

COMMUNITY OF THE CROSS (CONTINUED)

JOHN 8:1-11¹

BY PASTOR JIM LINCOLN ON JUNE 1, 2008

Last Sunday we considered what it means to accept the reproach of the cross, boast in it, and to even be crucified to the world and the world to us because of it. This morning I want to continue our focus on God's call to us to be people of the cross, where God's perfect justice and perfect mercy meet. And one of the best illustrations of this is the way Jesus dealt with the woman caught in adultery. I struggle with this title because the episode is just as much about the Pharisees as it is about the woman. So, it could just as accurately be called, *The Pharisees Caught in Hypocrisy*.

Isaiah said of the Messiah, "A bruised reed he won't break and a flickering wick he won't put out." With justice and mercy, Jesus does this for this woman caught in adultery.

CONTEXT

According to Jewish Law, she couldn't be charged unless there were two witnesses to the act. That's why it was so difficult to make a case against adultery. Before the age of photography and video, how do you catch someone in adultery? It was very difficult to prove. I guess you could call the Pharisees, "Peeping Pharisees."

However, the issue of her guilt was not in question. Their case against her seemed airtight. Also, Jesus' words, "Go and sin no more," imply that she was guilty as charged. Here, Jesus is being asked about the penalty. And The Mosaic Law said that the punishment for adultery was execution by stoning (Lev. 20:10 & Deut. 22:22).

¹ *Most scholars argue against the inclusion of this text as part of John's original manuscript. The arguments are impressive. However, I have taken Dr. Earl Palmer's view. He argues for its inclusion in The Intimate Gospel Word Books 1978. Palmer suggests that it could have been suppressed because of a possible misinterpretation as evidence for Jesus' support of antinomianism. He states the text is a testimony to faithful scribes who recorded the ancient words without succumbing to such fears. Regardless, it has enjoyed the witness of the church from the beginning, as a true testimony of Jesus' life and teaching.*

The Pharisees aren't concerned about the truth of the Law (6). They want to hurt Jesus' reputation with the people. They've interrupted one of his public lessons to publicly embarrass him. They want to force Jesus to choose between the life of the woman on the one hand and the divine authority of God's word on the other. Everyone knew that Jesus was a teacher of compassion, mercy, and forgiveness. But, Jesus also said that not one jot or tittle would pass away from the Law of Moses. So, if he says, "The Law of Moses is true," he'll have to agree to the punishment and approve of her execution. If he's indeed a brave prophet like Elijah, who killed 400 prophets of Baal, surely he won't balk at the execution of one person who is guilty of a capital crime. If he chooses the Law of Moses, that would mean, "*Come to Jesus with your sin and he will have you executed*".

They wanted everyone to know that if he overlooks her sin, he'll be in defiance of the Law of Moses.

On the other hand, if he says, "*No, forgive her. We don't have to follow the Mosaic Law.*" They can say, "There you have it. He's a liberal! He doesn't really believe the Bible. He's a people pleaser. He'll compromise the truth to gain favor with the people. Can you see their scheme? It was very clever.

If Jesus shows compassion, he relativises morality.

If he sticks to the moral absolute he crushes people.

Ministers face similar charges today from both sides. Either you crush people in the application of moral absolutes or you side-step the commandments to show compassion. One group wants you to uphold the absolute moral code without deviation, (at least the parts that don't convict them). On the other hand, there are those who advocate tolerance of everything and say that we ought to never make any moral judgments or distinctions (except of course against those who are conservative in their morals, and they get judged without mercy or tolerance). Either Jesus makes relative moral absolutes or he crushes people. How can you be righteous and merciful at the same time without compromising either?

WHAT DID JESUS DO?

Well, he didn't answer their question. Here's what he did. He revealed the truth in these men's hearts which disqualified them from executing this woman. Second, he revealed that He has the authority to forgive (Her sin didn't put her beyond the pale of grace.) and he calls her to the way of righteousness. "*Go and sin no more.*"

He does two things: 1) He *disturbs* the comfortable (the self-righteous), and 2) He *comforts* the soul that has been made uncomfortable by her sin.

FIRST, JESUS DISTURBS THE COMFORTABLE

When they put the question to Jesus, the first thing he did was to bend down and scribble something in the dirt. Now, there is no explanation of what he actually wrote in the dust. The most popular interpretation is that he was writing Jer.17:13, which says, *“Those who turn away from you will be written in the dust because they have forsaken the Lord, the spring of living water.”* Some say that he wrote the sins of the Pharisees or the names of their paramours in the dirt. But anyone who says they know what Jesus wrote is overstating the case. No one knows. The value is not in the fact that we can discover or speculate about what Jesus wrote. The value of it is that it’s evidence that this is accurate historical writing. Propaganda doesn’t include pieces that add nothing to the point. However, authentic historical writing often does. Second, his actions delayed everything.

Jesus delayed his response. He went silent, just when everyone was expecting him to answer. And that gave them time to think twice about what they were doing. In the sixteenth century, Martin Luther did a similar thing. When Luther was asked by his accusers at the Diet of Worms to recant of his writings, he said, *“Unless I am convicted by scripture and plain reason...my conscience is captive to the Word of God...to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. So help me God”*. Now, he did say these things. However, he said them the next day. When they first asked him to recant his first response was, *“Can I sleep on it?”* That gave him time to pray and think. It also gave them time to reconsider what they were doing. By writing in the dirt, Jesus was delaying his response. He was slowing the process down. But, the Pharisees missed their opportunity to rethink and walk away before they dug their hole of hypocrisy deeper. Foolishly, they persisted and demanded a response.

Then Jesus stood up and said, *“He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to cast the stone at her.”* Notice that Jesus didn’t actually say if stones should or shouldn’t be thrown. He said, *“Let him who is without sin throw the first stone.”* He doesn’t deny that she deserves the punishment. Jesus doesn’t defend or attack capital punishment.² Instead he makes another case. *“You who are bent on doing this are disqualified from being executioners.”*

² In 1 Cor., execution for adultery was replaced with separation from the fellowship. The man who was having an unrepentant affair with his father's wife wasn't executed. He was separated from the fellowship. The church did not claim the right to execute the civil law of Israel the way it was executed by the state of Israel.

Why were they disqualified? I notice several reasons.

FIRST, THEY WERE DISQUALIFIED BECAUSE THE WHOLE THING WAS A SET UP.

Verse 6 makes this clear. Again they were not there because they cared about the Law of Moses. Yes, they had their verse. But, “WHERE’S THE MAN?” The Mosaic Law called for both parties to be executed. According to Mosaic Law there should be no double standard or impartiality. If they were really interested in the Law of Moses, they would have brought the man along with her. They didn’t. They said they had eyewitnesses. They said twice, “*She was caught in the very act.*” If that was true they had to see the man as well as the woman. But, in their hearts they don’t care about the Law of Moses. They care about the parts that might ruin Jesus’ reputation. They are disqualified because they have used this woman and the Law of Moses to serve their own ends, not as an authority on how to live before God or man. They know enough Bible to use it as a weapon to serve their wicked hearts. They look very moral on the outside, but on the inside their hearts are corrupt. They are as Jesus later said...white washed tombs.

SECOND, THEY RUSH TO JUDGMENT AND CIRCUMVENT DUE PROCESS.

Capital crimes in Israel in Jesus’ day were extremely rare and very difficult to prosecute. The law required two witnesses and complete agreement on the testimonies. It was very hard to actually convict someone of a capital crime. For example In the Mishna, a *Jewish commentary on the Law*, there’s a case of a woman named Susanna who was accused of sexual crime with a young man under a tree. She was acquitted because the witnesses couldn’t agree on the size of the leaves on the tree. It turns out that she was innocent. But, the standard of evidence was extremely difficult to reach (which is a good thing). The Mishna also said that a court that executed more than one person in seven years was a murderous court.”³

³ *Although the Biblical text appears to contemplate frequent imposition of capital punishment, the weight of authority among rabbis of the Mishnaic period (1st-3rd centuries of the Common Era), who first committed to writing what had theretofore been transmitted from generation to generation as the Oral Law, clearly condemned frequent executions. The Mishna in the tractate Makkoth (7a) declared:*

In addition to that, at least twenty-three judges had to be satisfied to *a legal certainty*, before the court could impose a death sentence. And then you had to have Roman approval. So, capital punishment was something that required irrefutable evidence and a lengthy and arduous due process to carry out.

Here, these men rush to judgment with no trial and no due process. They don't take her to court where rules of evidence are required. They bring her out and expose her before all these people without any defense. They can't wait to get a judgment of execution. They show no empathy, no anguish, and no identification at all with a fellow sinner. They do this without looking inside themselves at all. There is only condemnation, contempt and judgment. John said that the law came through Moses and grace and truth came through Jesus. Beloved, that order is important. They know their law (at least the parts that validate their actions) but they are oblivious to both grace and truth. They have confused knowing a piece of the law with truth.

THIRD, THEIR MOTIVES WERE WICKED.

They want to have something on record so they can accuse Jesus and ruin his reputation. They hated Jesus so much that it had become common knowledge that they were plotting to murder him (7:25). *"They were saying these things to test him in order that they might have grounds to accuse him."* They just want to make him look bad in the eyes of the people.

The Sanhedrin that executes one person in seven years is called "murderous." Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah says that this extends to one execution in seventy years. Rabbi Tarfon and Rabbi Akiva say, "If we had been among the Sanhedrin, no one would ever have been executed." Rabbi Simon ben Gamliel responds, "Such an attitude would increase bloodshed in Israel."

This exchange among rabbis living in the first and second centuries reflects differences over the deterrent value of capital punishment that continue among legal scholars to this day. Some rabbis of the Mishnaic period (such as Rabbis Tarfon and Akiva) were unwilling to participate in a process that would take human life, while other rabbis (like Rabbi Simon ben Gamliel) believed that capital punishment had a deterrent effect that permitted it to be employed.

The infrequency of the death penalty was attributable to the meticulous application of stringent rules regarding the admissibility and sufficiency of evidence. A court of at least 23 judges would have to be satisfied, to a legal certainty, that the capital offense had been committed before the court could impose a death sentence. Since the testimony of two eye-witnesses was required, and the witnesses were subjected to searching and detailed interrogation by the court, there was rarely an instance when the evidence met the prescribed legal standard. See Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Book of Judges, Sanhedrin, chapter XII.

After Jesus wrote something in the dirt, he stood and said, “*Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.*” I don’t think he’s challenging civil law. He doesn’t mean that only sinless persons could ever participate in the punishment of a crime. He was referring to that piece of the Mosaic Law that required the witness to be the first one to throw the stone of execution in Deut.17:7 and Lev. 24:14. The witness of the crime had to be innocent with respect to the crime they were prosecuting. And the witness had to be the first to throw the stone. In this context, Jesus is saying that they must be without sin with respect to this crime if they’re going to execute. But, everyone knew they hated Jesus. They all knew they were just trying to set him up. They failed to trap him. And so, beginning with the oldest, they left. There is no evidence that they were ashamed of themselves. They simply failed to trip Jesus up. If they actually stoned here to death, they would pile up even more sin and their reputation would suffer even more. Jesus has bested them in the conversation. There was no advantage in staying to carry out the deed. So, they left.

Jesus reveals the conspiracy, wickedness and hypocrisy in their hearts. They’re plotting his murder while accusing her adultery. They have denied her a trial, no witnesses were produced, no man that was involved, and no due process. Although they have a Bible verse in their pocket, they’re making a mockery of justice. Their own sin of hypocrisy, injustice and impartiality if not adultery in their own lives and hearts disqualifies them. There is nothing legitimate about what they are doing. Beloved listen, *she is nothing more to them than a moral issue and a tool of their hatred.* They’re right on the side of the moral question. But, they’re as far away from God’s grace and truth as one possibly could be. And that is a dangerous place to be.

How did Jesus deal with this rush to judgment, eagerness to punish, mockery of justice and hypocrisy? He forced them to step up and admit that they were disqualified to execute her.

Jesus disturbs the comfortable with his righteousness. If you’re eager to judge whether the person in your sights is liberal or conservative, if you’re eager to punish, if you are eager to condemn, if you are eager to conspire with others to humiliate and embarrass someone, and entrap another, even if you are right on the moral issue, you will be wrong before God and before Jesus. Here’s why. Although the state is an instrument of carrying out God’s justice, the participants are always flawed instruments. None of us is morally qualified to punish another. The only qualification any of us has is an *alien* qualification and one that has been delegated by One who is qualified. And that should bring with it pause, humility, empathy and hesitation *even when punishment is necessary.* Law came through Moses and Grace and truth came through Jesus. The order of that is enormously important. Jesus disturbed the self-righteous and those comfortable with judging others.

SECOND, JESUS NOT ONLY DISTURBS THE COMFORTABLE.

He comforts the one made uncomfortable by her sin. After the Pharisees left, Jesus stood up again and said, (10) *“Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you? ‘No one Lord,’ and Jesus said, ‘Neither do I condemn you; go your way. From now on sin no more.’”*

In the presence of His mercy - although the just sentence of the Mosaic law is condemnation - that condemnation was not pronounced by anyone. In the presence of our Lord and Savior, no one can stand and condemn us, even though we stand guilty under the law. How good is that? Woman, Where are they? Where did they go? He says, *“If I have forgiven you, no one can stand here and accuse you.”* Beloved can you hear this? The Hebrew word *“satan”* means *“accuser”*. Rom. 8:1 says that there is now therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus...for what the law could not do...God did by sending his Son...” What can't the law do? It can't clear us. It can only reveal how guilty we are before its righteousness.

Jesus asked, *“Did no one condemn you? Neither do I condemn you.”*

Although she's guilty, Jesus forgives her and cast her sin as far as the east is from the west.

Also, notice that even though she's been a victim of a wicked conspiracy, Jesus won't let her shift the blame and waste any time judging them. He says, *“Go on your way and sin no more.”* He doesn't say, *“The charges were false and you've been set up and you're innocent of these charges or that they had unjustly accused you.”* He says, *“Go and sin no more.”* He doesn't let her pick up the role of victim even though it's apparent that, in one sense, she is. Jesus implies that he knows she's guilty. And he demands change. He demands that she commit her life to the way of righteousness. But he does so after he forgives her. *“I don't condemn you either...”*

But remember what we have been saying about sins. Sins don't evaporate into thin air. They are never overlooked. Someone always pays. Jesus can't merely forgive her or us. He doesn't just overlook sin. It must be paid for. He doesn't dismiss justice in his mercy. She can go free because Jesus will pay. How can he say, *“I don't condemn you?”* He can because He will be condemned. Yes, stones ought to be thrown, but they will hit Jesus, not you. Yes, spears ought to be thrown, but they will go in his side, not yours. Yes, thorns ought to be brought down, but they will be pushed down on his head, not yours. Yes, nails will have to be driven. And they will be driven in his hands and feet, not yours.

He can say this to her because he will die in her place and pay the penalty for her sins on her behalf and for us and on our behalf. Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!

And then, Here's what is reasonable. He says, "*Go and sin no more.*" To receive such love...to know you have been forgiven...to know what was given up so that we would not be condemned...to have the bent reed of our lives lifted and straightened up before the smile of God...to be folded into the care of the Good Shepherd...to be loved by the Son of God...to receive His promise that he will never leave nor forsake you...to hear that if He did not spare his only son will he not give you all things...to be called and taken as His bride and His body...to be kept by Jesus forever...to know these glorious things, beloved, *is to be changed by them*. It is to cherish them, prize them, treasure them, revel in them. This grace creates the desire to want to live in the way of righteousness. His grace acquits and it transforms what you love, value, and want to do. If not, you just don't know what it means to be loved by Jesus.

He doesn't say, "*Go and sin no more and then I won't condemn you.*" He says, "*I don't condemn you. Go and sin no more.*" The power to live a holy life flows out of His mercy. Rom. 12:1-2 says, "I urge you BY THE MERCIES OF GOD, to present your bodies as living and holy sacrifices...which is your reasonable worship."

Jesus disturbs the comfortable
And He comforts the uncomfortable in their sin.

Jesus is the only one who can hold together the perfect righteousness and perfect mercy. No mere mortal gets this perfectly right. But Jesus always does. He is holy and He will expose our sin and make us very uncomfortable and if we repent and believe in Him, he will forgive us, love us and Shepherd us with an undying love that demands and calls out our all for Him.

He said, "*Where are your accusers? Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more.*"