



I wanted to share some findings that will relate to this passage. Baylor University Professors Paul Froese and Christopher Bader conducted a survey in 2005 of the religious views of over 1,600 U.S. adults. They published their findings in a book called *America's Four Gods: What We Say about God & What That Says About Us*. They discovered that our American conception generally falls into one of four different categories: an **authoritative** God who punishes people who sin; a **benevolent** God who helps people out when they need it; a **critical** God who is passive until passing final judgment; or a **distant** God who has ordered the universe but is totally uninvolved in human affairs. Interestingly, the report also found that American's views on social, political, moral and scientific issues are usually tied to their conception of God.

Have you ever thought about how your view of God affects the way you live and the way you treat others? Theologian and pastor A. W. Tozer said, "What comes to mind when we think of God is the most important thing about us. For we tend, by a secret law of the soul, to move toward our mental image of God."

For example, if you believe God deeply values all human life you won't be so quick to look down on people who are very different than you or don't hold the same views you do. If you think God is always looking for a reason to reprimand you, much of your motivation will be based on fear and insecurity. There's a direct correlation between how you view God and how you live your life. We should do our best, then, to have the right view. So the important question we want to answer today is: how should we view God? Today's passage is going to help us find an answer.

We're continuing our series on the book of John. Last week we saw Jesus teaching in the temple courts at the Festival of Tabernacles. The religious leaders were intent on stopping Him; they sent temple guards to arrest Him but they wouldn't lay a hand on Him because of the power of His words. Jesus leaves for the Mount of Olives about two miles east of Jerusalem, a place He often rested at and taught from. At daybreak He's back at the temple, sitting down as rabbis would in the outer courtyard under the pillars instructing His disciples about the Kingdom of God. All of sudden there's a commotion off to the side and a noisy group of people come near. Take out your bibles and let's pick up the story in John 8.

But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all

the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him (verses 1–6).

The Religious Leaders

The religious leaders put together a new trap for Jesus and didn't waste any time springing it by bringing a woman guilty of adultery. The teachers of the law were recognized scholars. They were influential because they interpreted the Law of Moses and determined how it should be applied in daily life. They acted as advisors, theologians, and lawyers. The Pharisees were also influential. They believed it was important to be highly regarded for doing visible forms of piety: ceremonial washings, fasting and praying for all to see, being seen at festivals, etc. They were obsessed with following the Law of Moses and their own man-made laws and they expected everyone else to as well, happy to impose their expectations on you and shame you if you fell short.

Now, there's a problem with that kind of view. It puts you at the center of the universe because the idea is if you're a good person and work hard at keeping all the religious rules, God is obligated to give you a comfortable life and some status. The focus of your life becomes you, not God. Self-centered people believe God owes them something; that's their view.

There's a great play/movie from the 80s called *Amadeus*. One of the main characters is Salieri, a talented composer who makes a deal with God, saying "Lord, make me a great composer! Let me celebrate your glory through music, and be celebrated myself. Make me famous through the world. In return, I vow I will give you my chastity, my industry, my deepest humility, every hour of my life, and I will help my fellow man all I can. AMEN!" He keeps this vow for a while, working hard, helping the poor, etc. Then Mozart appears, a musical genius gifted by God, but a lewd, vulgar, seemingly godless person. Salieri gets so angry at God for not gifting him like Mozart even though he worked so hard to be good, that he tells God, "From now on we are enemies, You and I." Sadly he turns his anger on Mozart and becomes determined to ruin his life.

We're probably not as extreme as that, but if we make ourselves the focus of our life we can act like Salieri and insist that God give us a better life because of all we do for Him.

There's more. If we think God owes us something it will affect how we treat others. Our translation says they "brought" her in (v. 3) but the idea is they yanked her around like a farm animal. They didn't think twice about exposing her sin and humiliating her, and they're advocating her execution. She stopped being a person and became simply an object of disgust. Self-centered people can treat others as objects; using people, like they use God, to get what they want.

Why? If we think we belong to an exclusive, religious group of people that God blesses we can see people struggling, or acting immoral, and be unsympathetic and judgmental. It becomes "us" versus "them."

How you treat "sinners," people who break taboos like this woman, reveals a lot about you. Are you quick to point fingers or criticize? If so, check your view of God. We can never obligate God to give us what we want; God is bigger than that! Whatever He gives us is a gift of grace, something we can't earn. He's generous and loving to everyone equally! Therefore, we're not better than anyone else and we shouldn't look down at or objectify people because of their failures. Sometimes people suffer for reasons beyond their control. And honestly, we're all just one bad choice away from hurting ourselves and others. Let's not be people who treat others as objects.

The Woman

Let's move on and shift our attention on this woman. Can you imagine how she's feeling? We're not even given her name; she's simply known as "a woman caught in the act of adultery." It's like her sin defines her, and in a society with far less regard for the dignity of women, this was a painful label to carry. The fact that she doesn't say a single word in her defense, when capital punishment is a possibility, shows that she was wracked with guilt and regret, deeply humiliated, and afraid for her life. If she's like us, she's wants her guilt removed, she's hoping for a miracle to save her. What's her view of God? People who carry guilt and shame are desperate for God's grace.

Make no mistake, she did something serious. She broke the marriage covenant and now some lives are shattered. We don't know why she did but many times what starts out as self-centeredness can grow to hardness of heart, then bitterness and anger, mistrust and feelings of loneliness, which can end up in infidelity. Hurting people can look to and get obsessed with all sorts of things to ease their pain; like workaholicism, food, or sexual immorality. Unless we go to Jesus Christ for the unconditional acceptance and grace that we need, we'll never experience true peace and freedom. People who carry regret and shame are desperate for God's grace.

Maybe you can relate to her, maybe you've done or said something that hurt people who trusted you. There have been times in my life where I've carried regret for a long time, too long; seems like the regret never goes away. If we carry it around it can lead to self-loathing, which is dangerous.

Now there's a difference between that unhealthy sense of shame and a normal, healthy conviction of sin. I have a two-year-old little firecracker named Jeremiah. I love that boy! He's at the stage where he likes to find boxes or containers full of things and promptly empty those things all over the floor. One day he took daddy's wallet and began to empty it card-by-card. He didn't know I was watching; he glanced up to see if I noticed. He knew he was getting into hot water. I caught Him and his eyes got really big! Big Jeremiah is the same. My wife Evelina made some cookies and we enjoyed some after dinner. But before bedtime I snuck in the kitchen and peeked to see if I was alone and ate a few more. I was caught red-handed by her and put them away! If you need to make sure no one is looking at you that's probably not a healthy thing to do. Both little Jeremiah and big Jeremiah knew we were doing something wrong.

It's like that when the Holy Spirit convicts us of sin. We respond not by denying it, but acknowledging sin, feeling remorse, and repenting, which means changing our mind about it and we stop. If we sin and carry that shame, we'll be desperate for God's grace.

Getting back to our story, the religious leaders brought this situation to Jesus because as a teacher, He had the ability to decide on a point of Law that had serious consequences. As a matter of fact, the Law of Moses **did** prescribe capital punishment in the case of adultery. Both the religious leaders and Jesus knew Deuteronomy 22, which says: "***If a man is found sleeping with another man's wife, both the man who slept with her and the woman must die. You must purge the evil from Israel***" (Deut. 22:22).

That seems harsh to us but remember, God wanted Israel to be His people, set apart from other nations. God especially wanted Israel to reflect His holiness in their relationships. Stoning isn't specifically mentioned here but the idea is capital punishment.

If you read Deuteronomy 22 closely and apply it to this situation a question should pop up in your mind. Where is the other guy? I don't mean to be graphic, but when they found her they actually caught two people in the act, so where was he? Something fishy's going on. He could have escaped, but that's not highly likely because these religious leaders knew what was required to accuse someone of a capital sin. Again Deuteronomy says: "***On the testimony of two or three witnesses a person is to be put to death, but no one is to be put to death on the testimony of only one witness***" (Deut. 17:6).

With at least two or three of them witnessing firsthand it was more probable they let the guy go, generally having contempt for women, or he was an accomplice to their scheme; both despicable options. At the very least they egregiously neglected the Law and at worst, they would be partly responsible for her death.

The real reason they brought this woman is that they wanted to end Jesus' ministry. This was a loaded question. On one hand, they knew Jesus was merciful and hoped He would negate the Law by saying she shouldn't be stoned. At that point they could rightly discredit Him as a teacher and possibly arrest Him. On the other hand, if He upholds the Law and approves stoning they would again discredit Him; calling Him a hypocrite because He didn't strictly follow Sabbath rules. He'd also be in trouble with the Roman officials who alone had power to execute. Plus, stoning wouldn't fit with His ministry of grace and compassion.

It seems like an impossible situation for Jesus. He had to uphold the Law of Moses because God is holy and just, but at the same time He needed to show mercy because God is gracious to sinners. What answer would you give?

Jesus' Response

The accusers won't stop pressing Jesus and the tension is building to a fever pitch. Jesus does something that stuns everyone.

But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. 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 (verses 6–9).

Jesus starts drawing in the sand! There's much scholarly speculation about what He wrote but ultimately we don't know. But then, with a perfect balance of truth and grace He speaks decisively; *"let anyone of you without sin be the first."* God wrote the Law and the apostle Paul said the Law is "good," Jesus would never negate it. He simply turned the tables and made them look at themselves. His words struck them like stones. They took advantage of this woman to accuse Jesus, an innocent man. They realized they are sinners and it humbled them and softened their hearts. The older guys leave first; having more life experience to grasp Jesus' truths. The younger ones follow. This is an encouragement to mature believers here to lead others in how to obey and follow Christ. Even when you have to show others how to admit you're wrong, confess sin, and repent by turning away. That takes guts and humility, but it's a sign of maturity.

Faith and Forgiveness

Finally just the woman remains. But guess what? She's not the same person who was dragged in minutes earlier. She's undergone radical transformation! Her view of God had changed.

Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" "No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin" (verses 10–11).

He stands up and looks at her face to face, meeting her on her terms. He calls her "woman," which sounds rude to us but was actually a term of respect in that culture. Jesus loves her in spite of what she's done. He knows she's spiritually poor and hurting; He doesn't bring up her sin or kick her while she's down, and He won't do that to you either. Jesus loves you no matter how much hurt you've caused or how ashamed you are. Up until now she probably viewed God as someone who was about to punish her. But her view changed because of what Jesus does for her.

When He asked if anyone condemned her she finally talks, saying "No one, Sir." Our translation says she addresses Him as "Sir" but it goes beyond mere respect. Don't miss this. The word is also translated "Lord," as in "my Savior." No one, Lord, condemns me. It's at that moment that she crossed the line from unbelief to belief. He went from being just a great man to being her Savior, by her faith.

"Neither do I condemn you," Jesus said. These are the most meaningful words of the entire passage because it means she's been forgiven. Those were costly words for Jesus because it meant He would have to pay for her sin on the cross. Jesus never condones her adultery. We're all responsible for our sin. God is holy and just and therefore has an unyielding insistence that sin and evil be punished. That puts us in a dire situation. But God is at the same time absolutely gracious and merciful. He made a way for you to be forgiven by sending Jesus to die on your behalf.

So to answer our first question, how should we view God? Forgiven people believe God loves them unconditionally. That's how we should view God. God loves you and He forgives you. And if Christ is your Lord, no one can condemn you. Martin Luther said about this passage, "in Christ's realm no punishment is to be found, but only mercy and forgiveness of sins, whereas in the realm of Moses and the world there is no forgiveness of sin, but only wrath and punishment."

We talk a lot about faith; faith goes beyond simply an intellectual acceptance of the facts of Jesus' life and death. It means confidence that Jesus Christ, and nothing else, has atoned for your sin on the cross. That's good news! Christ hadn't died yet for her but she still believed in Him. The cross is how Christ can be both just and justifier for those who have faith as Paul says in Romans 3. Jesus offers the free gift of forgiveness to the religious leaders too, but they don't want it, at least not now. They still view God as someone who owes them something.

His final words are *"Go now and leave your life of sin."* The idea for her and us is not to lead a sinless life, which is impossible, but to begin a new life of faith with the ongoing attitude that the

love of Christ is the center of our identity. These words are also a command to obey Christ and to turn away from sins we didn't before. We can do this because Jesus broke the control of sin over our lives and we are empowered by the Spirit of God to execute the choice to not sin. That's a message of great hope for us.

Notice how Jesus doesn't say, "First leave your life of sin, then I won't condemn you." No, grace is a free gift. First He forgives, and then He tells her to live out her faith. What love He shows us! Forgiven people know that God loves them unconditionally.

In closing, of all the characters in this story, who are you most like? Are you like the religious leaders who believe God owes them a comfortable life because they follow the rules and do religious things? Don't love God for what He can give you; love Him just for who He is. Let the humbling reality of the Gospel sink in. We're all sinners, but we're saved by grace and Christ is calling you to enter into a rich life of living by grace; depending on Him in prayer for your needs. Evaluate how you treat others and if you're critical or judgmental ask God for the grace to show others the same compassion and understanding that Christ shows you.

Are you like the woman who looks to other things like relationships, or success, or your looks, for your sense of acceptance? These aren't bad things by themselves. But if you truly want a transformed life, love Jesus more than anything or anyone, and His love will free you from your enslavement to what you've

made into your idols. Cultivate a lifestyle of time spent in study of the word and prayer so you can grow in your relationship with Christ.

Is there a sin that the Holy Spirit has been telling you to deal with? If so, listen to Him. Confess it to God and if it affects others, confess it to them and ask them for forgiveness. Repent, which is literally changing your mind, and ask God for the power to continually turn away from that sin. He'll make a way for you to escape when you're tempted.

Perhaps you're terribly ashamed of hurt you've caused others. Know that there's great hope in Christ; no matter how guilty you feel; you'll never be more loved and accepted than you are in Christ. By faith, believe that your sins were forgiven at the cross. Live out your faith knowing you are free of condemnation.

William Cowper was an 18th century English poet who wrote the following:

To see the Law by Christ fulfilled
And hear his pardoning voice
Changes a slave into a child
And duty into choice

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

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