



# Central Peninsula Church

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John 8:1–12

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## The Exposure of Shame

### OUTDOOR SERVICE

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Nobody likes to be exposed. The last few years we've seen countless athletes exposed by a little test. Baseball players, track stars, cyclists have offered denial after denial, but the experts say that the tests don't lie. A few have finally come clean, but often times their denials only turned into excuses for why they had to do what they did.

It reminds me of a clerk who was working one night in a Honeybaked Ham store. The store was equipped with security cameras and she was watching them when she saw a woman come in the store, grab a ham off the shelf and stuff it up her dress. With the ham wedged between her thighs, the woman waddled toward the door. The clerk was stunned and wondered what she should do. Just then, the ham dropped out from between the woman's legs, hit the metal handicapped ramp with a loud bang, and then rolled down to the bottom. The shoplifter didn't miss a beat. She quickly turned her head and yelled out, "Who threw that ham at me?" Then she ran out of the store.

The more I read and the more I talk to people, I'm convinced that something we all fear perhaps more than anything else is exposure and the shame which so often results. But, in a strange way, we need that exposure, because without it we can never really change. Our secrets, unexposed, become for us the chains that keep us from real freedom.

This was the case in an incident recorded in the Gospel of John, chapter 8, where we see a number of people exposed in an encounter with Jesus. It's significant that this story takes place in the context of one of the most memorable statements Jesus ever made: "**I am the light of the world.**" This is a story about what happens when we're exposed to that light. This is a story about how we react when that light shines on us and we feel exposed, ashamed. This is a story about how one woman found healing in that light. It's also about a group of men who found a dark place to hide.

#### I. The Scene is Set (John 8:1–2).

The incident takes place at a time when the opposition to Jesus was mounting. It was during the second half of His three year ministry, and though He still attracted huge crowds wherever He went, they were actually divided in their opinion of Him. This division reached as far as the religious leadership of the Jews. A

few of them were genuinely impressed with Him. But most of them, particularly a group called the Pharisees, were deeply offended by Him. He claimed to be God, and yet in their minds He didn't act like God. His obedience to the Law was suspect at best, and He hung out with the wrong kind of people. So they began to make plans to destroy Him.

They thought an ideal time would be during one of the great feasts that the Jews celebrated in Jerusalem each year. As a matter of fact, one was coming up—the Feast of Tabernacles. They knew that Jesus and His cronies would be there. Perhaps they could somehow incite the throngs of people who would come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast against Him. Perhaps they could catch Him in an error that would expose Him as the charlatan He was. And so they devised a plan.

It didn't happen until the morning after the 7th day of the feast. Originally, the Feast was just seven days, but in the first century an extra day was tacked on as sort of a rest-up day, like the day after Christmas, when hardly anyone goes to work. The Feast of Tabernacles was a celebration. It was really a week-long party that for some people had lost all religious significance, and they needed a day to rest up. As dawn broke that day, listen to how John sets the scene. "**But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. Early in the morning He came again into the temple, and all the people were coming to Him; and He sat down and began to teach them**" (John 8:1–2). Later we learn that this was in a part of the Temple known as "the Treasury," which was a favorite spot for people to congregate.

#### II. The Sinful Exposure of a Shamed Woman (8:3–6a).

**A. The Shamed Woman:** It was there, as Jesus taught the people, that He was suddenly interrupted.

**"The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery, and having set her in the center of the court, they said to Him, 'Teacher, this woman has been caught in adultery, in the very act. Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women; what then do You say?' They were saying this, testing Him,..."** (vv. 3–6a).

What a scene this is! Who was this woman? We don't know a lot about her. There is no indication that she was a prostitute by trade. It's possible that she was a young woman who just got caught up in the celebration.

We don't know what private need she sought to meet as she gave up her virtue the previous evening. If we read between the lines, we might imagine her somehow unhappy or disappointed or bored with her life. Perhaps she was just lonely. She ends up celebrating with friends and they sang and danced into the late hours of the evening. She met a man who was young and carefree and so good looking. He seemed to genuinely care for her, and somehow in the early morning hours, one thing led to another...

But then came the shocking exposure. A band of stern-faced men broke into the room. She reached for her lover, but he quickly slipped away. Then the men reached for her. She barely had time to grab a sheet to cover her naked body. They dragged her off through the streets and she stumbled along, sobbing, ashamed, crying out for mercy. People looked with disgust on a loose woman who perhaps deserved what she was about to get. They brought her to the Temple and threw her down before the Teacher as "Exhibit A" in their court of law.

**B. The Sinful Exposure:** On the surface, it seemed that these men had an open and shut case. How do you argue with eye witnesses? How do you argue with God's Word? But righteousness is not always what it appears to be. There are a number of things wrong with this whole scene. First of all, these men knew that this form of punishment was seldom used anymore. For good or for bad, it was an outmoded law by almost everyone's standards. The Romans, who controlled Palestine at the time, didn't even allow the Jews the right to carry out capital punishment. In cases like this, if she was married, divorce was the usual course of action, not stoning. Not only that, but where was the MAN who she had been with? Wasn't he guilty too? The law they refer to says that both the woman and the man must die. Why was he getting off?

But perhaps the ugliest thing about this scene was their blatant disregard for the woman. Why drag her through the streets? Why throw her down in the midst of the crowd? Why not just keep her in custody and present the case to Jesus? Pascal once said that there is no greater evil than that evil which men do in the name of God. That seems to fit here. To them this woman wasn't a person, she was a thing, a case study; as I said before: "Exhibit A." She's nothing more than a category to them: "Moses said to stone *such women*." She has no name, she has no uniqueness, she has no voice. They're like the doctor who can't remember any of his patient's names; he only remembers them by their illness. "Oh, I remember. You're the one with a gall bladder problem."

One of Rembrandt's great paintings was of

this very scene. He painted it in 1644 and it was called "The Woman Caught in Adultery." In it, the Pharisees have come to Jesus with this woman. She's kneeling, with her face turned down in shame. Every eye in that painting is on Jesus. Everyone is looking to Him to hear His verdict on this legal question. But Jesus, in contrast to everyone else, has his eyes fixed on the woman. He's the only one that seems to notice her as a person, not a legal question.

Jesus is now confronted with a real dilemma. John calls it a "test". If He condones the stoning, He'll be in trouble with the Romans because they didn't allow it. But if He stops the stoning, how could He claim to be the Messiah who fulfilled the Law? And this was what the Pharisees expected Him to do. They knew He was a man who was a little soft on crime. They had seen Him befriend men like Zaccheus, the conniving tax collector; and women like Mary, who was employed in the local red-light district. So by this test they hoped to gather irrefutable evidence that He couldn't be trusted as a man who stood for the truth.

### III. The Silent Exposure of Shamed Men (8:6b-8).

**A. The Silence of the Light:** How did Jesus respond? He did something rather strange.

**"...so that they might have grounds for accusing Him. But Jesus stooped down and with His finger wrote on the ground. But when they persisted in asking Him, He straightened up, and said to them, 'He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.' Again He stooped down and wrote on the ground"** (vv. 6b-8).

He begins by not responding at all. He begins in silence. Why is this? Some say that Jesus was stumped at this point and needed some time to think through His response. Others say that the whole scene made Him so sick that He couldn't respond. But Jesus knew what He was doing here. And by His silence He did a very important thing. He slowed the whole process down. He took control of what was fast becoming a mob scene. These men were incensed. The crowd was squeezing in, trying to see, anxious for a response. But Jesus refused to be rushed. He slowed everything down. And in doing that, He did a great favor, not only to this woman, but to these men. This forced these men to stop and think for a minute about what was happening.

**B. The Action of the Light:** As part of that silence, He also stooped down level with the woman and wrote something with His finger on the ground. No one knows what He wrote, but it's interesting that these men had come to Him armed with the Law of Moses; the Law that the finger of God Himself had written on tablets of stone. Well, it was as if by using His finger to write in the dust Jesus was claiming that Law as His own here. How could it be used against Him when it belonged to Him? God was writing again here, not high up on Mt. Sinai, but stooped down with an adulterous woman in the Jerusalem dust.

**C. The Words of the Light:** But these men wouldn't let up. They crowded around Him, shouting in His face, repeating over and over again: "Tell us what You think, Rabbi. Give us your decision!" And so finally He spoke: "**He who is without sin, go ahead and throw the first stone.**" With these words, Jesus remained faithful to the Law and protected the woman at the same time. "Go ahead and throw," He says. "Moses was right. But let the one who has not sinned throw first." He gave them permission to throw, but if they did they knew they would be denying what their own Law said was true of them. They were all sinners. No one could claim perfection. And there is something else about these words that was very important. With these words He shifted the attention and the pressure away from the woman and towards the Pharisees. All eyes were on them now. The ones who had done the exposing were now being exposed. The light was now shining on them and their faces were flushed, their shame exposed.

Then He stooped and wrote in the ground again. I imagine Him very close to the woman at this point. I even wonder if He placed Himself between the woman and those men, as if to say, "If you're going to throw, you had better aim well." And there was that silence again. It must have seemed like hours passed. It was a very tense moment. What do you do when you're exposed to the light and your shame is exposed?

#### **IV. Response to the Light (8:9–11).**

**A. The Pharisees Depart into the Darkness:** Look what they did. "**When they heard it, they began to go out one by one, beginning with the older ones, and He was left alone, and the woman, where she was, in the center of the court**" (v. 9). I imagine a young Pharisee immediately scooped up a stone and took aim. As he was just about to throw, a scribe next to him held back his arm and nodded towards the other side of the crowd. There a gray old man, the most venerated of all the scribes, shuffled out, his head bowed and eyes cast down. Then another white-haired leader, and then another. The younger ones knew that to throw a rock now was a slap in the face of his elders. And so, one by one, frustrated again by this country preacher from Galilee, they filed out.

It's like when you lift up a rock by a river bed and all the little bugs underneath scurry for the darkness. These men were exposed to the light and instead of staying in the light, they ran for cover. And as they departed, they left the woman in the same place. Why should they bother with her now; she was no longer useful to them. Case closed. We'll get Him next time. And she's left alone with Jesus.

**B. The Woman stays in the Light:** It was just Jesus and the woman now. "**Straightening up, Jesus said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you?' She said, 'No one, Lord.' And Jesus said, 'I do not condemn you, either Go From now on sin no more'**" (vv. 10–11). Here is one of the most tender scenes in all the

Bible. At first, she wasn't sure what to think. On the one hand, she was still so afraid. She was left alone with the one man who was qualified to stone her. She was in the presence of a holiness far more dreadful than the petty moralism of the scribes. She was exposed in a way far deeper than the Pharisees could uncover her. Those eyes penetrated her soul; He seemed to know her. Now the light was shining on her. But then she heard his voice. For the first time that morning, someone spoke to her! She was no longer a thing to be spoken about. She was a person to be spoken to. He asks her a question: "**Where are they? Does no one condemn you?**" He knew the answer to that question, and so did she. She had seen them file out. But He wanted her to look and He wanted her to respond, because part of what had kept this woman in darkness was the fear of what others would think of her and do to her if she were exposed. Jesus wanted her to look and see again that she needn't fear rejection any longer. The playing field had been leveled. They were no different than she was.

Then she heard Him deliver His own verdict, "**Neither do I condemn you.**" The only one qualified to condemn refused to do so. The Holy One looked at her and her shame right in the face and said, "Not guilty." But how could He do this? Wasn't it sin? How could He remain just and holy and let sin go unpunished? Jesus spoke these words in the shadow of the cross. He who stooped beside her in the line of fire of those stones, would soon Himself be naked and exposed, shamed and hung on a Roman cross. His sacrifice would be God's gracious covering for her shame. So, the light that exposed the woman's shame also graciously removed it.

But He wasn't finished yet. He then sent her away: "**Go your way and sin no more.**" Yes, it was sin. No, His forgiveness wasn't license to sin more. In actuality, it was His love and forgiveness that set her free to live a life of purity and wholeness. Because she was loved, she no longer had to look for love "in all the wrong places." She no longer had to fill her emptiness with men. In these words, Jesus gave this woman great dignity and worth. She wasn't what she thought she was. She didn't have to live that way. She could live a life pleasing to God. With His help and His love, she really could be free from sin. She stepped into the light of day feeling whole, clean, restored. What had started as a miserable day ended up wonderfully pivotal to her whole existence.

#### **CONCLUSION**

As she walked off that day, Jesus stood tall on the Temple steps. Look at v.12. "**Then Jesus again spoke to them, saying, 'I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but**

**will have the Light of life.”**

Nobody likes to be exposed. Nobody likes to be shamed. This adulterous woman and these self-righteous men were no different in this way. As a matter of fact, they both had spent their whole lives trying to avoid exposure, trying to avoid the pain that coming to grips with what they really were on the inside would bring them. They both had spent their life hiding. These men covered themselves with religion, which helped them feel good about themselves while shaming others. This woman covered herself with the love of a man, someone who told her she was beautiful, needed, and special. All of us hide; the question is, what do we hide under?

Dallas Willard writes about a two-and-a-half-year-old girl named Larissa in her backyard who one day discovered the secret to making mud, which she called “warm chocolate.” Her grandmother had been reading and was facing away from the action, but after cleaning up her granddaughter’s mess, she told her not to make any more chocolate and turned her chair around so she could watch her. The little girl soon resumed her “warm chocolate” routine, with one request posed as sweetly as a two-and-a-half-year-old can make it: “Don’t look at me, Nana. Okay?” Nana (being a little codependent) of course agreed. Larissa continued to manufacture warm chocolate. Three times she said, as she continued her work, “Don’t look at me, Nana. Okay?” Willard writes: “Thus the tender soul of a little child shows us how necessary it is to us that we be unobserved in our wrong.” It may be that out of all the prayers that are ever spoken, the most common one is simply this: “Don’t look at me, God.” It was the very first prayer recorded in the Bible. God came into the Garden of Eden looking for Adam and Eve and called, “Where are you?” Adam answered, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid,” “so I hid.” In other words, “Don’t look at me, God.”

Exposure is painful, but it’s also necessary. It’s necessary if we’re ever going to be whole. The light that exposes is also the light that heals. Sooner or later Jesus comes around to each of our lives and turns over our safe little rocks and exposes us to the light. And when that happens, we have a choice how we will respond. Like the scribes, we can scurry off into the darkness, finding new rocks to hide under. Or like this woman, we can stay in the light, face the pain and the shame, and then let Him take that shame away. It’s hard to do because deep down we’re convinced that if He or anybody else knew our sin, they would immediately hurl stones of rejection at us. But listen carefully to His words because He speaks them to you as He did to her: **“Where have they gone? Does no one condemn you? Neither do I condemn you.”** And then, though we would rather not live with the responsibility, listen again as He says, **“Go away now and sin no more.”**