



When I was about five years old I had a problem. I wet my bed. Not often but I still feared one day I'd be sleeping at someone else's house and it would happen. And then it did happen. We were on a family vacation, staying at the home of friends. I was in a sleeping bag and sure enough it happened. I thought I could hide it and hoped it would dry before night time, so I just left it and went out fishing for the day with all the guys. I'll never forget coming back to the house and driving up the driveway and seeing my sleeping bag hanging out to dry in front of the house for all to see. I wanted to run and hide!

At some time or another, we've all been exposed and humiliated. This especially happens when we're caught right smack in the middle of doing something we know is wrong. But imagine for a moment that the One who exposed you and caught you was God. Every one of us knows we'll face a day when we stand before God and answer for what we've done. Most of us would like to put that off as long as possible. But what if it happened today? If God were to catch you right smack in the middle of doing something you absolutely know is wrong, what would He do? You might answer that question in a serious way, or with sarcasm, or even with humor. But if we're honest we'll admit many of us picture God carrying a big, heavy bat, ready to clobber us for everything wrong we've done.

If you're wondering what God would do, you don't have to wonder any longer. There is a story in the Bible about a person caught right in the middle of doing something she knew was wrong; something that in that culture was worthy of death. And she was brought to Jesus.

This story is recorded in John 8. It's significant it takes place in the context of one of the most memorable statements Jesus ever made: *"I am the light of the world."* What does light do? It exposes. This is a story about what happens when we're exposed by that light and what happens when that light shines on us.

It takes place at a time when the opposition to Jesus was growing. Though He still attracted huge crowds, most of the religious leaders, called the Pharisees, were deeply offended by Him. He claimed to be God, but He didn't keep their laws and He hung out with the wrong kind of people. So they wanted to bring Him down.

They thought an ideal time would be during one of the feasts the Jews celebrated in Jerusalem each year. One was coming up

called the Feast of Tabernacles. Many people would be there. They knew Jesus and His buddies would come. Perhaps they could catch Him in an error that would expose Him as the charlatan He was. They devised a plan.

Sin is embarrassing

One morning, at the tail end of the week-long celebration, Jesus came into the Temple area; a crowd gathered and He began to teach. But suddenly he was interrupted. *"And the scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery, and having set her in the midst, 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?' And they were saying this, testing Him, in order that they might have grounds for accusing Him."*

What a scene! Who was this woman? We don't know a lot about her. Probably just a young woman who got caught up in the celebration. We don't know what happened the night before. We might imagine her somehow disappointed or bored with her life. Perhaps she was just lonely. She ends up celebrating with friends and they sang and danced into the night. She met a man who paid attention to her, and one thing led to another. Times haven't changed; people are people.

But then came the shocking exposure. A band of stern-faced men break into the room. They reach for her. She barely has time to grab a sheet to cover her naked body. They drag her off through the streets and she stumbles along, sobbing, ashamed, crying out for mercy. People look with disgust on a loose woman who perhaps deserved what she was about to get. They bring her to the Temple and throw her down before Jesus as "Exhibit A" in their court of law.

I don't think this woman needed a committee of men to tell her she was a sinner. When we do something wrong, our conscience tells us. That's why we feel guilty on the inside. This could be any of us. Suppose God were here this morning to expose you. He could say, "This man has come to church but he's lusting after the woman two seats in front of him. This woman is going out on her husband and he has no idea. This teenager is on drugs but his parents aren't aware. This person is into pornography but no one knows." Can you imagine how ashamed you would be if you were exposed for all to see like this woman?

Sin is self-indicting

On the surface, these men seem to have an open and shut case. How do you argue with eye witnesses? But there are a number of things wrong with this scene. First of all, these men knew that stoning was a form of punishment seldom used anymore. It was an outmoded form of capital punishment and it was against Roman law for Jews to do it. Second, where was the **man** who she had been with? Wasn't he guilty, too? The law they refer to says both the woman and the man must die. Why is he getting off? This is all wrong!

The ugliest thing is their blatant disregard for the woman. Why drag her through the streets and throw her down in the midst of the crowd? Why make a public spectacle of her? Pascal once said there is no greater evil than the evil men do in the name of God. That fits here. To them this woman isn't a person; she's a thing, a case study. Notice their words "Moses said to stone such women." She has no name, no voice, no identity. 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."

So Jesus is confronted with a dilemma. 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, He'll be accused of compromising God's Law. You might say He was between a rock and a hard place.

We are all sinners

How did Jesus respond? He does something rather strange. *"But Jesus stooped down, and with His finger wrote 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. I wonder 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 dust.

John then writes, *"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.'"* 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 gives 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. Jesus didn't say, "He who is without adultery...." He said, "He who is without sin..." No one could claim to be without sin.

No one here can claim that, either. Sin is sin. God, being a holy God, demands perfection. It's like if you drove over to Santa Cruz

and decided you were going to swim all the way to Hawaii. You might be a great swimmer and make it a few miles. Some of you wouldn't get past the buoys. But it doesn't matter if you swam five miles or five feet; you would all fall short and drown. In the same way, God's standard is perfection; it's out of reach. So the person who has told a white lie is just as guilty before God as the person who murders. No matter how good we are, we all fall short. We don't like to look at ourselves that way. We like to look at ourselves as being better than most people. It's like the boy who came in from a Little League game. His mother asked, "How did you do?" He said, "Fantastic. Even the coach said I was the best of the worst three." That's all we are—the best of the worst.

So all eyes are on the Pharisees now. The ones who had done the exposing are now being exposed. The light is now shining on them. John says, *"And again He stooped down, and wrote on the ground."* I see Him very close to the woman. 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." It must have seemed like hours passed. It was a tense moment.

Now they're exposed. These Pharisees had come wanting Him to cross-examine her, and they left realizing they'd been cross-examined by Him. Look what they did next, *"And 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 midst"* (v.9). I imagine a young Pharisee immediately scooped up a stone and took aim. As he was about to throw, the guy next to him held back his arm, nodding towards the other side of the crowd. A gray haired old man, the most venerated of all the scribes, shuffled out. Then another, and still another. The younger ones knew to throw a rock now was a slap in the face of these elders. So one by one, they filed out as well. Why did the oldest leave first? It makes sense to me. The older we get, the more we come up with ways to sin we never thought of before and the more aware we are of how far short we fall of even our best ideals. I'm old enough to realize that if you knew me as I know me, you probably wouldn't sit there and listen to me right now. But before you get up and leave, remember that if I knew you as you know you, I might not want to talk to you right now.

Christ is passionate to save us from sin

So now it's just Jesus and the woman. Look what happens, *"And straightening up, Jesus said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you?' And she said, 'No one, Lord.' And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you; go your way. From now on sin no more'"* (verses 10-11). Here is one of the most tender scenes in all the Bible. At first, she must have been afraid. Now the light is really shining on her. She's left alone with the one man qualified to stone her. She's in the presence of a holiness. But then she hears his voice. Finally, someone speaks to her! She's no longer a

thing to be spoken about. He asks, *“Where are they? Does no one condemn you?”* He knows the answer; so does she. But He wants her to look because part of what had kept her in darkness was the fear of what others would think of her if she were exposed. Jesus wants her to see the playing field has been leveled. They're no different than she.

Then she hears 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 shame right in the face and said, “Not guilty.” Do you know what this means for all of us? It means the God who has a perfect right to condemn us is the one with a passionate desire to forgive us. That's what God says to everyone here this morning. The God with a perfect right to condemn you is the one with a passionate desire to forgive you.

But how can He do this? Isn't He holy? Isn't sin sin? How can He remain just and holy and let sinners off the hook? 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. In a way, he would be stoned for us. His sacrifice would be God's gracious way of atoning for our sin.

But God wants to do more than just forgive us; he wants to transform us. So Jesus sends her away with these words, “Go your way and sin no more.” Yes, it is sin. No, His forgiveness isn't license to sin more. In actuality, it's His love and forgiveness that sets us free to live a life of purity and wholeness. Because we're loved, we no longer have to look for love in all the wrong places. In these words, Jesus gives this woman and us great dignity and worth. We don't have to live that way. We can live a life pleasing to God. With His help and His love, we really can conquer sin. I believe that woman lived differently from that day on. Grace does that to us.

Conclusion

Nobody likes to be caught and exposed. Both this adulterous woman and these self-righteous men had spent their life hiding. We're no different. Some of us like these men cover ourselves with religion, which helps us feel good about ourselves while shaming others. Others of us are like this woman. Our sin is more obvious and blatant; out there for all to see. And we pretend it

doesn't matter; we don't care. But we do. All of us hide, the question is, what do we hide under? This story teaches us we can't hide from God. We've all been caught in the middle of sin. But the God who has a perfect right to condemn us is the God with a passionate desire to forgive us.

I heard a story of nine-year-old who was sitting at his desk in school when suddenly there is a puddle between his feet, and the front of his pants are wet. He thinks his heart is going to stop. When the boys find out, he'll never hear the end of it. And when the girls find out, they'll never speak to him again. He put his head down and prayed: “Dear God, this is an emergency! I need help now!” He looks up, and here comes the teacher with a look in her eyes that says she knows. As she's coming to snatch him up, a classmate named Susie is carrying a goldfish bowl filled with water. She stumbles and dumps it in his lap. He pretends to be angry but prays, “Thank you, Jesus! I'm born again!” Now, rather than being the object of ridicule, he's the object of sympathy. The teacher rushes him downstairs and gives him gym shorts to put on while his pants dry. When he comes back to class, all the kids are cleaning up around his desk. This sympathy is wonderful! But the ridicule that should have been his has been transferred to Susie. She tries to help, but they tell her to get out: “You've done enough, you klutz!” As the day progresses, he gets more sympathy and she gets more ridicule. Finally, at the end of the day, they're waiting at the bus stop. The boy walks over to Susie and whispers, “Susie, you did that on purpose, didn't you?” Susie whispers back, “I wet my pants once, too.”

God is not out to shame you and condemn you. He's out to forgive you and set you free from a life dominated by sin. Two thousand years ago Jesus did something to cover your sin; he did something to transfer the blame from you to him. Because of what Jesus did on the cross, God wants to pardon you rather than punish you. All you have to do is say “Yes” to his offer.

All of you have a stone in your hand. That stone represents judgment and condemnation. With that stone some of you judge and condemn others. Others of you see that stone as God's judgment and condemnation of yourself. Either way, this story calls us to lay our stones of judgment down.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

© 2010 Central Peninsula Church, Foster City, CA
Catalog No. 1351

This message from Scripture was preached on Sunday, October 3, 2010 at Central Peninsula Church
1005 Shell Boulevard | Foster City CA 94404 | 650 349.1132 | www.cpcfc.org. Additional copies available on request.