

FAULTS OF MY FRIENDS
John 8:1-11
(sermon outline by Glenn Durham)

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Jesus preached a lot about forgiveness. He was frequently [found] with those who were considered sinners, because, as He said, He had come for the sick and not for those who are well. (Vanier, p. 140)

The voices yanked her out of bed.

“Get up, you harlot.”

“What kind of woman do you think you are?”

Priests slammed open the bedroom door, threw back the window curtains, and pulled off the covers. Before she felt the warmth of the morning sun, she felt the heat of their scorn.

“Shame on you.”

“Pathetic.”

“Disgusting.”

She scarcely had time to cover her naked body before they marched her through the narrow streets. Dogs yelped. Roosters ran. Women leaned out their windows. Mothers snatched their children off the path. Merchants peered out the doors of their shops. Jerusalem became a jury and rendered its verdict with glares and crossed arms.

And if the bedroom raid and parade of shame were inadequate, the men thrust her right into the middle of a morning Bible class. Stunned students stood on one side of her. Pious plaintiffs on the other. They had their questions and convictions; she had her dangling negligee and smeared lipstick. (Max Lucado, “The God Who Stoops,” www.preaching.com)

God does not say: “If you change, I will love you.” We discover that God loves us and then we change and want to respond to God’s love. (Vanier, p. 144)

Look at John 8:1-6

But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.

Early in the morning He came again into the temple, and all the people were coming to Him; and He sat down and began to teach them.

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

they said to Him, “Teacher, this woman has been caught in adultery, in the very act.

Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women; what then do You say?”

They were saying this, testing Him, so that they might have grounds for accusing Him. But Jesus stooped down and with His finger wrote on the ground.

Jesus taught in Jerusalem during the day and then travel to the Mount of Olives to spend the night. This high area rose 230 feet above the temple grounds where Jesus taught. You remember, it is from this very mountain that Jesus will ascend to Heaven, as His disciples watch Him disappear into the presence of the Father.

Jesus is teaching again, sitting – as all ancient teachers sat when they taught. The text says that the people kept on coming, and Jesus kept on teaching. As the group was sitting around the feet of Jesus, Scribes and Pharisees enter the scene. The Scribes were skilled professionals at writing and studying the law. They had much in common with the Pharisees, who also took great interest in the interpretation of Moses’ law. The Scribes and Pharisees came dragging a woman who had been caught in the act – the very act – of adultery.

Interesting. There is no man here. Where did he go anyway? Last time I counted, adultery takes two. In reality, the Jewish law says both the man and the woman would be equally guilty before the law. There should have been two sinners standing before Jesus, rather than one.

But the woman had been placed in a trap. And, more so, it was a trap for Jesus. To trap her would be to trap the troublesome rabbi.

The Scribes would not hear of a secret trial. They wanted to put her out in public. They wanted to discredit Jesus and His disciples.

The law – Leviticus 20:10, Deuteronomy 22:22 – no question. The woman was caught. And Moses, himself, had called for a trial and then, if found guilty upon the evidence of two witnesses, a death penalty.

The trap exists on multiple levels. Jesus’ enemies presented Him with a profound problem. He could choose justice – go with the law of Moses and stone the woman. Or He could choose mercy – the very chief attribute of God. No one can easily reconcile justice and mercy.

God is holy. Ignoring and setting aside our failures and frailties would mar the very beauty of God. And once we see God in all of His holiness, we would forever weep at the slightest tarnish. Our sins mar the beauty of God like a child running through the Louvre with a Marks-A-Lot could blemish the paintings of the masters.

“Teacher, this woman was caught in the act – the very act. Now Moses says we need to stone her. What do you say?”

Have you ever noticed the powerful always use the weak to further their agenda? The woman is a mere object, used to propel their own purposes. Live or die – they don't care about her. They don't even care about the keeping of the law. They only care about capturing the Christ in their trap.

How could Jesus, the Messiah, who would claim to be the second Moses, the second deliverer of the people of God, dispute with the great lawgiver Himself? "You let Jesus start contradicting Moses," thought the Pharisees, "then we'll see how the crowd reacts."

Jesus looks into these hard hearts and sees hatred and hypocrisy. They ignore the details of the law in order to press their own agenda. Theirs is not a love for the holiness of God or fear of offending Yahweh. They love themselves, and what they fear losing is power and prestige. If they were so concerned with justice, they would not have been applying the law with partiality.

What is Jesus going to do? If He shows mercy, He undercuts morality. And if He doesn't – why, the hurting would never follow a Messiah who stones desperate girls. Isaiah 42 says, "A bruised reed He will not break, a faintly burning wick He will not quench; He will faithfully bring forth justice."

Will not His followers flee if He breaks this one so bruised by society and sin?

They press. They push. "What's your answer?" There is no way out. And if it were a game of chess, the Pharisees were shouting "Checkmate."

After their persistence (v. 7), Jesus straightened up and says to them, "Okay. Stone her. And the one who has no sin, cast the first stone."

It is the most ancient trick of Satan. You would think, after 2,000 years of trying to follow Jesus, we – present day followers of the Christ – wouldn't fall for Satan's same old setbacks. Here's what he does: If Satan can get you to focus on the faults and failures, the sins and sordid lives of those around you, he knows you'll never cleanse your own soul.

Have you ever noticed how easy it is to see the faults and failures, the foibles and frailties of our husband, our wife, our son, our daughter, our best friend, our boss, our in-laws or out-laws? Just as long as the prince of darkness has you examining the hearts of another, he has you right where he wants you.

Everything, and I mean everything, about Jesus is the complete opposite of Satan. He is light; Satan is darkness. He is truth; Satan is a liar. Satan comes to kill, steal, and destroy; Jesus comes that we might have life and have life abundantly. Yes, while Satan wants you to seek out the sins of others, Jesus draws your focus back to your own blemished soul. He'd already told them while teaching, "Why are you trying to take this splinter out of your brother's eye when you've got a log in your own?"

When we judge or accuse people, is it not because we are unable to accept the truth of our own brokenness and to forgive ourselves? We project onto others what we refuse to see in ourselves. We accuse, judge and condemn others because unconsciously we are judging ourselves. When we condemn others, we are also placing ourselves on trial. (Vanier, p. 150).

I want us to notice two things about this text.

I. Jesus discomforts the haughty

The religiously self-righteous have trapped a teacher. Of course we know their motives are defiled and their desires insincere. They do not crave the divine solution to the marriage of justice and mercy; they want to destroy Jesus.

Jesus will not be trapped in their corner. He will not be drawn into their debate. He will not play their game.

Jesus does not say they can't throw a stone. Moses has already said they could. Rather, he disqualifies these men from being witnesses or executioners. "Let the one of you who doesn't have any sin be the first one to throw a stone at this sinner."

It was day when grace makes a thud. It started with the older ones (v. 9) dropping their stones and walking away. Jesus was left alone with the sinful woman standing in solitude.

It took two eyewitnesses to bring about the punishment of death. But there were no eyewitnesses left to testify to her guilt.

The oldest were the first to realize their trap had sprung on themselves. Maybe the older we get, the less sure we are of our purity. We used to be sure, to be arrogant. I was a whole lot more righteous when I was 20 than I am at 61. I was a lot smarter then, too.

The first rock hits the ground, like the first stone of a hail storm. You know how hailstones build into a rattling cacophony. The first hailstone bounces on the skylight, and you wonder what it might be. Then there is a second, a third, and then a thunderous release from heaven.

This is a thunderous release from their hands. The stones were dropped. The accusers walked away. The woman was left to the judgment of Jesus.

II. Jesus comforts the humbled

What promises had been made to this woman, as she was lured into the lust of the moment? She was assured all would be well with her dark secret. But caught. **From that second on, she'd be known as an adulteress. When she goes into 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*)**

Do you know the feeling of shame? Do you know what it feels like to be humiliated? Maybe it's not adultery, but it's something – your hand caught in the cookie jar. Now you'll have to face the people, face your family, face yourself, face your God.

The feelings of this poor woman could certainly be our own feelings, couldn't they? What do you do when there is no place to hide and no rock to crawl under?

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 as soon as possible in his office.

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 when you've tried to keep up the front for years.

Shamed.

Yes, the woman should be shamed. But the same Jesus who discomforts the haughty comforts the humbled.

Jesus stands up a second time (v. 10), "Woman, where are they? Where are those who are going to testify? Where are the witnesses? Where is the jury? Where are the judges? Where are they, woman?"

"No one, Lord" (v. 11).

Powerful words of the text. "Who accuses you?" "No one, Lord." The word here is the word for Lord, *kurios*. "No one, Lord."

Satan hurls accusations. In fact, "The Accuser" is his nickname (Rev. 12:10). The Holy Spirit convicts, not so much accuses.

Yes, the woman was caught in the act of immorality, stupidity, dishonestly, irresponsibility. But the accusers, one by one, walk away.

For some of you, your parents were your accusers all your life. They owned a travel agency which specialized in guilt trips – and you're still on one. And you hear their voices in your very dreams.

Hebrews 10:21 says, "Since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and sure faith, because we have been made free from a guilty conscience."

A clean conscience, a clean record, a clean heart - free from accusation, free from condemnation.

Hebrews 7:25 says since He will live forever, He will always be there to remind God that He has paid for our sins with His blood.

Jesus doesn't say there doesn't need to be a death because of this sin and every sin. What He does say is, "Throw the stones at Me on Calvary."

Romans 8:33 says, "Who can accuse the people God has chosen?" No one, because "God is the one who makes them right." "Who can say God's people are guilty?" No one, because Jesus has died, but He is also risen from the dead and now He's on God's right side, appealing to God for us.

God gives guilt to change you. Satan gives guilt to enslave you.

"Neither do I condemn you. Go your way. From now on, sin no more."

Feelings of guilt are like roadblocks: they prevent us from advancing on the road of faith and love. Jesus takes away these roadblocks and tell us: "I do not condemn you." Forgiven, we are called to forgive and to liberate others from their prisons of guilt. (Vanier, p. 139)

Undeserved grace is the single greatest incentive for new and improved behavior. I cannot imagine for a moment that the woman leaves unchanged.

Sometimes I can tell that those who are most guilty are most thirsty for a drink from God's goblet of grace. I once baptized a woman whom I knew had had a life marked and marred by sin. Failure and disobedience were her street address. Sin and sensuality were her phone number. And as I plunged her into the redemptive waters of baptism, she emerged with a new face, a new countenance – the face of grace. "Sometimes you can just tell," I thought to myself, "those who are really thirsty for the grace of God."

And God comforts the humbled.

You know the problem with the stories of the New Testament. The problem is you have to pick a character. You have to be in the play. You have to rehearse your lines. You've got to get on stage. You are on stage already – the spotlight is on, and you are the actor.

Are you a Pharisee? Do you always look at the sins of others – judging, pointing, criticizing, carping, condemning?

A trial implies a judgment.

A judgment implies a *separation*.

When we judge someone, we are “the good one,” the other is the “bad one”;

we are superior, the other inferior;

we know and the other *does not*.

We built a barrier between us.

**Don’t we all tend to judge others,
seeing what is negative in them instead of
the positive”?**

But the Word became flesh to be close to people. He calls his disciples to love as he loves:

**“Be compassionate as my Father is
compassionate;**

do not judge and you shall not be judged;

**do not condemn and you shall not be
condemned.**

Forgive and it will be forgiven to you”

(Luke 6:36-37). (Vanier, p. 142-143)

We’re all the Pharisees sometimes. I’m a Pharisee sometimes. It’s a pitiful state to be in. Misery.

Maybe you’re not the Pharisee today. Maybe you’re the woman with the wrecked life of sordid sin. Maybe you are thirsty for a drink from God’s goblet of grace, and you walk away forgiven because He’s taken the stones for you on Calvary and you’re changed forever.

Or maybe most of us are a member of the crowd. We like to see action, violence, somebody caught. “There’s about to be a bloodletting.” And even when we’re about to take joy in the fall of another, Jesus turns to us and says, “Get the light off of her and shine it on yourself.”

Those who know that self-examination will be terribly painful choose to examine others. It’s just easier that way.

Jesus says, “You’re so perfect, I want you to go ahead and hurl the first stone.”

Self-righteousness is no righteousness at all. It is deceived, decay of your own heart.

God will discomfort the haughty, but always comfort the humbled. Drop your stone, walk away, and go in the God of grace.

In the Gospel of John, sin is above all [else] the refusal to welcome Jesus and to trust him. It is remaining obstinately blind in the face of the signs and miracles he did to show that he was sent by God. It is turning our back on him.

...

This wall of sin is strengthened as we consciously refuse to be healed and even try to get rid of Jesus. Sin, then, is being closed up in oneself and in one's group. It leads to conflict, oppression and all forms of abuse of power. Sin leads to death.

The woman taken in adultery in this gospel story symbolizes each of us when we turn away from God and refuse God's gift of life and love, when we hurt others and ourselves.

...

Jesus says to each one of us, as he said to this woman: "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more." (Vanier, p. 147-48)

**The whole gospel of Jesus is contained within the words of the "Our Father":
Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. (Vanier, p. 151)**

Let us pray.

Jean Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John*, (New York: Paulist Press), 2004.