

GETTING PAST SHAME

John 8:1-11

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Amarillo, Texas
January 28, 2024

A man talking to John Wesley once made the arrogant comment, "I never forgive." Mr. Wesley wisely replied, "Then, sir, I hope that you never sin."

In our passage today, Jesus is around the temple area, teaching. And when Jesus taught, large crowds assembled. He sounded different from the other rabbis. To be sure, there were other teachers around, sitting and instructing their disciples, their students. But somehow, this particular rabbi by the name of Jesus, this one from Nazareth, was drawing all the attention.

He knew His scripture, His Old Testament, like the other rabbis. But He made the law and prophets come alive.

Besides, the rumor was that He could perform miracles. It had even been reported that He had healed the sick, cast out demons, and, some even said, walked on water.

So they gathered – some committed and hungering for real knowledge; others curious, hoping to see a miracle. Maybe He'll turn some water into wine. Or maybe He'll give sight to the blind.

In John 8:1, we learn that Jesus is in the area of the Mount of Olives. He certainly spent some time there – a high hill to the east of Jerusalem. You will remember that a garden on this mountain was called Gethsemane, where Jesus often prayed. Jesus taught in Jerusalem during the day and then traveled to the Mount of Olives to spend the night. This high area rose 230 feet above the temple grounds below.

And don't forget, from this very mount Jesus will ascend to heaven, as the disciples watch him disappear into the sky.

In verse 2, He is at it again – teaching. Sitting like all ancient teachers. A better translation would be, "Jesus kept teaching, and the people kept coming."

I want us to notice some things from this particular story.

I. When you focus on the sins of others, you will miss your own missteps.

Look at John 8:3

The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery, and having set her in the center of the court....

Can you imagine being the woman in John 8 being caught in the act of adultery? It must have been one of those times when you hope that you are experiencing a bad dream and you'll wake up back in your own bed, in your own place. It must be one of those times when you wish you could just disappear, but you can't. There is no exit door – there is no way to escape. What she was experiencing was real. It was no ordinary nightmare – it was a living nightmare.

As the people gathered around the feet of Jesus as He sits and teaches, proclaiming the kingdom of God, the scribes and Pharisees come dragging a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery. Look at the end of verse 4: "in the very act." There was no question as to what Moses would require. Look at verse 5. "Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women; what then do You say?"

Note that the man was not also brought before Jesus. Why? According to Jewish law, the man would be equally guilty. Therefore, there should have been two sinners standing before Jesus rather than just one. All this makes it clear that the Pharisees and scribes had not caught the young lady by chance. No, they had set a trap to portray her as a tramp.

But greater still, they had set a trap for Jesus. How long had they waited behind the curtain, how long had they hidden behind the wall before they leapt out and declared, "Sinner, sinner," and carried her from the bed into the streets? For sure, the man who had been the accomplice had been allowed to sneak away, to escape from their grasp. The woman was held captive – captive to their grasp and captive to her own shame.

They could have given her a private hearing. But no, they parade her out in the public eye for all to behold. All needed to see – yes, Jesus needed to see. They needed to see Jesus see in order that His response could be heard by all ears.

The guilt is obvious. Leviticus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 22:22 say that Moses declared her penalty ought to be stoning.

So they posed the question at the end of verse 5. "Moses said stone her, what then do you say?"

As Max Lucado describes, Jesus had been teaching, the woman had been cheating, and the Pharisees were out to stop them both. They knew Jesus would be a person of grace.

But if He was lenient – and all ears would hear – then He would be going against Moses himself. Imagine that – the one who claimed to be Messiah, the second deliverer, would go against Moses, the first deliverer. Jesus, the fulfillment of the law, would become a promoter of lawlessness.

It was a perfect trap. There was no way out for Jesus.

But, if Jesus had not been lenient, if He had declared, "Moses has said we shall stone her," then Jesus would be breaking the law of Rome, for a death penalty was not permitted at the hands of Jews. It was a trap of the greatest proportions. A woman was used, a Messiah exposed, and, in the end, this troublesome teacher would be put in His place.

"Oh Jesus, the law says kill her. What do you say?"

Heads poke out the windows as the posse pushes her through the streets. Dogs bark. Neighbors turn. The city sees. Clutching her thin robe around her shoulders, she tries to hide her nakedness.

But nothing can hide her shame.

From this second on, she'll be known as an adulteress. When she goes to the market, women will whisper. When she passes, heads will turn. When her name is mentioned, people will remember.

Moral failure finds easy recall. (Max Lucado, *He Still Moves Stones*)

I want you to notice that the religious leaders have made no notice of their own sins, their secret sins. They can only see the undeniable sins of the dear lady.

I suppose it's the greatest temptation in the world – the temptation to focus on the failures of your friends and family rather than your own. To be sure, none of us would deny the danger of sin. We can see it all – adultery, gossip, lying, greed, gluttony, lust, arrogance. We have no trouble calling out sin when we see it in others.

Although she was told that giving up her two to three packs of cigarettes a day would leave her nervous and irritable at first, Elsie Kennedy, a University of Kentucky professor, confided that she didn't find it that way at all. "I stayed my old, sweet self," she said, "but my friends got so disagreeable I couldn't stand them." (Louisville *Courier-Journal*)

No, we're not tempted to deny the nature of sin. We are just tempted not to notice it within ourselves.

How would this place, how would this city be transformed if each of us first noticed the shortcomings within ourselves before we searched the souls of others for sin?

II. Sometimes we have to begin again at the point of shame.

We know the feeling of shame, don't we? What it feels like to be humiliated. Perhaps we haven't been caught in adultery, but maybe we've been caught with our hand in the cookie jar. Now we have to face the music, face our families, face ourselves, face God.

Centuries ago, a man conned his way into the orchestra of the Chinese Emperor. He could not play the flute, but he dramatically mimicked the characteristics of a seasoned flutist. He charaded for a modest salary and a comfortable place to live. He enjoyed the trappings of his deception until the Emperor decided he would like to hear a private solo from each musician in the orchestra. In a state of panic, he took flute lessons, but he couldn't learn fast enough. In desperation, he feigned illness, but the court physicians couldn't find anything wrong with him. On the eve before

his presentation, he took poison and committed suicide. He refused to face the music. Someday, in some way, each of us, even for our private actions, is going to have to face the music.

Shamed. To have someone switch on the light when you are quite comfortable in the shadows.

Shamed. To have the teacher announce that someone has been caught cheating, and to have her walk toward your desk.

Shamed. To be on the take at work and have a note on your desk that the boss wants to see you in his office as soon as possible.

Shamed. To eventually have the whole world know what you and God already know.

Shamed. To have a spouse walk out on you and begin to air all of your dirty laundry to friends and family – some true, some not so much.

Shamed.

Yes, the woman should be shamed. And each of us, at some point in our lives, should be, too.

This week, I had lunch with a businessman in our community – just a get-together to discuss and ponder our broken lives and the broken world around us. This business person is often asked to vet potential politicians regarding their candidacy for an electable office. He said, "I ask potential politicians four questions." As he gave me his keen questions, the last one was riveting: "What are you ashamed of?"

I was rattled by his last question when I left the lunch. I pondered, "How would I answer that question, if, with out warning a leading figure, whom I respected, posed that potent question: What are you ashamed of?"

The reality is, the woman caught in adultery – well, we know hers. And the reality is each one of us knows ours, and it causes us to shudder in shame.

As I mused over the meeting, the answer of grace quickly came to mind. My answer would be, "I've forgotten. The blood of Jesus declares that God will remember my sins no more. Only Satan remembers sins of shame. So my answer would be, 'I've forgotten. God's forgotten. And the devil is the only one trying to remember.'"

My friend's point is that your opponent will find out your shame and publicize it, much like the Pharisees were publicly pointing their finger at the woman.

But there is one thing about shame – it allows us to start at the bottom.

Months ago, someone in the midst of the tragedies of life looked at me and said, "Things can only get better." He was right, for his life had hit rock bottom. God uses broken things. He uses our brokenness. Broken soil to produce a crop. Broken clouds to give rain. Broken grain to give

bread. Broken bread to give strength. A broken alabaster box to give forth perfume. It is Peter, bitterly weeping, who returns to greater power than ever before.

III. All attempts to test God will end in our own humiliation.

You see the real point of the story, don't you? It's not about the woman; it's about the rabbi.

Look at verse 6

They were saying this, testing Him, so that they might have grounds for accusing Him. But Jesus....

In the minds of the Pharisees, the test was complete. Jesus had finally been cornered. Trapped. Checkmate on this rabbi. If He said that she should go free, then ha! The great teacher of the law will be found disagreeing with Moses. On the other hand, if He upholds the Mosaic law, then He'll be breaking the Roman law, because the Jews were not allowed to put anyone to death – especially in the case of adultery. "Now that we have Him in the corner, the people will finally see this rabbi for the phony that He really is!"

The religious leaders come to this rabbi under the ruse that they are seeking legal advice. Justice was not their concern. Rather, their goal was one: to discredit this new teacher named Jesus, who was attracting such an enormous crowd.

But instead of giving them an immediate answer, Jesus does a strange thing. He bends down and begins to write in the sand. The question has puzzled preachers throughout the ages: What on earth did Jesus scribble in the dirt?

Ancient commentaries – some of them have the idea that Jesus actually began to list the personal sins of the scribes and Pharisees, to let them know that He knew about them, too. And if they wanted to make sin a public matter that day, He could more than accommodate their cause.

Whenever you try to trap God – oh, we do it, too. "God, if your word is true, if you really love me, then you will....," as if we had the right to command the Creator. If you try to put God in a corner, you'll find yourself to be the victim, not the victor.

Now, I don't know much about wrestling. I grew up in a culture where we knew more about "wrestling" – I hope you know the difference. Wrestling is what they do at Oklahoma State. "Wrastling" is what they do on television – with big belts and big mouths. But in the finer collegiate form, one is awarded points not for smashing his opponents head with a folding chair, but for things like a take-down, an escape. Or, there is a third move, worth two points, called a "reversal."

In the University of West Virginia Wrestling Rules, I found this definition of a reversal: "You score two points when your opponent has you down on the mat and you come from underneath and gain control of your opponent. The reversal."

If you find yourself trying to trap God, trying to put Him in a box, catch Him in a corner, you'll find God making a two-point move. The great reversal. And you, then, my friend, have the back on the mat, and the counting has already begun.

Watch Jesus documenting the sins of the accusers in the dirt, maybe fulfilling Jeremiah 17:13, "Those who turn away from me shall be written on the earth." Jesus' silence threatened their game. So they insist, persisted in asking him (v. 7). "So, what do you say. Should we get the stones out? Or are you going to break the law of Moses?" Jesus uttered one of his most-often quoted quips. "He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her."

There is a man who keeps a large stone on his desk, with one word written across the stone: "First." It's a constant reminder for him of these words from Jesus: "He that is without sin, let him first cast a stone." It helps check within him the carnal desire to be hasty in condemning others. As he daily recalls his own shortcomings, he finds it less difficult to show grace to the weak and erring. The remarkable paperweight also serves a second useful purpose. When people come into his office in an angry, criticizing mood, he quietly hands the stone to them at an appropriate moment. Surprised, they usually examine the stone carefully and then ask what the word "first" means. As they listen to the explanation, it isn't long until their attitude changes and their heart softens. And though some wrongs may still have to be made right, a new spirit of forgiveness and charity is found.

Normally a witness against the shady lady would be required to throw the first stone, to make sure they weren't making it up. But Jesus changes the game. He asks if there is anyone who has no sin in his life or her life – well, if anyone like that were present, it would be great if they would be willing to hurl the first stone.

IV. The way we measure it out to others is the way God measures it to us.

In Matthew 7:1-5, we read these words.

Do not judge so that you will not be judged. For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, "let me take the speck out of your eye," and behold, the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.

What always bothered me about that sermon were those words in verse 2: "For in the way you judge, you will be judged." If we're going to start throwing stones at the sinners, Jesus says perhaps we're going to need a whole quarry to take care of this crowd.

That's the essence of what Jesus is saying. The whole point of the gospel is this: you are a sinner and you received God's grace. Therefore, as you receive God's grace, you must give God's grace. More than once in the Bible, it's clear: as you set up the standard of measure, so it will be measured to you.

I do not like that concept. I want to measure others with a harsh and critical spirit, censorious. But I want the Master to measure me with grace and mercy.

A remarkable thing happens in the story. I imagine it this way: The first person sort of releases their stone nonchalantly. There is a thud on the ground, then another. And then there is a rhythmic rumbling as the stones pound the temple precinct.

To be sure, the woman's sin was terrible, beyond excuse. But what sin do I have that keeps me from casting the first stone?

Have you ever noticed verse 9?

When they heard it, they began to go out one by one, beginning with the older ones.

Beginning with the older ones. What is that about? And why did John tell us that the eldest were the earliest to drop their stones and walk away? They had more experience. They quickly grasped the implications of Jesus' words. The wisest among them see Jesus' point, and they walk away.

The woman, we are told in verse 9, was "left alone." It's a strong word. It means "abandoned." When the force of Jesus' words struck home with the crowd, especially the oldest and the wisest, they were no longer interested in her sin, but they saw their own. They made no attempt to interfere with her, and she was left where she was.

V. Jesus is not condoning sin.

It's amazing how many times this passage is preached and people conclude that the message is "Sin is no big deal." On the contrary, the message is "grace is given, but go and sin no more."

In fact, I would say that the words of Jesus show that he both reproves her sin but also that he has a certain confidence that she has, in fact, learned her lesson.

Dr. J. Wilbur Chapman told of a distinguished Methodist minister who preached on sin. One of his church officers came afterward to talk to him in his study. He said to the pastor, "Dr. Howard, we don't want you to talk so plainly as you do about sin, because if our boys and girls hear you talking so much about sin they will more easily become sinners. Call it a mistake, if you will – but don't speak about sin."

The minister went to his utility closet and brought back a bottle of strychnine that was clearly marked "rat poison." "Oh," said the minister, "I see what you want me to do. You want me to change the label. Suppose I peel off this label of 'poison,' remove the skull and crossbones, and relabel it as 'essence of peppermint.' Don't you see, the milder you make the label, the more dangerous you make the poison?"

Maybe the last words you and I need to hear this morning are the words, "Go and sin no more."

**Sinner She Was
Her reputation had unraveled,**

**picked apart by self-righteous hands,
weavers in reverse.**

**Her pride faded like empty colors
until all she knew of herself
was what others said.**

**She was evil; she was wrong.
Sinner she was, branded and worthless.
Sinner she was, dirty and useless.**

**But there came a man with love in his eyes
and forgiveness on his lips.
Sinner she was, but forgiven she was.
and her life came back to her.**

**They didn't understand,
these that never knew the weight of shame,
that never danced with despair.
So perfect, they'd never been healed.
So perfect, they'd never been forgiven.
So perfect, they'd never needed anything
or anyone more than themselves.**

**But she knew what it was to need,
and her broken heart cried glad tears.
He was her Lord;
He was the Christ.**

**(R.A. England and P. Haymens, eds., *Season for Singles*, printed in *Formation: Perspectives*,
January-April 1999)**

Let us pray.