



Have you ever been caught red-handed doing something you knew was wrong? Sure you have! Who wants to tell us about it? OK fine, I'll go first. When I was a freshman in high school, my brother and I went to Macy's at the mall to buy clothes. I was admiring a great looking shirt and with the money in my pocket started walking towards the cash register to pay. However, my brother gave me a great idea, "Steal the shirt and let's use the money for lunch." Now, he may remember the story different, but since I am telling it and he is not here, it's really all his fault! I stuffed the shirt in my backpack and we walked out the store. With my heart racing, I thought we got away with the crime of the century until two undercover security guards grabbed us by the arms and forced us back inside. I was terrified! Will they send me to San Quentin? Death Row? Thankfully they did not press charges and let us go with a firm warning to never come back. They probably did that because I cried like a little baby in the interrogation room. I wasn't the hardened criminal I thought I could be. My mom was called in to pick up the new crime lords and take us home. It was very embarrassing and I've never felt comfortable in a Macy's store ever since!

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. Now let's imagine for a moment the One who exposed you and caught you was God. Every one of us will face a day when we stand before God and answer for what we've done. Most of us would like to put that off for as long as possible. But, what if that happened today? What if God were to catch you right 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. Sadly, many of us picture God carrying a big heavy bat, ready to clobber us for everything wrong we've done.

As we continue our study of the biography of Jesus written by his best friend John, today we come to chapter 8. Scholars have debated for centuries whether this story should be in the Bible or not because most of the earliest ancient manuscripts do not have the story in them. Since I don't want to bore you with textual criticism, it's safe to say that this story did really happen in the life of Jesus and for good reason it was added later. It's really not a big deal but Bible nerds like myself love to talk about these things. In my humble opinion, I'm glad this story made it in the New Testament. In this story a woman was caught right in the

middle of doing something she knew was wrong, something in that culture was worthy of death and she was brought to Jesus.

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.

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. 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" (John 8:2–11).

The Scribes Set a Trap to Arrest Jesus

I want you to imagine what it must have been like early that morning. We find Jesus teaching at dawn in the temple courts as was his custom. He is surrounded by a small handful of listeners. Some nod their head in agreement and open their hearts in obedience. They have accepted the rabbi as their teacher, now they are learning how to follow him as their Lord. They're amazed at his teaching and have never heard anyone teach like this before. I wonder what topic Jesus was teaching about that morning. Prayer, perhaps. Maybe a lesson on kindness or anxiety. Whatever it was, it was soon interrupted when an angry mob of people burst into the courtyard with rocks in one hand and a frightened young woman in the other.

These people are determined as they explode out of the narrow streets and stomp toward Jesus. Those listening to him scramble to get out of the way; these people mean business. As the dust settles, we see the mob is made up of religious leaders, scribes and Pharisees. These were the respected and important men

of their day. And struggling to keep her balance in the arms of this angry mob is a scantily clad woman. Just moments before she had been in bed with a man who was not her husband. Did she make her living doing this? *Maybe. Maybe not.* We really don't know. What we do know is the door was yanked open and she was dragged out of bed screaming. She barely had time to cover herself with a bed sheet before being forced out into the street by two men the age of her father. With holy righteousness blazing in their eyes, the morality police throw the woman in Jesus' direction. She nearly falls over.

"We found this woman in bed with another man!" cries the leader. "The law says to stone her. What do you say?" I picture the woman with absolute despair in her eyes; she's filled with shame. She finally musters the courage and takes her first look at Jesus. And what she sees changes everything. His eyes are not glaring back at her. She sees kindness and love in them. It's a stare she is a stranger to. As Jesus looked at this woman, what was he thinking? Did he see her as his beloved daughter? Did his mind race back to the moment he created her in heaven-lies? With the tenderness only a father can give, he set out to make all things work together for good. Meanwhile, the tension will only thicken by what Jesus does next.

There's a new show coming out called, *Motive*. Maybe you have heard of it. In each episode, the victim and the killer are shown before the opening credits. The real trick to *Motive* is to determine why the killer did what they did. What was their motive? The key to understanding this passage is to figure out the motive behind the religious leaders and Pharisees. Why would they find and drag a poor woman into public disgrace? What was the motivation behind putting Jesus in this awful situation? John tells us in verse 6a, "*They were using this question as a trap in order to have a basis for accusing him.*"

To understand Jesus' predicament here, you need to know more about Jewish and Roman law. The scribes pointed to the Law of Moses but what did the law actually command? Leviticus 20:10 says, "*If a man commits adultery with another man's wife—with the wife of his neighbor—both the adulterer and the adulteress are to be put to death.*" And Deuteronomy 22:22 says the same thing. 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 stoning was a form of capital punishment seldom used anymore. Stoning was rarely done because it was against Roman law for Jews to do it. Second, where in the world was the man whom she had been with? It takes two to tango and he was guilty too. The law they refer to says both the man and the woman must die. Did he run away? Did he bribe the Jewish authorities? Was this all a set up from the beginning? We don't know. The religious authorities have evil motive in bringing the

woman before Jesus. They wanted to trap Jesus in a legal dispute in order to remove his influence over the people.

The ugliest thing about all this was 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? Why make her the talk of the town and an object of shame? Someone once said, "There is no greater evil than the evil men do in the name of God." To them this woman isn't a person; she is an object to be used to get what they want. So, who was this woman? We don't know a lot about her, not even her name. She was probably a young lady who got caught up in the celebration of the Festival of Tabernacles we talked about last Sunday. After celebrating with friends, singing and dancing into the night, she met a man who paid attention to her. Maybe she was lonely and one thing led to another. Times haven't really changed. People are people. Max Lucado writes, "The longing for love and acceptance that makes us human can also lead us to make shameful and sad choices. Even more shocking are some of the thoughtless and evil acts people commit toward others they deem less worthy of love. Yet each of us desires those marvelous moments when we feel valued and appreciated by someone else."

Jesus Responds to the Scribes with Grace and Truth

Jesus is confronted with a major dilemma. If he goes ahead with the stoning, he'll be in trouble with the Romans because they don't allow it. Not to mention this woman will die. But, if he stops the stoning, he'll be accused of compromising God's Law. So, how does Jesus respond? Honestly, he does something rather strange. "*But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger*" (v. 6b). No one knows what he wrote, but it hasn't stopped people from guessing. Some believe he was drawing in the sand to give himself more time to think about what to say. I've always thought he was writing the specific sins of each man that was clutching a stone. Most believe that he began writing in Hebrew a verse from the law that would shape his response to the dilemma. Maybe it was Exodus 23:1, "*Do not help a wicked man by being a malicious witness.*" That makes the most sense to me because the law required strong testimony from two eye witnesses who saw the couple in a sexual context, i.e., lying in the same bed, unmistakable body movements, positive identities and Barry White music playing! This prevented suspicious husbands from falsely accusing their wives of adultery.

John then writes, "*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!'*" (v. 7). With these words, Jesus remained faithful to the Law and protected the woman at the same time. I imagine Jesus placing himself in between the woman and the men. "Go ahead and throw," he says, "you better have good aim!" Jesus is clear. We are not mistakers in need of correction. We are sinners in need of a Savior. We

need more than a second chance. We need a second birth. Jesus didn't say, "He who is without adultery..." He said, "He who is without sin." These men wanted to be God's agents in punishing the sins of others. But Jesus pierces their hearts with a truth no one can deny—none of us are without sin.

As a kid, did you ever have to draw straws to make a decision? Remember that game? You would get several straws together in a bundle but one of them is cut short. One by one, each person draws a straw. If you get the long one, you are good, you make the team or get the candy or whatever. If you get the short straw, you are out, game over. The reality Jesus is pointing to here is we all draw the short straw. We are all sinners from the very moment of our birth. Actually, we are all guilty of moral adultery. Apostle Paul wrote about this several years after the death of Jesus, "*You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery?*" (Romans 2:22). Even Jesus himself equated lust with adultery, "*If you even look at a woman lustfully, you've committed adultery with her in your heart.*" We've all drawn the short straw, we are all sinners and deserve God's punishment. But there's good news.

So all eyes are on the scribes and Pharisees now. The ones who had done the exposing are now being exposed. I don't know how much time had passed, Jesus didn't seem to care. He bends down and writes on the ground again. Instead of cross-examining the woman, Jesus cross-examined the religious authorities. Look at what they did next. "*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*" (v. 9). According to Jewish law, the eye witnesses must be the first people to throw the first stones (Deut. 17:7). Jesus is asking the witnesses if they are truly eligible before the law to testify in this case. They are not. I picture someone clearing his throat as if to speak, but no one dared say a word. Feet began to shuffle. Eyes dropped. Then you hear it-thud...thud...thud...rocks fell to the ground. And they walked away. They came as one, but they left one by one. Those who had come to shame Jesus now leave in shame, the oldest first and the younger ones last.

Why did the oldest leave first? It makes perfect 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 short we fall of even our best ideals. For example, what if what I sometimes think about and have even done were displayed on this big screen for all to see? I'd be embarrassed and you might not want to listen to me right now. In some ways I am this woman. Now before you get up and leave, what if the things you think about and have done were also flashed on the big screen for us all to see? I might want to leave and not talk to you! You are like this woman. We are all in the same boat, aren't we? It's like the little kid who came home 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.

Jesus Responds to the Woman with Grace and Truth

So now it's just Jesus and the woman. This is one of the most tender scenes in all the Bible. She's left alone with the one man qualified to stone her. She's in the presence of holiness. Then she hears his voice again. Finally, someone is speaking to her. She's no longer an object to be spoken about. Jesus tells the woman to look up, "*Is there no one to condemn you?*" Maybe she expected Jesus to rebuke her. Maybe she expected him to simply walk away from her. I'm not sure, but I do know this: What she got, she never expected. She received from Jesus both a promise and a commission. The promise was, "*Then neither do I condemn you.*" The commission was, "*Go and sin no more.*" Jesus looked into her heart and knew she was an adulteress. But, with great compassion, he did not condemn her to death by stoning because the witnesses had vanished. Since Jesus wasn't an eyewitness either, the woman walks away never to be seen or heard from again.

I wonder what happened with her? Did she leave her life of sin? I think so. Grace does that to people. I wonder if she was at Calvary the day Jesus was crucified? If she was there surely she would recognize his voice again. It's raspier and weaker, but the words are the same, "*Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.*" There's no doubt she would recognize his eyes. How could she ever forget those eyes? Clear and filled with tears. Eyes that truly saw her not as she was, but as she was intended to be.

Do you know what all this means for us? It means the God who has a perfect right to condemn us is the One with a passionate desire to forgive us. Sin was not treated lightly by Jesus. But sinners were offered the opportunity to start a new life. The God with a perfect right to condemn you is the one with a passionate desire to forgive you. And not just forgive you, but transform your life.

How can a holy God let sinners off the hook? Listen to the words we've already heard John tell the church, "*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him*" (John 3:16-17). Jesus himself would soon be naked and exposed, shamed and hung on a Roman cross. His sacrifice would be God's gracious way of atoning for our sin. He would die in our place and for our sin. God is not out to shame and condemn you. He's out to forgive you and set you free from a life dominated by sin.

I want to end by talking just for a moment about grace and truth. I've learned something recently that has really helped me personally and my ministry. In this passage we get a clear and close look at what grace and truth look like in an otherwise graceless world that has essentially turned its back on truth. In the very beginning of John we read, "*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth*" (John 1:14). I really love that last phrase, "*full of grace and truth.*" Sometimes we try to strike a balance between the two. I personally pride myself with always trying to err on the side of grace with people and in situations. One of our core values as a church is grace. But, we also believe in the truth. What we find in this passage and in Jesus' ministry is he did not come to strike a balance between grace and truth. He was the full embodiment of both. He brought the full measure of grace and truth to both the scribes and the woman. Grace—you are not condemned. You are free! Truth—go and sin no more.

Grace doesn't dumb down sin to make it more easy to digest. Grace doesn't have to. The purpose of truth isn't to isolate people from God or from his people. As we follow Jesus through the Gospel of John, we find him acknowledging the full implications of sin and yet not condemning sinners. The only group he consistently condemned were graceless religious people, those

who misused truth to control people through guilt, fear, and condemnation.

It's easy to be an all-truth church. We can focus on rules, be legalistic, and be very nasty to people. On the other hand, it may be even easier to create an all-grace church. The Peninsula is full of them. We can ignore sin and only teach parts of the Bible that are easy to swallow. Tolerance is the highest virtue and truth is thrown out the window. Jesus didn't leave either option on the table, nor should we. This woman met someone who knew exactly who she was and what she had done. And yet, despite his awareness, Jesus did not treat her as an object to make a point or a pawn to manipulate. He spoke the truth. He set her free to go and sin no more. No matter how often we come to Christ burdened and fallen again, he is willing to say to us, "Go and sin no more." That's the power of grace and truth. Think about the game of drawing straws again. When we make mistakes, when we sin, grace means that forgiveness isn't like drawing straws anymore. Guess what—we all get the long one!

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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