

NEITHER DO I CONDEMN YOU

John 7:53-8:11

Key Verse: 8:11b, "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

Today we will study a beautiful and famous story of Jesus and a shameful woman caught in adultery. We'll look at and learn from the accusers, the woman, and Jesus.

First, the accusers. This passage opens by saying, "Then they all went home, but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives." We know from the other gospels that Jesus often withdrew to lonely places to pray. His usual place to pray near Jerusalem was the Mount of Olives, also known as the Garden of Gethsemane.

The people all went home. We all appreciate and enjoy the comforts of a home and a bed to sleep in. In one sense, one of our primary aims of life is comfort. Sometimes our desire for comfort goes to excess into what we call luxury—luxury cars, homes, resorts, restaurants, and food. Those are things we don't actually need, but it's natural to really want these. In Luke 16:19 Jesus told the story of a rich man who lived in luxury every day, and who was not mindful of a poor beggar at his gate. The rich man ended up in torment in Hades. The point here is not how nice is the home that we live in or the car that we drive. It's whether we are mindful of the poor. It's whether we are mindful of blessing, helping and serving others, or if we are just focused on our own comfort and well-being. There are always hurting, needy people around us whom we can help if we have eyes to see and a heart to care for them.

So what happened the next morning? Look at verse 2. "At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them."

Jesus did not hide from opposition. Jesus did not retreat to a safer place. Jesus came to a public place where many people were gathered. And Jesus sat down to teach them. To teach the truths of God and his kingdom to the people was a major and central part of Jesus' ministry, day after day. This could not be said of his critics. What were they up to?

Look at verses 3-5: "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?'"

Note the contrast between Jesus and his critics. Jesus spent his time praying and teaching the people the truths of God's word. But they spent their time and energy finding someone to condemn. If they were trying to help people to live upright lives before God, then their activity would be commendable. But their aim was to accuse and destroy.

Verse 6 tells us their intention: "They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him." How was this a trap for Jesus? Like the question of paying taxes to Caesar, this was most likely a difficult question for the Jewish leaders themselves to answer. If Jesus said, "Yes, stone her," he would be contradicting his own teaching on mercy and forgiveness, and perhaps he would get in trouble with Roman law. If Jesus said, "No, don't execute her," he would be going against Moses' teaching, which came from God. Either way, whether Jesus answered "yes" or "no" he would be in trouble.

The sole intention of Jesus' critics was to defeat and destroy Jesus. So they conspired how to bring Jesus down. The devil and those on the side of evil have the intent to steal, kill and destroy. Those on the side of God intend to bring freedom, life, healing, and salvation.

The Pharisees and teachers of the law thought they had the perfect scenario to trap Jesus. In their zeal to kill Jesus, they were ready to kill others as well, if it served their purpose. Thus they showed that their spirit and motivation was not good and from God, but evil and from the devil.

There's more to the story. What did Jesus say? Well, he said nothing, at first. Rather, he bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. The surprising thing here is that the author does not tell us what Jesus wrote. This is an excellent example of an eye-witness account, for the writer saw something without being able to fully explain it.

Then what did Jesus write on the ground? We don't know. Some ideas have been suggested. One scholar suggests he may have written Exodus 23:1b which says, "Do not help a guilty person by being a malicious witness." That would be a wise Bible verse for this situation, because, were they not protecting the man who was caught with this woman in adultery? After all, it takes two to commit adultery. Why did they not bring the man as well?

Actually, the Law of Moses required that both the man and the woman were to be put to death. 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."

Another suggestion was that Jesus might have written on the ground two of the Ten Commandments: "You shall not commit adultery," and, "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife."

Or it may simply be that by not answering them right away Jesus was giving them time to realize their murderous treachery in their condemning spirit against this woman. A quiet and delayed response can sometimes be more powerful than a quick reply.

When they kept on questioning him, Jesus 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 Jesus stooped down and wrote on the ground.

The Law of Moses required that the accuser be the first one to throw the stone at the accused, since they were a witness. In fact, if they were proven to be a false witness, then they would have to suffer the fate of the accused. This law also assumed that the accuser was innocent of the same sin, and therefore was qualified to execute judgment. So in effect Jesus was saying, "Any one of you who is not guilty of adultery, go ahead and execute judgment." I can only imagine what Jesus might have said if any of them were bold enough to claim they were without this sin.

Because as we know, Jesus defined adultery in much stricter terms. He taught in Matthew 5:27-28, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Jesus' standard of sin went well beyond sinful actions to sinful thoughts, words and desires. By Jesus' and the Bible's standards, there is no one who is not guilty of sin.

So what happened? While Jesus was writing a second time on the ground, the accusing mob began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. The accusers realized one by one that this was an argument they could not win. They began to see the weakness of their accusation. They were not about to test Jesus any further, for they might end up being more ashamed of what Jesus knew about each one of them. It was time for them to acknowledge the wisdom of Jesus and sit at his feet to learn more. But they went away.

Second, the woman. Consider this woman. She was caught in the act of adultery. She was dragged before Jesus and publicly humiliated. By the standard of God's law she was condemned as an adulteress and should be executed. She was about to die that day by public execution. She was filled with shame and fear. She had no place to hide, and no where to run. She could not hold her head up before her neighbors and towns

people. She could not lift up her eyes to look at the preacher and healer from Nazareth.

But all that was about to change with one pronouncement of Jesus. 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."

Jesus' words, "Neither do I condemn you," set her free. She was no longer on death row. She was pardoned. She was freed from her death sentence. She escaped her prison of condemnation.

Jesus did not condemn her. But he also didn't condone her sin. He said to her clearly, "Go now and leave your life of sin." Jesus commanded her to live a new life. She did not have to live as an adulteress any more. She could live a new life in, through and for Jesus Christ. Jesus calls us all to a new life in him, free from the prison and slavery of sin. Jesus gives us all a second chance. We have all messed up. We have all said and done things we regret and wish we hadn't done or said. We want a clean slate. We want a new start, a new birth, a new life, a second chance.

Jesus spoke of this new birth to Nicodemus saying, "You must be born again." Paul spoke of it in 2 Corinthians 5:17, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!"

Third, Jesus. Jesus was the only one qualified to condemn this woman for he was without sin. He could've condemned her. But he rather chose to pardon her. How could he do this? Wasn't she guilty? Where is justice for the man's wife whom she sinned against? Can God just say, "It's ok this time"? That would not be justice, nor would that uphold the holiness of God.

Sin must be paid for. Sin must be atoned for. When Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you," he was not negating or minimizing her sin. Adultery is a serious sin worthy of condemnation and death. Then how could Jesus say this to her? It is because Jesus would be the one to take her punishment, judgment and condemnation on the cross. Jesus volunteered to take her place. And not only hers. Ours too. Jesus takes the place of judgment and condemnation that we all deserve because of our sins. Jesus is the substitute for all who believe in him, for all who commit their hearts and lives to Jesus Christ to live in him, through him and for him as his children, disciples and servants.

Again, Apostle Paul spoke of this substitutionary atonement in 2 Corinthians 5:21, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

So what can we conclude in this passage? Who do you relate to? Clearly, sometimes we are guilty of the sin of accusation. We sit in the judge's seat, looking down on others, and somehow convincing ourselves that we are better than others, that we are not as bad, that we do not deserve to be judged or condemned. But Jesus convicts us with his words, "Are you without sin? Are you qualified to judge someone else?" Jesus said in Matthew 7:1-2, "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."

Clearly, sometimes we are like the woman. We are ashamed of something we have said or done. We feel useless or worthless. We don't like who we are. We wish we could take back what we've said or done and start over again. At such times, we must hear Jesus' words, "Neither do I condemn you."

At the same time, we need to hear Jesus' words calling us to a new life: "Go now and leave your life of sin." We need to live a new life in Christ. We need to live in his grace, mercy and freedom.

We really want to be like Jesus, to have his grace, mercy, wisdom, love and compassion. We know we should be like him. But we also know we fall short of his mind and heart. We know the power of sin still defeats us from time to time. We are tempted to condemn ourselves. To give up hope. To listen to the devil's lies.

It is then that we must see Jesus on the cross. Condemned in our places. "Neither do I condemn you." He took your condemnation and mine on the cross. He shed his holy and sinless blood for you and for me, the righteous one for us unrighteous ones, to bring us to God. He did this, so that we could leave a life of sin and live a new life in his grace, mercy and freedom.

I grew up as a faithful church goer. I didn't drink, smoke, take drugs or sleep around. So I thought I was better than my peers. I used to judge those in my mind who boasted about doing these things. I liked to judge others. But in my mind and in my private life, I was a slave to my own sins such as lust, vanity and arrogance. By the grace of God I was invited to Bible study. The Bible convicted me that I was just like the proud and self-righteous enemies of Jesus, who thought they were better than others. Before, I had thought that Jesus died because of others, because of bad people who rejected him. But now I can see that Jesus died for others, in place of them, including me, even for his own disciples who deserted and denied him.

Jesus pardoned an adulteress not because her sin was not serious, but because he took the serious penalty of her sin upon himself, out of love, out of grace—wonderful, marvelous and amazing grace.

Sometimes we live self-righteous lives like the woman's accusers. We think we are better than others. Other times we know we are living in sin, similar to this woman, whose sin was so obvious. We might feel too far gone, with no hope for a better life. Jesus came to save. This passage excellently illustrates the truth of John 3:17, which says, "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."

Jesus came the first time to save sinners. Apostle Paul wrote, "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst." Jesus Christ will come again as the judge. Hebrews 9:27-28 tells us, "Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him."

May we all live new lives in the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

[Endnote about this passage: Bible scholars are not in agreement whether this passage was part of the original gospel of John or not. It is found in some ancient manuscripts and missing in others. This is one of only two passages in the New Testament which are in italics and up for debate. The other passage is the conclusion of Mark's gospel. In either case, the inclusion or omission of these two passages does not change any Christian doctrine. The gospel is still unshaken and unchanged and we can rest assured that Jesus indeed died for our sins and rose again from the dead. Those facts are irrefutable. In addition, these passages only support what we already know about Jesus and the gospel. So why was this passage missing in some manuscripts or added in others? Some have suggested that it was removed since it could give a wrong message to those guilty of adultery. They feared a misuse of this passage could cause much damage among believers in Jesus. Another theory is that the story was well known and regarded as authentic and true, but it was simply unclear where to include it in the gospels. So it has been found at other locations in John or Luke. Suffice it to say, the passage confirms the truth of John 3:17, that Jesus came not to condemn but to save. This is really the essence of the gospel.]