Latin, Syriac, and Coptic). However, just about everyone believes the story is authentic. The church historian Eusebius in his *Ecclesiastical History* (39.16) mentions a similar story from Papias early in the second century, and it is also found in the third century *Didascalia Apostolorum* (ch. 7). Most current scholars place its addition to the Gospel of John in the second century, possibly because adultery was being treated then as a virtually unforgivable sin, and leaders wanted the church to realize God's forgiveness extended to sexual sins as well. So I would conclude that it is not canonical, but it is most likely a true story from Jesus' ministry. See Osborne, Grant R. *John: Verse by Verse*. Edited by Jeffrey Reimer, Elliot Ritzema, Danielle Thevenaz, and Rebecca Brant. Osborne New Testament Commentaries. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018, p. 204.

⁵⁹ Sitting down was identified in Jewish culture as a position of authority.

How does Jesus define His ministry? For whom did He come?

While he was reclining at the table in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came to eat with Jesus and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” Now when he heard this, he said, “It is not those who are well who need a doctor, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means: I desire mercy and not sacrifice. For I didn’t come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

– Matthew 9.10-13

What is the greatest problem of the religious establishment? To what did their sinful attitude blind them?

“Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take up my yoke and learn from me, because I am lowly and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

– Matthew 11.28-30

What does it mean to be *weary*? What does it mean to be *burdened*? What does Jesus offer for those who hurt?

John 8.3-6a: The Pharisees Seek to Ensnare Jesus

When we left John 8.2 it is early in the morning. Jesus has returned to the temple area, sat down, and has begun teaching. Visualize the crowd that is forming. Some are listening intently and amazed that the long-promised Messiah has come. Others are skeptical. *Is this really the Christ?* Now, see the scene interrupted by a throng of men dragging a woman bound in shame. Hear her crying. See the people look away in disgust. She’s probably only partially clothed. She’s dirty. All of her shame is completely outside in the open.

Those in the religious establishment are smugly smiling inside. They think they have Jesus right where they want Him. In their mind, there is no way He can get out of this one without discrediting Himself. He has to confront the situation. The woman is right in front of Him, minus her partner. The people are watching and listening. How will the Man from Nazareth respond?

Teacher, ...this woman was caught in the act of committing adultery. In the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?

– John 8.4-5

One can almost hear the indignation and self-righteous condescension of the Pharisees. And she is in a very bad spot. She is accused of a very serious violation. Leviticus 20.10 said the penalty for adultery was death. Deuteronomy 22.23-24 specified that a woman caught in adultery was to be stoned. Now, keep in mind, they are not concerned about her violation. In fact, it has been said that execution for adultery during the time of Jesus was rare and enforcement of it would have been spotty at best. Most people looked at the Old Law in an unfavorable way. The Pharisees could really care less about her. She’s just a pawn in their much larger game of trying to trap Jesus.

What's the trap? If Jesus said not to stone her, then He discredited Himself in condoning violation of the Law. If He said to stone her, He would lose His reputation as the friend of sinners. Then they could accuse Him of inconsistency because He had not stoned all the other sinners He had befriended.

John 8.6b-11: How Jesus Responds

Jesus stooped down and started writing on the ground with his finger.

– John 8.6b

Again, set the scene in your mind. See everyone standing around. The Pharisees are ready. Rocks are in their hand. The stoning is ready to begin. You can almost feel the attention shift as Jesus writes on the ground. *They persisted in questioning Him*, 8.7a. They are peppering Him with demands for an answer. The situation is urgent.

he stood up and said to them, “The one without sin among you should be the first to throw a stone at her.”

– John 8.7b

Then, He *stooped down again and continued writing on the ground*, 8.8. Now the reality is beginning to set in. They were adulterers, too. Now, watch them slither away:

When they heard this, they left one by one, starting with the older men. Only he was left, with the woman in the center.

– John 8.9

The NKJV reads:

Then those who heard it, **being convicted by their conscience**, went out one by one, beginning with the oldest even to the last. And Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst.

– John 8.9

If you were in this moment, convicted by your conscience, as you stood in the presence of Jesus, what would you do? Would you run away? Or, would you run to Jesus? Sadly, these men did not want to face the reality of their sin. They had the hardest of hearts.

Who stayed? *Only He was left, with the woman in the center*. Now again, think of the situation. It's completely embarrassing. You are lying on the ground, partially clothed and exposed, in front of the Son of God. What is there to say?

In 8.10, Jesus asks two questions:

1. Where are her accusers?
2. Had anyone officially condemned her?

She answers, *No one, Lord*, 8.11. Jesus then says:

“Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more.”

– John 8.11b

How Could Jesus Do That?

How do we tie together the concepts of judgment and grace? We struggle to understand how God harmonizes His justice with His mercy. What did righteousness and justice demand? *Her death*. What gift did grace bring? *Life*. The Scriptures present both sides.

God is a God of justice:

There is no other God but me, a righteous God and Savior; there is no one except me.

– Isaiah 45.21b

I have known only you out of all the clans of the earth; therefore, I will punish you for all your iniquities.

– Amos 3.2

There will be affliction and distress for every human being who does evil, first to the Jew, and also to the Greek;

– Romans 2.9

God is righteous. God will punish people for *every* iniquity.

God is the God of mercy:

Who is a God like you, forgiving iniquity and passing over rebellion for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not hold on to his anger forever because he delights in faithful love. He will again have compassion on us; he will vanquish our iniquities. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. You will show loyalty to Jacob and faithful love to Abraham, as you swore to our ancestors from days long ago.

– Micah 7.18-20

The LORD passed in front of him and proclaimed: The LORD—the LORD is a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in faithful love and truth, maintaining faithful love to a thousand generations, forgiving iniquity, rebellion, and sin. But he will not leave the guilty unpunished, bringing the consequences of the fathers' iniquity on the children and grandchildren to the third and fourth generation.

– Exodus 34.6-7

But God, who is rich in mercy, because of his great love that he had for us, made us alive with Christ even though we were dead in trespasses. You are saved by grace! He also raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavens in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might display the immeasurable riches of his grace through his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

– Ephesians 2.4-7

God pardons iniquity. He passes over transgression. He delights in steadfast love. He moves with compassion. He treads our iniquities under foot. He casts our sins into the depths of the sea.

So, how can Jesus be the God of justice and yet forgive sin?

Who has the right to judge? James 4.12 provides the answer:

There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?

– James 4.12

In our story, Jesus bears this out. Only He has the right to judge. And His decision is that she walked away completely justified and righteous before God. *How could He do that?* The answer is that He was

headed to the cross and He would die in her place. He would bear in His body her sin . . . and that of the whole world.

But he was pierced because of our rebellion, crushed because of our iniquities; punishment for our peace was on him, and we are healed by his wounds. We all went astray like sheep; we all have turned to our own way; and the LORD has punished him for the iniquity of us all.

– Isaiah 53.5-6

This should emotionally move us. Jesus came for the brokenhearted. Jesus came for sinners. *Jesus came for you.* He died for your immorality, lies, cursing's, foul thoughts, and every bad deed. He stood in your place:

He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree; so that, having died to sins, we might live for righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.

– 1 Peter 2.24

This does not mean He excuses our sin. In fact, there is nothing in salvation by grace that ever winks at sin. Encountering Jesus demands a transformed life . . . a turning away from sin.

For sin will not rule over you, because you are not under the law but under grace. What then? Should we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? Absolutely not! Don't you know that if you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of that one you obey—either of sin leading to death or of obedience leading to righteousness?

– Romans 6.14-16

Sin was never treated lightly by Jesus . . . but this story reminds us all that even the vilest sinner can be offered the opportunity to begin life anew.

For Thought and Reflection

1. What are the three principles we can pull out of Luke 4.16-18; Matthew 9.10-13; and Matthew 11.28-30? How do these serve as the framework for this lesson?
2. What happened as Jesus was teaching in the temple early on the morning after the Feast of Booth's ended? What was the woman's sin? What was the penalty?
3. Explain the motives of the Pharisees in bringing this woman before Jesus. What were their intentions?

4. How does Jesus react as they press Him for an answer?

5. What does His response imply? How do the men react?

6. Who is left after the men leave? What are the two questions Jesus asks?

7. How does Jesus respond?

8. What are some things that might make you uncomfortable with how this story ends?

9. Who has the right to judge? Is it our job to determine the woman's fate ... or anyone else's for that matter?

10. Does salvation by grace ever imply that we *wink* at sin? Does salvation by grace imply that there will be sins that are not paid for? Explain.

11. How does this story most challenge you as a Christian?

12. How does this story encourage you as a Christian?