

John, Pt 32: When Law Meets Grace

John 7:53 ESV [[They went each to his own house, **8:1** but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. **2** Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them. **3** The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst **4** they said to him, “Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. **5** Now in the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?” **6** 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. **7** 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.” **8** And once more he bent down and wrote on the ground. **9** 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. **10** Jesus stood up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” **11** She said, “No one, Lord.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.”]]

- I. You may not have known this, but the story you just read is actually controversial. That’s why in some versions the story is bookended by brackets. You may also have a footnote in your Bible that reads something like this:
 - A. “**The earliest manuscripts do not include 7:53–8:11.**” What does that mean, and more importantly, should that affect the way we see scripture in general?
 1. First, what does it mean? Let’s begin by understanding that we know of nowhere on earth where is there a first edition, autographed copy of the book of John (or any other Biblical writing). So how did it wind up with us?
 - a) In the early days of the church (having no books as we know them), the churches would hand-copy the letters sent to them by the Apostles and these letters eventually became the books of the New Testament. They did this in order to share Apostolic teachings with other believers.
 - (1) This ongoing process contributed approximately 25,000 complete manuscripts and fragments in various languages to the source material we now have. And all this before the 15th century! That also doesn’t account for the perhaps millions of manuscripts we know were lost, or otherwise destroyed by tyrants, fires, disasters, etc.
 - (2) The accumulation is also impressive when you consider the passage of time, that much of the early Christian world was illiterate, and that these manuscripts were very difficult and expensive to produce!
 - (3) Also impressive is the fact that the earliest fragment of John ever found dates to about 125 A.D. That is only 50 or so years after the original was written!
 - b) In short, everything that has wound up in today’s New Testament is there because of a decades-long process of comparing several of the earliest manuscripts available, using very high standards that ranged from examining the consistency with the Old Testament revelation of God, to agreement with the known facts and character of Christ, and so on.
 - c) For the most part, a consensus had formed on the list of books we have now by the early 3rd century (some 1800 years ago!).

2. In the vast majority of cases, the content of the various manuscripts was virtually identical, lending tremendous confidence to their authenticity. On the rare occasions when there **was** a variance, the suspect passage was either left out of the scriptures entirely or included, but not arbitrarily. Items were included only on consideration of other extenuating circumstances.
 - a) One such omission that we've already looked at is John 5:4, which appears to explain a local legend as opposed to gospel truth. For this reason, most modern versions omit it, while it is still found in the KJV.
 - b) In the case of John 7:53-8:11, the problem is that it is not found in **any** of the earliest manuscripts that are available to us, though it is found in a large amount of **later** manuscripts. It's absence in the earlier ones however, makes it suspect. But what does "suspect" actually mean?
 - (1) It means we can probably say with a great degree of certainty that this story **did not** come from the pen of the Apostle John. So that means that it is fraudulent and we should probably throw it out, right?
 - (2) Not so fast. There are a few things to consider. While most scholars agree that it is not an **original** account, many of them feel (for various reasons) that it is still an **authentic** account, but that was added later.
 - (3) "Most likely, the story had been circulating for a long time—it was an oral tradition—and a scribe (or scribes) felt that, since it was already accepted as truth by consensus, it was appropriate to include it in the text of Scripture." (gotquestions.org/John-7-53-8-11.html)
 - c) This fact alone however, does not necessarily support John 8's inclusion. the article on gotquestions.org goes on to point out that "truth is not determined by consensus. The only thing we should consider inspired Scripture is what the prophets and apostles wrote as they 'spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit' (2 Peter 1:21)." *ibid*
 3. It would seem there is another argument however, that would **support** it's inclusion; and that is to consider what we know about the details of Christ's life and character, and there is nothing in this passage to contradict that.
 - a) We see Christ forgiving other sexually immoral women in Luke 7 and John 4.
 - b) We see him cautioning people against harsh, hypocritical judgement in Matthew 7.
 - c) We see him asserting his right to forgive in Mark 2.
 - d) We see him declaring himself to be the ultimate judge in Matthew 25.
 4. All of these facets of who Christ is are included in this little story. His deeds are not exaggerated by it, nor his glory diminished by it.
- B. So I don't know if you are convinced one way or the other, so here's what I'd like to propose we do with this passage. Let's **not** look at the passage as a single card in a house of cards...if we remove it the whole structure collapses! I assure you, the doctrine of the scripture's inerrancy remains intact, with or without it.
- C. Rather, perhaps we should view it as an "extra shingle" on a well-shingled roof. The roof, being well-shingled already, doesn't require it; but it's presence won't hurt anything either. So let's look at the story...

- II. **John 8:2 ESV** Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them. **3** The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst **4** they said to him, “Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery.”
- A. Imagine the awkwardness and humiliation. Jesus is teaching when all of the sudden the air is shattered by the abusive shouts and scuffling of a mob, and punctuated by the desperate shrieks of a terrified woman.
- B. As Jesus looks up, that woman is violently hurled to the ground before him. She is nearly naked and is grasping her torn, remaining garments in order that she might not be exposed. Her mouth is bleeding; her body is bruised from the struggle. Tears roll down her cheeks as panicked sobs escape her lips.
1. Behind and above her a cold, unfeeling voice brings a devastating accusation. “We caught her Jesus! In the very act!” The words cause her dirty, tear-streaked face to burn with the redness of her indignity.
 2. Can you relate to her? Not falsely accused, but busted! Your hand was in the cookie jar, and you were caught. There was no denial that could clear your name. There were no excuses that would spare you the devastating shame. There was no more chance to conceal your crime or to escape.
- C. This poor woman knew the consequences prescribed, yet she still must have nearly given way when she heard this heartless mob who had dragged her out to be judged say **John 8:5 ESV** Now in the Law, Moses **commanded** us to stone such women. So **what do you say?**” The crowd had come prepared, rocks in hand, to fulfill Moses’ directive. She certainly abandoned all hope.
1. The law was clear, and it didn’t offer loopholes or “wiggle-room”. In her culture, Moses reigned supreme. He was the great law-giver of her people and what he said, went. She would surely die. If the Rabbi was a righteous man, he couldn’t possibly disagree with **Moses!** The mob of leaders had made it clear, citing Deuteronomy, “Moses **commanded** us”. No appeal!
 - a) Yet they had asked him, “So what do you say?” Did this give her any chance? Would they really leave the decision in the hands of Jesus, even after they had so viciously extracted her from her bed of sin and guilt?
 - b) She tried to steal a glimpse of his face. Would she find his expression to be warm, kind, and merciful; or icy, just and filled with wrath?
 2. But, astonishingly, he did not return her gaze, nor did he respond to her accusers. Instead, he merely bent down and scribbled in the dust of the temple courts with his finger! What was this all about?
 - a) There has been much speculation on this point. Some, realizing the hypocrisy and misogyny of these spiritual bloodhounds, have suggested that perhaps he clearly wrote the name of the **man** with whom she had been caught for all to see. This would have been particularly unnerving since he may have been standing there in her would-be jury!
 - b) Similarly, some have theorized that instead he wrote the names of every single mistress kept by these pillars of the community. But the Bible does not tell us what he wrote and so we simply do not know.
 3. If I were to guess, however, I would assume it was Jesus’ way of scorning their attempts to force him to play the judge in such an obvious kangaroo court. He

was signifying “intentional disregard (Ellicott)”; saying that he had zero interest in playing the role they had thrust upon him.

- a) They did not ask him to judge out of respect for him! The text says, “**that they might have some charge to bring against him**”. They were testing him. Would he be just, upholding the law; or merciful, forgiving the guilty?
 - b) If he said, “stone her”, then all the drunks, tax collectors and whores that were so drawn to him would have no reason to hope; decimating his credibility. If he said, “let her go”, they can accuse him of dishonoring Moses, the chosen spokesman of Yahweh, as well as breaking God’s own law. Either way, they’ve got him! He’s trapped! No way out!
- D. As he keeps drawing in the dirt, the voices grow louder and more persistent. “Teacher! Didn’t you hear us? The law of Moses has been violated! Justice cries out! Stop playing in the sand and render a decision, for goodness sake!”
- III. After what must have seemed like an eternity to the scribes and Pharisees, and a nano-second to the accused, Jesus stops drawing and stands up. A pit quickly forms in the woman’s stomach; her chin quivers uncontrollably.
- A. With a sigh, Jesus says, “**Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.**”
 1. According to mosaic law, this was not an invitation to execute the offender, but a command. The law said that it was the responsibility of the entire community to carry out capital punishment.
 2. Yes, Moses had spoken. She was guilty. She would surely die. But Christ had made a curious stipulation. Her execution must be initiated by one who was morally perfect.
 - B. He then immediately stoops back down and goes back to drawing in the dirt.
 1. He does not ask for their interpretation of what he said, for it is unnecessary. When Christ speaks, he speaks with authority that no one can challenge.
 - a) Can I make one additional observation about his strange action of writing in the sand? **Exodus 31:18 ESV And he gave to Moses, when he had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God.**
 - b) By writing with his finger in the dust of temple, could it be that Jesus wasn’t merely ignoring the Jews, or passing the time in an awkward situation; perhaps he was declaring to them exactly **whom it was** that these supposed “experts in the law” were carelessly addressing.
 2. Was he pointing out in dramatic symbolism that while they wanted to measure him against **Moses**, they were missing the fact that he was **God**; therefore in actuality he, and not Moses, was the lawgiver?
 - a) What we do know for sure is that Jesus’ qualifying condition (“him who is without sin”) takes all the wind out of their sails. Their minds are flooded with images of forbidden bodies along with the lustful memories and experiences associated with them.
 - b) Perhaps in their zeal to entrap Jesus and make an example of this woman, utilizing the commandment, “You shall not commit adultery”, they are suddenly, acutely aware that they are actually breaking the 6th and 9th commandments: “do not kill” and “do not bear false witness”.

3. As a sidebar, it's important to recognize that Jesus was not making flawlessness a condition for dealing with the sin of others. If he were, every policeman, judge and jury would be disqualified! Not to mention pastors!
 - a) The point is that when our judgements are driven by hypocritical self-righteousness, and not motivated by zeal for God's glory, and tempered with a humble awareness of our own faults, we are **always** wrong.
 - b) And the temple court, which mere moments ago was a chaotic symphony, falls silent; except for the steady dropping of rocks...one by one, and the shuffling away of humiliated men...one by one.
- C. But while Jesus does not ask for their opinion, notice that he also does not release the woman. Unlike with the woman in Mark 14, he does not rebuke her accusers, telling them to leave her alone. She remains there; afraid, weeping.
 1. The moments tick by until slowly all of the men who have brought her to face divine justice have evaporated from the temple, like a morning fog, and she sits alone in the midst of a sea of discarded rocks.
 2. Her heart began beating rapidly as Christ stood once more. There was something about him so holy, righteous and just! Was he the one "without sin"? Had he driven those bloodthirsty hypocrites away so that he could pick up their stones and vindicate God's name by putting her to death?
- D. But then he speaks. **"Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"** She sheepishly looks around. "No one, Lord." she says. She now felt more exposed than she had all day, as though there was nothing hidden from his eyes. Yet she no longer had a sense of shame, but one of being fully known.
 1. She knew in that moment that if he began to pick up rocks and hurl them at her, that there would be justice in it. She was guilty and he was pure. She had been caught red-handed and there was no arguing the facts with him.
 2. She did not have the sense that she was less guilty in his presence, but exponentially more so. Yet she felt safe being entrusted to his care. If he kills her, or if he frees her, what he does will be righteous, and she knows it.
- E. Then he says it. **"Neither do I condemn you..."** And she stands there, stunned. Though those that **shouldn't have**, tried; the one who **could have**, didn't.
 1. She had gotten away with the same sin many times, escaping the notice of the Pharisees; but not this time.
 2. And yet she didn't feel like she'd she'd gotten a "get out of jail free" card, or "gotten away" with something; rather, she felt released from a prison that had already long held her, delivered from a snare that held her fast.
- IV. But Christ isn't done. He has one more parting word before wrapping up this incident. With a hand placed firmly on her shoulder and his eyes locked on hers he says, **"...go, and from now on sin no more."** A more accurate translation might be, "Go, and no longer be a sinner".
 - A. It was simultaneously a declaration of a new identity, as well as a command to not squander the grace that had been bestowed upon her.
 1. **Philippians 1:27a ESV** Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ...

2. Many people falsely believe that to fight sin and to have a zero tolerance level for it is a “works based” mentality. That is ridiculous and not at all the teaching of Jesus. He says, “...go, and from now on *sin no more*.”
- B. Our lives would be meaningless had he never said, “Neither do I condemn you” by taking our place in just condemnation on the cross. But the cross does not release us from the obligation to be transformed; instead, the cross empowers us to be transformed!
1. The dichotomy between the law and grace that you see in books like Romans and Hebrews is not meant to give us the impression that grace is good and law is bad. Romans 7 say the law is “holy” and “spiritual”. The problem, then, lies not with the law but with me. I am wretched and broken.
 2. But grace comes through Jesus and says, “You are wretched, but neither do I condemn you. You were sold under sin, but now, go and sin no more.”
- C. Problems result for us when we (like the Jews) drag others before God’s justice without a humble consideration of our own weaknesses. It is also a problem when we try to roll up our sleeves and “get to the work” and try and fix ourselves. You must first be freed from condemnation by the grace of Christ and only then will you be empowered to “go and sin no more.”
1. And the work is two-fold. First, he changes your identity. He says, “You are no longer a sinner. It is not who you are. I do not condemn you for your past. My grace is sufficient for you in the present, and your future is hidden and safe with me. Therefore, you are an entirely new creation.”
 2. But next he gives us the Holy Spirit’s power to give us increasing daily, real-world experience of that eternal reality. **Ezekiel 36:27 ESV** *And I will put my Spirit within you, and **cause you** to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.*
- D. The promise of this passage is that genuine, increasing holiness will be the experience of every true believer in Jesus Christ.
- V. Have you had the experience of standing exposed and shamed before Jesus and hearing him say, “Neither do I condemn you”? What an amazing joy that brings. It is no less wonderful to hear him say, “Go, and from now on, sin no more” knowing that he will be the fountain and source of all your transformation and success.
- A. In order to know this joy, you must be convinced that he is your only hope of salvation; not your good deeds or merits.
 - B. But you must also know that he hates sin, and his desire for you is to make you holy, not leaving you as you are.
 - C. **Ephesians 5:25 ESV** *Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, **26 that he might sanctify her**, having **cleansed** her by the **washing** of water with the word, **27** so that he might present the church to himself **in splendor**, without **spot** or **wrinkle** or **any such thing**, that she might be **holy** and **without blemish**.*