

I Do Not Condemn You!

John 7:53-8:11

Call: Lam 3:21-24 (ESV)

Scripture: Eph 2:4-9 (ESV)

I. Intro

Have you ever been caught doing something you weren't supposed to do? For ski week this spring, we went to the snow and went skiing as a family. After lunch, I stayed in the car for a few extra minutes after everyone else went back up the hill. When I decided to join them, I walked through the parking lot and ducked under a rope which was separating the parking lot from the snow. I didn't think it was a big deal, since I wasn't cutting in any line. The rope simply separated the parking lot from the snow. But, an employee saw me, and in front of a large crowd, he decided to berate me for ducking under the rope. I was publicly humiliated. It reminded me of those Southwest commercials from awhile ago with the tag line, "Want to get away?"

Ever have one of those moments? A time when you were caught? A time when you were caught stumbling? A time when "you wanted to get away?" Now, think about what the response was by the person who caught you? Was grace and compassion offered? Or, were you humiliated? Regardless of which response, today's text will touch some of those same emotions.

***Let's Pray.** Father we come to you this morning wanting to hear your Word clearly. We invite your Spirit, your living-water, here this morning to open our eyes and ears and remove any hindrances we may have. In Jesus name, Amen.*

Review

Back in chapter 1, John told us that Jesus invited us to "come and see" the era of grace and truth. And, we have seen many people in the Gospel experience the grace and truth of Jesus. This continues in our text today, where we pick up the story at the end of the Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem. Last week, we looked at the incredible joy that was experienced during this feast, especially during the water ceremony every morning. As one Rabbi said, "He who has not seen the rejoicing of the water drawing has never seen joy in his life." On the last day of the feast, presumably after the joyous water ceremony, Jesus stood up and cried out those "golden words," inviting everyone to come to him and drink his living water. And, whoever does will have living water flow within them and out of them. What is this living water? It's the Holy Spirit, the very life of God. This week we get another example of how this living water washes over someone.

I invite you into our text, John 7, beginning in verse 53.

II. The Context (7:53-8:2)

53 *[[They went each to his own house, 8:1 but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. 2 Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them. (ESV)*

A. Textual Comments

As we come to this text today, we need to mention a couple of words about the text itself. No matter what translation of the Bible you read, the text today is set off with brackets, along with a footnote. The footnote will say something to the effect that this scene is not in the earliest manuscripts of the Gospel of John. Even in later manuscripts, this scene is found at different points in this Gospel. Some manuscripts even have it at the end of Luke. Because of this, many commentators don't think it fits here in the midst of this Feast. I, on the other hand, believe it fits fine right here. Regardless, there is evidence that it *is* an ancient text, and it undoubtedly fits within the Jesus tradition no matter where it is located in the Gospel record.

B. Teaching Again

The scene begins with everyone leaving town. The feast is over, and normalcy begins to return to Jerusalem. Jesus goes to the Mount of Olives, which appears to have been his home while in Jerusalem (Lk 21:37).

The next day, Jesus goes back to the Temple and begins teaching. We don't know the content of his teaching, but a crowd gathers to hear him.

Verse 3.

III. Caught! (3-6a)

3 The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst 4 they said to him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. 5 Now in the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?" 6 This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him. (ESV)

A. The Scene

Think about the context again. The absolute highpoint of the entire year has just happened with the Feast of Tabernacles. Rejoicing and celebration for an entire week. The best party of the year had just ended. But Tabernacles was also known as a place where everyone was welcomed and accepted. Why? Because that was the character of God. And, now, we get this ugly little scene that shocks us back to reality. The contrast is staggering, and quite frankly, this is a terrible scene.

B. A Real Life Example

In the 1960s, James Michener, the historical fiction writer, wrote a novel about the Middle East, called *Caravans*. I'm told he lived in the Middle East for many years before writing the novel. And, during his time there, he witnessed a stoning in the same context as this one. He describes it in his novel. It is absolutely awful.

The lady is brought out, shaking and quivering, wholly masked and tied to a post. The leaders of the blood thirsty mob speak, and continue to raise their voices in order to work the crowd into a frenzy. The witnesses are then brought forward to throw the first stones, as cheers arise from the crowd. Michener then goes into horrible detail in describing the brutal scene. It's hard to read. He even says he almost fainted while it was happening. But he wasn't allowed to leave the scene, because he was a guest, and guests were known to be killed if they left the scene.

This is what this woman potentially faces. Sometimes we, who know this text well, forget that this woman's life is on the line. At Tabernacles! Just horrendous stuff.

C. Interrupted

So, Jesus is teaching and the Scribes and Pharisees interrupt him, bringing this unnamed woman. This is the only time the scribes are mentioned in John. It's important because the Scribes filled many roles in first century Judaism, including lawyer, theologian and ethicist. Their presence makes what's about to happen official. These proceedings are formal and legal.

However, their presence is eclipsed by this unnamed woman. She is "*brought and placed*" before Jesus, words that depict the treatment of a prisoner. She's apparently been "*caught in the act,*" and Moses commands that "*such women*" be killed.

D. Where is the Man?

Yes, Deuteronomy does state that adulterers who are caught in the act must be killed (Deut 22:22-23). Presumably the woman has been caught in the act, but where's the man? Doesn't it take two? It's hard to commit adultery on your own. Where is the man? It's obvious these Religious Authorities aren't really concerned at all with the law, because the law specifically states that *both* the man and the woman must be killed, not just the woman (Lev 20:10; Deut 22:22). They are breaking the law themselves, in this act. The man has been let off the hook while the woman must pay. Sadly this is the way it is in many cultures to this day. The powerful, usually the men, use condemnation to silence the marginalized, usually the women (Croasman, 37).

At our intercessory prayer on Wednesday mornings, we always pray for a persecuted country from the Open Doors list. Almost every single week, Open Doors highlights the immense oppression on the women especially in these countries.

E. Objectification

The second question though is - couldn't they have taken the woman to Jesus in private? They do this in front of a crowd of people, totally humiliating her. It's obvious they could care less about this woman. John says as much in verse 6. The authorities are simply testing Jesus, and the woman is simply an object to get at him. She's no longer human. She's disposable. At the most inclusive and accepting feast on the calendar, these leaders take a broken woman and use her as bait. Her life hangs in the balance.

F. People-Protecting

Every time I read this story, I'm amazed at the objectification of a real-life person in order to make a theological point, by who? The pastors of the day! Then, I'm convicted. How often have I argued my theological points, according to *my* "perfect tradition," and crushed others in the process. Theology is not made in God's image. The law is not made in God's image. The Bible isn't made in God's image. Only people are. All people are made in God's image and represent him. No person is disposable.

We are to be people-protectors within a cancel culture. In a world where tribalism and division rage, how important it is for us, the church, to be people-protectors. How important it is for us to not demonize others, to not objectify others, to not treat someone as "other." Let's admit it. We all have those people who we just know are disposable. We all have those people who we want to cancel. We all have that person or those groups who we just know aren't really made in the image of God.

All people are made in his image. We're to be people-protectors.

Jim Houston, the founder of Regent College, when asked how he could listen to so many people, especially students, walk into his office with their problems (he's known to be a very wise counsellor). He answered like this, "I say a prayer before each one walks in. The prayer is that I would be in awe of each person's uniqueness as image-bearers of God."

This is the attitude which turned the Roman world upside-down. The early Christians were people-protectors. The early Christians treated culturally disposable people with utmost value. They were known to scour the garbage dumps for exposed babies, unwanted babies left on the garbage dumps. The early Christians treated women and children with utmost value, two groups of people who had virtually no value in the Roman world. The world had never seen *that* before. And, the world was turned upside-down. And, that's the way our world will get turned upside-down today, when the church stands up for and stands with all people, regardless of differences, because all people bear his image.

G. Jesus on Trial

So, a blood-thirsty mob with a poor woman facing a horrible death. Although her life hangs in the balance, Jesus is the one on trial here. What will he do? If he doesn't follow the law, he loses all credibility as a good Rabbi and teacher. On the other hand, if he upholds the Jewish law, he deals a death sentence to the woman. This would also be breaking Roman Law, because only the Romans were permitted to carry out capital punishment. How will Jesus respond?

Verse 6b.

IV. Jesus' Response to the Crowd #1 (6b)

[6 ...Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. \(ESV\)](#)

A. The Ground Writing

What? Jesus' first response bends over and writes on the ground. As we have seen throughout this Gospel, his initial responses to crises don't seem to help the situation. In this case, he doesn't say a thing, but simply writes something on the ground *"with his finger"* (6b).

B. The Content

What was he writing? John 3:16 maybe? Phone numbers of people to call? Maybe he's playing tic-tac-toe? No one knows because we're not told. And, of course, when this happens, everyone has ideas for what he wrote. Some say he was writing the sins of the accusers. Some say he was writing the ten commandments. Some say he was buying time until he could think of what to say.

C. "With His Finger"

Although the verb used by John is sometimes used for "writing down accusations," maybe *what* he writes isn't as important as *how* he wrote (BDAG)? John says he wrote *"with his finger."* And, if you know the story, you know that in verse 8, Jesus will stoop down and write again on the ground.

Now, in the Old Testament, who writes twice *"with his finger"*? God does. And when? During the wilderness wanderings in the giving of the ten commandments (Ex 31:18, Deut 9:10; 10:4). What feast are we celebrating right now in John? The Feast of Tabernacles which remembers the wilderness wanderings.

Jesus writes twice, as God did in writing the Ten Commandments. And, why did God have to write twice? God had to write twice because of Israel's idolatry with the golden calf. If you remember that story, Moses came down the mountain with the first set of tablets, and he throws them down and breaks them when he sees the golden calf. And what is the metaphor for idolatry in the Old Testament? Adultery.

Jesus is not just a good teacher or a new prophet. This is the I AM. This is God with us. Jesus' finger is the very finger of God. As one writer says, "When the Scribes and Pharisees challenge Jesus with the legality of the law of God, they are speaking directly to the lawgiver himself" (Klink, 395).

Verse 7.

V. Jesus' Response to the Crowd #2 (7-9)

7 And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her." 8 And once more he bent down and wrote on the ground. 9 But when they heard it, they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. (ESV)

A. The Brilliant Response

What a brilliant response! And, what a zinger! It seems the authorities continue to press him which raises the tension even further. Then, rising after the first writing, Jesus says, “Whoever is without sin, throw the first stone!” In other words, “OK, obviously you are righteous and perfect enough to stand in judgment against her – which is contradictory itself. So, by all means, go ahead and stone her” (Fitch, 170). Only a sinless person can pronounce judgment on this woman. It is brilliant! It is not a denial of the law, but a demand for the perfect execution of the law. What a zinger!

B. Everyone Leaves

The violence dissipates in the face of Jesus’ exposure of the massive contradictions in their actions. Everyone leaves, first the older ones, because they know they’re not perfect, followed by the youngest. Presumably, it took them awhile longer to determine they weren’t perfect.

It’s good to remember we are not perfect, isn’t it? This is why Jesus tells us in the Sermon on the Mount to not judge, to not condemn. We are all broken and sinful.

C. Jesus with the Woman

John then tells us that Jesus is left alone with the woman. The woman who has been searching for love in all the wrong places stands before her great lover. And, *He* is the one who fulfills his qualifications. Only He is without sin. Therefore, it is within his rights for him to condemn her and throw the first stone. So, will he?

Verse 10.

VI. Jesus’ Response to the Woman (10-11)

10 Jesus stood up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” 11 She said, “No one, Lord.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.”]] (ESV)

A. The Gospel

Jesus rises and addresses the woman. He calls her woman, which is the same word he used for his mother back in chapter 2. We said then that this is not a derogatory or harsh term. It’s a very respectful term. He then asks two questions which create space for him to work and healing to happen.

B. The Judgment

Jesus then renders his judgment, verse 11, “*I do not condemn you.*” Some of the most powerful words in all of Scripture. He acquits her. He forgives her. It’s not that he is saying that sin doesn’t matter, or isn’t real. It’s just that he begins with grace, not condemnation or cancellation. The woman may not be innocent, but he will wash her first in his grace. Grace means you can start over again, and that’s exactly what Jesus gives this woman, a new start. She is no longer defined by her past. Her past no longer determines her identity. She is free from it. And, so are you when you come to Christ.

And, then comes the truth. There is room for truth, but it always comes after grace. He concludes with two commands: go and leave. Go, you are free, but leave your life of sin. Now that you've been shown this grace, go live out of it. Jesus' words offer hope and opportunity for transformation. This woman is now free, but she's invited into a new life of following him, free from condemnation, and moving forward with conviction. This is what the grace of Jesus does for us. His love and grace move us out from our past, and forward into who we were made to be.

I think *Les Mis* pictures this perfectly in one of its opening scenes. The main character, Jean valJean, a convict on parole and homeless, is invited to stay overnight with a priest. During the night, he steals silver from the priest and runs away. He's quickly caught and brought back to the priest. At that moment, the priest has a decision to make. Will he forgive Jean valJean or condemn him? As you know, he forgives him, but he doesn't leave it there. He then invites Jean valJean to leave his life of sin and become an honest man. In other words, use this grace to leave your life of sin.

C. Grace and Truth

Well, this scene of the woman caught in adultery is one of the most dramatic scenes of grace in all of scripture (Klink, 386). Jesus comes to earth and he doesn't bring "shock and awe." He doesn't bring "to infinity and beyond." He brings grace and truth, and grace always comes first. Today's text provides one of the clearest examples of the era of grace and truth.

And, yes, this scene fits right here at Tabernacles, because in the middle of all the theology of Jesus' teaching, at some point, the theology must work itself out in real life. If the Gospel doesn't touch real life, it's not worth anything. Jesus had just offered the living water and now it flows over this woman.

VII. Implications: Grace First

So, are we known for grace first? We live in a society that runs on condemnation. As Matthew Croasman says, "Condemnation is the medium through which our cultural divisions are realized, policed, and reinforced" (Croasman, 36). Condemnation leaves no room for hope, and we are ambassadors of hope.

Maybe the most common place for condemnation and cancellation is in the on-line world. I'm told that one late night talk show host actually has a segment called, "Mean Tweets" where he takes mean tweets that are directed at a famous person, and has that famous person read them and respond to them. Apparently, this segment is hugely popular.

In the midst of this culture, are we, as a church, known for grace? Are we known by the words, "I do not condemn you?" Or are we known for the words, "you're bad and you must get your act together first."

Let's do a word association game. I say a word and you say the first word that comes to mind. If I said football, you would say soccer.

If I said, snow, you might say rain or I would say Tahoe.

If I said, dog you probably say cat.

If I said night you might say, day.

If I said Christian, what do you say? Do you say grace? Is that what the watching world would say?

Grace is the water the watching world is longing for. Grace, and not condemnation, is what your family and neighbors and colleagues and teammates are thirsting for. Isn't it what you long for? Think about what we talked about in our introduction. When we have that embarrassing moment when we want to get away, don't we thirst for grace?

Ex. Samantha Story

You all know that I'm very involved in Liberia. Years ago when I was the JH pastor, I had each grade, 6th, 7th and 8th, sponsor a child in that same grade at our school in Liberia. And, one of the first students we ever supported was a girl in 8th grade, we'll call her Samantha. Each year we went, we spent time with her, as well as our other sponsored students. When she was in 11th grade, she got pregnant. She had to drop out of school to stay at home with her child. The following year in our youth discipleship retreat, our theme was how to love our neighbors well. And, of course, we knew Samantha wouldn't be able to come because of her child. So, before we had left, my wife, Suzanne, who gets this way more than I do, had our JH group make a care package for Samantha and her newborn baby. I was hesitant because I was worried about cultural differences. But, Suzanne convinced me it was a good thing. Fast forward to the end of the retreat. We sent groups of students throughout the community and gave them \$20 to love on the community. Mostly, it was to go into the community and discover how God would create space to love on someone, not by giving out money, but by buying rice and sharing a meal with someone. I think one group bought a chicken and rice, and took it to a stranger's house where they cooked and shared the meal together. My group took the care package to Samantha's house along with a bag of rice. I must say, it was one of the highlights of my life – and I was hesitant to do it. But, it sure gave me a picture of grace. It doesn't mean we condoned her actions. It means we loved her and offered her living water.

VIII. Conclusion

In reality, our text today is the story of the cross in miniature isn't it? We are all this woman in the shadow of the cross. We've all been caught looking for love in all the wrong places. We all "want to get away" from our guilt and sin. And, then we look at the cross, and we see written in blood, "I do not condemn you." Then, we hear Jesus clearly say, "Not only do I not condemn you, I'll take all those want to get away moments, all that sin and guilt, upon me. Then, I'll bleed living water for you. Now go be transformed by living out of this love and this grace." Amen.

Benediction

His grace is sufficient for you. Go forth now being filled with the living water of the Holy Spirit to live and move and have your being in the richness and transformative grace that roots us in Jesus Christ. And may all people who bump into you this week receive an spillover of that grace. Amen.

Resources

Bruner, Dale, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*

Burge, Gary, *Jesus and the Jewish Feasts*

Croasmun, Matthew, *Let Me Ask You a Question*

Fitch, David, *The Church of Us vs. Them*

Johnson, Darrell, *Preaching the Gospel According to John* (Regent College Course)

Klink, Edward, *John* (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the NT)

Watts, Rikk, *The Life of God for the World* (Regent College Course)