

GRACE VS. THE ROCK

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. But when they persisted in asking Him, He straightened up, and said to them, "He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." Again He stooped down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they began to go out one by one, beginning with the older ones, and He was left alone, and the woman, where she was, in the center of the court. Straightening up, Jesus said to her, "Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you?" She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "I do not condemn you, either. Go. From now on sin no more."*

John 8:1-11¹

Most of us do not like to have our sins exposed in public. We go to great lengths to keep others from learning about our faults and misbehaviors. After committing a crime, many criminals create worse problems for themselves by trying to hide their crimes. Although we know we are sinners, and we are aware that everyone else knows that we sin, it is still a very private matter.

The woman described in John's Gospel (8:1-11) suffered the embarrassment of having her sin made very public. Although her sin, adultery, may not be our sin, her embarrassment over being made a public spectacle is certainly one that we all fear. Ultimately, there are no secret sins.

We know nothing of the background of this woman before she was thrust onto the ground in front of Jesus. Since she was accused of adultery, she was obviously married, or at the least, betrothed to be married. Her body already belonged to someone else. In the act of adultery, she gave her body to the wrong person.

It might have been a one-time act of passion, a spur of the moment fall into the arms of the wrong lover. She might have been a young woman, unfulfilled by an uncaring husband who spent his nights with friends and family rather than at home with his wife. We can understand how she might have been tempted into the arms of a long-time friend, or perhaps swept off her feet by a handsome stranger.

¹ It is possible that your Bible has a footnote or some indication that this passage (John 7:53-8:11) is not contained in the original version of John's Gospel. In fact, some ancient manuscripts include it in the Gospel of Luke. Most scholars conclude that the story was not originally written by John in the place where we have it today. However, no one questions its authenticity. Perhaps more than any other encounter with Jesus, we find in this story, a great expression of the mercy of our Lord.

It is possible that she and her lover maintained a long-term relationship, hidden for months, or years, from her husband's knowledge. Maybe she was simply a prostitute, abandoned by a slacker husband, or widowed by a man cut down in the prime of life. We really know nothing about her background. What we do know, from the testimony of witnesses, is that she was guilty of adultery.

The telling of the story by John, gives the impression that the woman was snatched from her bed, drug through the dusty city streets, and thrown to the ground at Jesus' feet. As she slouched in the dirt, her flesh was barely covered by the blanket she clutched as her accusers hustled her out of the bedroom. They were obviously not concerned with the woman's modesty. The clear implication is that she was simply a pawn, being used to put Jesus into a conundrum.

The reason we expose the sins of others is because it allows us to feel good about ourselves. Make no mistake, publicly embarrassing someone else is always a selfish act. Some people will claim that they are really seeking the truth, or that they are doing it for the good of the sinner, but the truth is that such exposure is very unloving. When we really love someone, we do not expose their sins. Love motivates us to do the exact opposite – to keep their sins from view.

This was the chief difference between the scribes and Pharisees, and Jesus. They were simply using the woman; Jesus actually loved the woman. To the accusers, the woman was like a Styrofoam cup, to be disposed after use. If they had been serious about the sin of adultery they would have behaved much differently. Adultery is one of those unique sins that requires the cooperation of a partner. If their concern was stamping out the sin, they would have also brought the partner.

Their failure to bring the man has left this story open to speculation about his identity. Some has suggested that he was a participant in the plan to trap Jesus. His assignment was to lure the woman into a compromising position, alert the others, and disappear. Our opinion of the scribes and Pharisees allows us to accept the plausibility of this theory. They were not above manipulating a situation for their own purposes.

If the adultery participating man was not a part of the plot, he must have considered himself very fortunate. At the very least, he should have his sin publicly exposed alongside his female partner. It would have been just as appropriate for the eyes of the crowd to view his shame. However, since he did not serve their purpose, the scribes and Pharisees paid no attention as he slithered away from the scene of the crime. In the end, he might have been the biggest loser in this entire episode. Because he escaped the accusations, he missed the opportunity to encounter the Savior.

The adulterous woman met the Savior. It was not a meeting that she expected, nor was it planned. No one would purposely come to the feet of the Son of God, barely wrapped in a blanket, and with hair that was disheveled from a night of sex and sleep. A thin layer of sand, from the city streets, covered more of her body than did the coveted blanket. She was afraid, confused, and crying, as she felt the penetrating stares from the curious crowd that gathered around Jesus. From her perspective there was nothing but chaos. Screaming and hollering drowned out the gasps of disbelief.

"Bring her over here, quickly, over here!" is what one man kept ordering.

She didn't know what they were doing, but it was apparent that they were fulfilling a plan. She did know that her sin was being exposed, right on the city streets, where

everyone could see and hear.

The dragging stopped, the dust began to settle, and the sound of screaming was slowly replaced by incoherent whispers. After a few minutes, when the commotion was calmed, the dominating voice of one of her accusers penetrated into everyone's ears.

"Teacher, this woman has been caught in adultery, in the very act," he said with planned precision. "Now in the law, Moses commanded us to stone such women; what then do you say?"

As he spoke, the crowd hushed. When he finished they began to murmur to one another. They had been frequently amazed at Jesus' teaching. He was becoming well-known as a rabbi with a unique perspective on the law of God. But, there was no way to solve this problem. In this theological chess match, it seemed like the scribes and Pharisees had him checkmated.

The obvious answer, at least to a casual reader of the law, was that Jesus would have to agree that the woman should be stoned. Yet, if Jesus took this position, then He would face two problems. First, He would lose his popularity among the common people. The majority of folks attracted to Jesus were classified as sinners, just like this adulterous woman (and you and me as well). These non-religious people would have walked away from Jesus, disillusioned by His strict adherence to burdensome legalism.

Second, to side with the scribes and Pharisees would create problems with the Roman authorities. If Jesus participated in a public stoning then He could expect wrath from these occupying pagans. They did not permit the Jews to administer the death penalty without official permission.

The other possibility posed by the scribes and Pharisees was for Jesus to absolve the woman of any guilt. The Pharisees had listened to Jesus' teaching and this is probably the direction they anticipated. Once Jesus chose this course of action, they stood ready to accuse Him of breaking the Law of Moses. Leviticus was very clear when it said, "the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death" (Leviticus 20:10).

These Pharisees exposed a very dangerous perspective. They were willing to sacrifice this woman's life for their own purposes. They were not concerned about her welfare; they were only interested in finding support for their own position. When our beliefs take precedence over people, the result will be rock throwing. These religious rulers abused this woman, misused the Law of Moses, and criticized Jesus for their own gain.

I have a friend who was married for about a month and then divorced. The marriage was never consummated sexually, and they never even lived together. All of this happened before he became a Christian. Today this man is a pastor. It is amazing how many rocks are thrown at him by Christians as a result of this blundered marriage. These religious zealots will even ignore the fact that he is now a devoted husband and father, a model to be respected.

Anytime we give priority to our opinion over people the result will be rock throwing. God did not give the law as a religious tool to judge and criticize others. He gave it to point us to our need for forgiveness and salvation. We must also be careful not to use God's law as an instrument for justifying our own lifestyle. Rock throwers are notorious for ignoring their own sins, and highlighting the sins of others. This woman

was about to be the recipient of a stoning, as it appeared Jesus would be helpless to change the course of events.

It is likely that neither this woman, nor anyone else in the crowd, had ever actually witnessed a stoning. Not only was the authority for administering the death penalty withheld from the Jews by the Romans, the religious leaders were not anxious to kill sinners. Their purpose was to discredit Jesus in the minds of the mindless masses. Even though she did not know the particulars of a stoning, she was certain it was something to be avoided.

To most of us, the idea of stoning conjures up the image of a victim being lined up against a wall, as a large crowd pelts them with chunks of granite. As painful as that seems, that is not an accurate reflection of the ancient practice of stoning. In Jewish procedure, the culprit was stripped, with hands tied behind the back. They were placed on a scaffold nearly a dozen feet in the air. The first witness, and testifier against the accused, pushed the sinner over the ledge. If the fall produced death, the punishment was ended. However, if death did not occur, the next witness dropped a very large stone on the breast of the convicted. This “first stone” usually produced the sought for consequence of death.

From her slouched position at the feet of Jesus, this woman sat motionless, dazed. So much out of the ordinary had happened to her in the past few moments that she was in shock. Even if she were not afraid to open her mouth, she had no idea what to say. How could she possibly defend herself against so many witnesses, and the physical evidence of her appearance?

Although she might not have recognized Jesus as the new celebrity in town, it was quickly apparent that He was the center of everyone’s focus. She had been cast down at His feet. The question of punishment had been directed to His attention. The anticipation of the crowd was tuned in to His response. She was smart enough to realize that life or death for her depended on His determination.

Even though I am confident that this adulterous woman feared for her life, I am unconvinced that she would have ever been executed. The intent of the scribes and Pharisees was to disgrace Jesus. They only wanted to trap him, and once His answer was uttered, they would have walked away from the woman – mission accomplished. The greatest danger she faced – of having her sin publicly exposed – was behind her. However, the fear of death can be just as disconcerting as the possibility of death.

The woman cowered in fear at Jesus’ feet. The crowd clamored in anticipation of Jesus’ answer. The scribes and Pharisees relished the sweet smell of victory. Jesus did very little.

He stooped down and began to scribble in the dirt with his index finger. I would like to join the many commentator and speculators at this point and offer my opinion about Jesus’ writing, but I have no opinion. I have studied a myriad of suggestions on the subject – from those who use this to teach the importance of writing down our thoughts before we speak, to others who use it to teach that we should follow Jesus’ example and never write down anything that can be preserved longer than scribbles in the sand. Obviously, we do not know what Jesus wrote. If those standing at His side read the writing, they remained silent.

Jesus wrote in the dirt and the anticipation must have been paralyzing. Was this

the time when Jesus was finally baffled? How would He respond to such a precarious predicament?

He said nothing, so they kept asking.

“What do you say, Jesus! Should we stone her like Moses said?”

Still no response.

“Some teacher you are! You can’t even answer the simplest question,” taunted the accusers.

Finally, after what seemed like eternity for the woman at his feet, Jesus stood erect and turned to face His questioners.

“He who is without sin among you,” He uttered in a clear, firm voice, “let him *be the first* to throw a stone at her.”

The entire crowd remained silent, as Jesus stooped back down and resumed His writing in the ground. Perhaps some of the younger, more impertinent participants let out a half-hearted snicker at Jesus’ words, but no one had anything to say. They were all stunned – as silent as the stones they were anxious to hurl.

Jesus essentially offered an invitation to those who had witnessed the adultery. Remember the Jewish practice of stoning meant that the one who cast the first stone is the one who does the killing.

“If you have no sin in your life, then go ahead, you be the one to kill this woman!” It is fascinating, that the only present in that dusty city courtyard who met the qualifications that Jesus established, was Jesus Himself. He was the only one without sin.

As is always the case, after Jesus speaks there is nothing more that needs to be said. It was only a few minutes before the older, wiser accusers slowly turned and walked away from the impromptu trial. They were soon followed by the others. Even the spectators realized that the show was over and it was time to go home.

In a master stroke, Jesus had turned the table on his opponents. It was a move that would have left any chess master in awe. As they sometimes say in athletics, He snatched victory from the jaws of defeat.

It did not take long for everyone to depart, and Jesus was left alone with the adulterous woman. We don’t know where the disciples were, the storyteller does not give us this detail. All we have is a very personal, face-to-face encounter between Jesus and a sinner. That should not surprise us because that is why Jesus came. He wants to meet sinners face-to-face.

Throughout the entire story, the woman has been talked about, but no one talked to her. When the accusers left, Jesus changed that as He spoke to her, “Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you?”

How foolish it is to stand before Jesus with words of condemnation of others on our lips. How can anyone be an accuser when speaking to the all-knowing Messiah? When we stand in Jesus’ presence, we are confronted with our own sinfulness, not the faults of others. That is exactly what happened. Everyone left that day with full awareness of their own sin.

The adulterous woman replied with a very short phrase, “No one, Lord.” This woman, still wrapped in the blanket of immorality, saw all of her accusers vanish. Even the One qualified to make accusations, chose to say, “I do not condemn you, either. . .”

Once he had dispatched her accusers and delivered her from danger, Jesus then acknowledged her existence. This is the beginning of grace, to be acknowledged by the Son of God. This is the Good News of the Gospel; God knows us and our problems.

After recognizing the woman, Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you..." These are the most precious words any person can hear. There is no better news than the report that God does not condemn us. The sinful ones were prepared and anxious to throw stones, but the sinless One refused to offer condemnation.

This is what set Jesus apart from the scribes and Pharisees. He is not out to condemn, but to redeem. As we strive to relate to others this is an important model to follow. Condemnation is easy, redemption takes effort. Instead of throwing stones we should be reaching out in forgiveness.

Yet, we must also realize that grace is not easy on sin. Jesus said, "Go. From now on sin no more."

This is what it means to love the sinner and hate the sin. Jesus is teaching us how to relate to sinners. It means to take a person who is judged and abused by others, love them, and set them on a redemptive course.

God does not forgive us and then set us free to continue in our sin. That would be grace which is powerless. When He forgives, God sets us free to amend our ways. When we throw rocks at those caught in sin, we destroy this whole process of grace.

In my office I have a softball-sized rock which has the Scripture reference "John 8:7" printed on the side. It is a reminder to me of this verse. God often directs my attention to this stone before I speak. Sometimes I have even directed another person's attention to it when they get carried away with criticism about others.

A stone is not symbolic of grace. The symbol of grace is the open arms of Jesus as he lifted this woman to her feet and set her free from condemnation. In every relationship we have the opportunity of administering judgment or grace. If we stand before another person as judge, then we deny them the opportunity of grace.

There was a sizable number of people watching, were waiting to see Jesus' response. They were also closely watching the religious leadership. People are watching closely today to see how Christians respond to sinners and their sin. When they observe us throwing stones at one another, and at others, they expect to receive the same treatment. Consequently, they have no desire to be a part of that kind of fellowship.

The crowds who stood behind Jesus and watched His response to the adulterous woman, saw something very appealing. They observed One who would love them and be able to help them. This is why the people came to Jesus.