

A Woman Caught in Sin: Drop Your Rocks

2 of 5 in *Jesus Encounters*

August 14, 2021

John 7:53 - 8:11

When I was in high school in the US, I got caught— in a prank gone wrong. One night my buddy and I thought it'd be fun to chuck a dozen eggs at a row of parked cars. One of those cars started to chase the car we were in. The car chasing us wasn't a cop car, but its driver had a CB radio—this was before the day of cell phones—and he radioed the cops on us.

Eventually, there may or may not have been a police helicopter that had its spotlight on my little car, and shortly thereafter your very own "Pastor" Steve and his partner in crime may or may not have been pulled over by a black and white and arrested for harassment.

We pled guilty—because we were—and we were sentenced to hard time— that is to say, two weeks community service.

Then I got on with my life, and put that incident behind me—or so I thought. I went off to university, where I met Jan, my Canadian wife-to-be. When we graduated, we got engaged, and decided that we would settle in Canada.

So I sent in my application to become a permanent resident of this country, but then I got a letter back from Canada Customs. Any guesses what the letter said? "Mr. Shaw, we cannot continue processing your application because you have an arrest on your record. Should your record be cleared, we can proceed with the application."

Back to the courthouse I went, some 5 years after that fateful night with the prank and the helicopter and the little holding cell they put us in and the officer joking with me about whether I wanted scrambled eggs for breakfast.

"Well Judge, you see, I met this great Canadian girl. We're engaged and I'm trying to immigrate to Canada, but there's this arrest on my record that I was told should have been cleared by now, because it was a first offense. Is there anything you can do for me, Judge?"

"Eggs, huh?"

"I'm afraid so, your honour."

That's when the judge did his magic. With the pronouncement a few Latin legal words— *nunc pro tunc* was the phrase he used—and a flourish of his pen—my record was expunged. And here I am today—now a full Canadian citizen—able to tell you this story of

having been caught in my guilt, but then, oh, the joy and relief of having my record made clean, my case dismissed.

Today, we continue with our series *Jesus Encounters*. Based in the Gospel of John, this series explores the stories of various individuals who had life-changing encounters with Jesus.

The Jesus encounter we'll be looking at today is about someone who was caught in her guilt, but her situation was incomparably more serious than my own, because her *very life* was on the line. And Jesus got her case dismissed, as it were. Let's read about it now, in John chapter 8, verses 1-11.

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.

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."¹

I'd like to approach this message a bit differently today. I won't be following an outline like I usually do, with "x" number of sermon points.

¹ John 7:53-8:11 (NIV)

Instead, for the main part of the message, I'm simply going to teach verse by verse through the passage. Then, I will highlight a handful of key takeaways. And finally, I'll lead you in a scripture meditation exercise based on this text.

After all, the series is called *Jesus Encounters*, and the scripture meditation exercise is meant to be a space for you to encounter Jesus in a personal and intimate way. What might he have to show you or say to you today?

Let's start into the first and main part of the message—a teaching time.

Some of you may have noticed a there's a note in your Bible saying that our passage is not found in the oldest and most reliable manuscripts of John's gospel.

Bible scholars are agreed that this story wasn't original to the Gospel of John, but was inserted at a later point in time. While it probably was not penned by John himself, there is nevertheless a consensus that this story is a historically authentic account of an actual event that took place in Jesus' ministry, and that it's most worthy of a place in scripture. Indeed, there can be no question that the Holy Spirit has used this very text to speak powerfully into countless lives, and I trust he will do the same here today.

Our text begins with Jesus going to the Mount of Olives on the east side of Jerusalem at the end of a long day of ministry. That's where he was staying at the time. At sunrise the next day, we find Jesus back in the city teaching at the Temple courts, with crowds of people gathered around him.

Now imagine if someone in our congregation were to stand up right now, interrupting the sermon, in order to call someone else out for their sins? Do you think that would make for an awkward moment in the service?

Well, in our text, Jesus is in the middle of teaching, and some Jewish religious leaders suddenly come forward with a woman, declaring:

“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.²

So this goes way beyond awkward. It's sinister— for several reasons.

² John 8:4-6a (NIV)

First, it's almost certain that the religious leaders had deliberately set a trap to catch this woman. In telling Jesus that she was caught in the act of adultery, they were making a legal claim. They were claiming that they had the evidence required by the Law of Moses to convict the woman. What evidence would that be?

Well, the law required the testimony of at least two witnesses.³ This would be a very difficult evidentiary standard to meet in the case of adultery, because in the normal course of things, how often would two independent witnesses just so happen upon a couple in the very act of adultery? It's highly unlikely. This had to be an intentional set-up.

Secondly, where is this woman's lover? He's nowhere to be found. If she was caught in the act, so was he, right? But the accusers allowed him to get away scot free, singling the woman out. It's a story that's been repeated millions of times in one way or another. So often throughout history, when there's sexual sin women get blamed and shamed, while men get away scot free.

Thirdly, along the same lines, the religious leaders drag this woman before a crowd. "They made her stand before the group," says the text, heaping public shame on her. They could have brought her to Jesus in private, but they didn't. Why?

Well, fourthly, their motive in all of this was to set a trap for Jesus, so they could discredit him publically.

Because on the one hand, if Jesus were to pardon the woman—to let her off the hook—they could accuse him of not taking sin seriously, of not taking the Law of Moses seriously. On the other hand, if Jesus were to say, "She's clearly guilty, stone her to death," then his reputation as a compassionate friend of sinners who showed such love and grace to the lost, the last, and the least— would be compromised in the eyes of all who were gathered there.⁴

If this were *Star Wars*, this would be the part of the story where Admiral Ackbar exclaims, "It's a trap!" (There's my little shout-out to you *Star Wars* fans.)

Indeed, it seemed like the perfect trap, because whichever way Jesus answered, he would be publically discredited. Not only that, Jerusalem was under Roman rule, and it was a crime for Jews to carry out capital punishment based on their religious law.⁵ So if an actual

³ See Deuteronomy 19:15

⁴ See Luke 9:10-13; Mark 2:15-17; Luke 5:29-32.

⁵ See John 18:31

stoning were to take place that day, Jesus could be arrested and executed for breaking Roman law.

As for the woman? However guilty she might have been of serious sin, the teachers of the law and Pharisees were simply using her as a tool in their attack on Jesus. To them, she was nothing more than a pawn in their religious power game.

So yeah— this wasn't just an awkward situation— it was sinister. And very dangerous.

The woman's life was in serious jeopardy. She was completely vulnerable, completely at risk. And Jesus seems to have been inescapably cornered. The crowd's attention is now fixed on him. How will he answer? What will he do? It's at this point that verse 6 tells us:

But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. ⁶

No one knows what Jesus wrote in the dirt at the Temple courts that day. Maybe he was writing the sins that those standing around him were guilty of. Maybe he listing the Ten Commandments. Maybe he was just doodling as a way of slowing things down, taking a moment to pray perhaps, or showing that he remained calm and collected— unafraid and unflappable— in the face of their insidious trap.

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. ⁷

Jesus' response is absolutely brilliant: "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to cast a stone at her."

In saying this, Jesus in no way denies or makes light of the woman's guilt, which was real. In saying this, Jesus can't be accused of denying the Law of Moses. And yet in saying this Jesus is turning the tables on the accusers, essentially telling them, "Guys, if we're going to get serious about the Law of Moses, which one of you is not guilty of sin? Before a holy God, which one of you is not deserving of condemnation and judgment?"

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. ⁸

⁶ John 8:6b (NIV)

⁷ John 8:7-8 (NIV)

⁸ John 8:9 (NIV)

One by one, the accusers dropped their rocks, and went home. The only two that remained were the woman and Jesus— who was still stooping down, doodling in the dust.

Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”⁹

Can you imagine what that moment must have been like for the woman, as she stood alone with Jesus, face to face, after everything that had just happened?

For one thing, she must have felt that a hint of her dignity—which had been so cruelly stripped away— was being restored. This is because Jesus addressed her as “woman.” You see, in that culture, to address a woman as “woman” was not demeaning as it often is today, but rather it was a term of dignity, respect and endearment. It was actually the same term Jesus used to address his beloved mother, Mary.¹⁰

“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 had said to the crowd, “Let anyone of you who is without sin be the first to cast a stone at her.” The only one among them who was actually without sin, the only one among them who actually had a right to condemn, the only one among them who actually had the right to pick up a rock was Jesus himself. But he refused to.

“Has no one condemned you? Neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin.”

Jesus’ final words to the woman do not imply that the woman was without guilt. She had committed a gravely serious sin—she knew it and he knew it. But the story shows that while sin Jesus does not treat sin lightly, his grace is greater than all of our sin. His mercy, combined with his exhortation to leave her life of sin, set her free in a manner she never saw coming. What had been the worst day of her life—and what so easily could

⁹ John 8:10 (NIV)

¹⁰ See John 2:4

have become the last day of her life— would actually become the best and most important day of her life, all because of Jesus.

What he did for the woman, Jesus does for you and me. Guilty sinners though we are, he forgives our sin, rescues us from death, and offers us the opportunity to start life anew.

But he does so at the ultimate cost of his own life.

Jesus saved the woman from death by stoning that day. But as you read the rest of John chapter 8, you see that Jesus' was well on a path toward his own death. In fact, in the very last verse of John chapter 8, those who had once dropped their rocks were now picking them up again, but this time they were trying to stone Jesus.¹¹

On that day he would slip away to safety. But the day would come soon enough when he would lay down his life on a cross, paying the penalty of our sins. This alone is what makes it possible for him to be able to say to you and to me this day, whatever our guilt: "Neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin."

So that's the teaching portion of this message. Before we conclude with a scripture meditation exercise, I'd like to briefly share with you a few takeaways drawn from this passage.

First, **Jesus lifts condemnation.** Sinful though we all are, Jesus doesn't condemn the woman, and he doesn't condemn us. In Romans 8:1 the Bible says:

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.¹²

What may be especially relevant for many listening to this message is that in our passage, Jesus lifts condemnation in a case of serious *sexual* sin. Maybe that's precisely what you needed to hear today—Jesus saying, "Neither do I condemn *you*."

But then he adds, "Go now and leave your life of sin." This speaks to our next takeaway: **Jesus takes sin seriously.** And so we should take the sin in our own lives seriously. In fact, sin is so serious, it took the death of Jesus to break its power over our lives. But his love for us is greater still, because he was willing to give his life for our forgiveness, and he also gave us his Spirit so that we can avail ourselves of his power to grow in a life of obedience, holiness and increasing freedom from sin. As the Bible says, also in Romans:

¹¹ See John 8:59

¹² Romans 8:1 (NIV)

So you also should consider yourselves to be dead to the power of sin and alive to God through Christ Jesus.

Do not let sin control the way you live; do not give in to sinful desires. Do not let any part of your body become an instrument of evil to serve sin. Instead, give yourselves completely to God, for you were dead, but now you have new life. So use your whole body as an instrument to do what is right for the glory of God. Sin is no longer your master, for you no longer live under the requirements of the law. Instead, you live under the freedom of God's grace. ¹³

To help you respond to the non-condemning love and grace of Jesus by taking sin seriously, I'd like to recommend an excellent and very readable book that gives practical, Bible-based counsel on putting sin to death in your life. It's called [Licenced to Kill: A Field Manual for Mortifying Sin](#). It's by Brian G. Hedges, and it's on sale at Amazon-- \$10 in paperback and just \$7 for the Kindle version.

Finally, and this is hugely important: **Jesus calls us to love, not judge.**

Yes, the woman's sin was serious. Jesus never denies this. But there is a much deeper and more insidious sin problem going on in this passage, and that sin is the *judgmentalism* of the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees. Their prideful sense of moral superiority over others—especially the woman—made them blind to the reality of their own sinfulness and spiritual bankruptcy.

As the saying goes, when you point the finger at someone else, there are three fingers pointing back at you. Or as Jesus puts it:

“Do not judge others, and you will not be judged. For you will be treated as you treat others. The standard you use in judging is the standard by which you will be judged.” ¹⁴

In our world, where we're exposed to a near-constant stream of judgments on social media and in the news, this teaching especially stands out.

Jesus says that we can either play the judgment game or the grace game. If you don't want to be judged, don't judge others. Extend to them the same gracious love that Jesus

¹³ Romans 6:11-14 (NLT)

¹⁴ Matthew 7:1-2 (NLT)

extended to the woman in our passage—the same gracious love that he extends to *you*. But if you insist on playing the judgment game, be aware that the judgment you give is the judgment you're going to get. This command stands out all the more when Jesus adds these words:

“And why worry about a speck in your friend’s eye when you have a log in your own? How can you think of saying to your friend, ‘Let me help you get rid of that speck in your eye,’ when you can’t see past the log in your own eye? Hypocrite! First get rid of the log in your own eye; then you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend’s eye.”¹⁵

Pastor and theologian Greg Boyd explains that the sin of judgmentalism involves ascribing worth to yourself at the expense of others. To be judgmental is to minimize your own sins and flaws, while maximizing the sins and flaws of others.¹⁶

If you ever find yourself saying or thinking, “Well at least I’m not as bad as that person, or as that group,” then you’re likely trying to ascribe worth to yourself at the expense of others.

Love is the opposite of judgment, and Jesus calls us to love like he loves. How does Jesus love? He ascribes worth to others at cost to himself. He lays down his life for the sake of others.

Therefore, we are to regard our own sins and flaws as *log-sized* and the sins and flaws of others as *speck-sized*. Because, as Boyd says, “When you let go of your need to judge others as a way of getting life and worth, you are freed to get your life from God so that you can love others as Jesus loved.”

Jesus’ call to love and not judge is a call to put down your rocks, so your hands will be free to receive Jesus’ love for yourself, and then extend it to others.

So those are the takeaways, and now, to conclude the message time, I’d like to lead you in a **scripture meditation exercise**. Again, this exercise is designed to help you encounter Jesus in a more personal way. It’s a way to shift from your rational left-brain which is probably more engaged in a teaching time, to your more experiential and imaginative right-brain.

¹⁵ Matthew 7:3-5 (NLT)

¹⁶ See Gregory Boyd, *The Myth of a Christian Religion*, pages 55-51.

In a moment, I will slowly read our passage again, twice, with a short, silent pause in-between readings. You don't have to do so, but I would very much encourage you to close your eyes during these readings, and see the scene unfold in your mind's eye. Make a movie of it in your mind.

Put yourself in the setting, and experience the story unfolding before you, as if you were there in person. Where are you in the scene? Who are you in the scene? Are you an onlooker from the crowd? Are you one of the accusers with a rock in your hand? Or do you identify with the woman, perhaps? What happens within your heart as you see and hear Jesus? Does Jesus ever look at you? Does he have anything to say to you personally?

We're going to ask the Holy Spirit to be sovereign over this exercise, and to speak to you as he will, to reveal to you what he will. Are you ready? "Spirit of our Lord Jesus, speak to each of us know, personally and intimately, through your word..."