



RELEASED FROM SHAME

SERIES: THAT YOU MAY BELIEVE

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John 7:53-8:11

17th Message

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I discovered last week that my personal computer is not personal. It is cold and detached. It couldn't care less about my happiness. On Friday afternoon I was putting some final touches on my sermon. I was looking forward to a relaxing night out with my family. All week I knew that my computer needed help because it kept freezing and crashing. I tried numerous remedies offered by various individuals. I thought I should transfer my sermon to a floppy disk just in case but, because the computer seemed to work all right for a couple of days, I didn't do that. Then, on Friday afternoon, my hard disk crashed. I recovered almost everything — except my sermon. When I recovered it, it looked like my three-year-old son's letters to me: it was a jumbled mass of consonants, symbols and shapes.

Computers are legalistic, impersonal pragmatists. If you push a button you will get a response. Learn the system and you will get a printout. They are heartless machines. I now know why they call them "hard" disks!

As I pondered my plight over the weekend, I realized that when it comes to understanding God, some people have a computer theology. Push the right buttons, enter the right code, insert the correct data, and bingo, you can print out your salvation. Computerized religion: You do your part and the divine computer does his. No kneeling. No weeping. No gratitude. No emotion. It's great, unless you make a mistake, unless you err, unless you enter the wrong data or forget to save the manuscript; unless you're caught on the wrong end of a power surge. If you are, well, tough luck, buddy; you're on your own. Religion by computer. That's what happens when you replace the living God with a cold system.

God hates that kind of religion. It crushes people and contaminates his leaders. Throughout his ministry, Jesus condemned religion-by-the-rules. We will learn this in the text we will look at this morning, the story of the woman caught in adultery, from the eighth chapter of the gospel of John. Most translations of the book of John include this story with a footnote. That is because most scholars agree that this section did not form part of John's gospel originally, but was inserted into the text at a later date. Not only does the overwhelming majority of ancient Greek manuscripts omit this story at this point, but many of the later manuscripts which include it, mark it with an asterisk, denoting that there was doubt about its placement.

Though it seems clear that this text did not form part of the gospel of John originally, most scholars believe it does record an incident that actually occurred in the life of Jesus. We know that he did much more than is recorded in the gospels. John says so in his stated purpose for writing the book (20:30-31). These stories were in circulation and were considered authoritative. In Acts (20:35), Paul quotes an un-

known saying of Jesus and applies it to the elders at Ephesus. In other words, even though the saying he quoted was not found in the gospels, it was considered authentic and authoritative by the apostles and by the church. I think this is how we should view John 8:1-11. The narrative is historical. It does contain an accurate account of Jesus' words and deeds, thus we can teach it and learn from it with confidence.

It is interesting to note that when the story does appear in ancient manuscripts, it is included in different places. Some place it at the end of the gospel of John, while others place it after the 21st chapter of Luke. So we might ask, why does the story appear here, before chapter 8? I think it may have been inserted here as an illustration of Jesus' teaching in chapter 8 concerning his authority to judge. He told the leaders in 8:15, "I judge no man." He will tell them that although he had the right to judge, he did not exercise that right. Jesus came into the world not to condemn it, but to save it (3:17). Yet the Father "entrusted all judgment to the Son" (5:22). Later, he will say, "For judgment I have come into this world" (9:39). Sin and judgment were major issues for the law-minded Jews, and they were major issues for Jesus and his Father. While the Jews could not convict Jesus of sin, he could and did, particularly on this occasion, convict them. He does have authority to judge.

We might also add that the introduction of a story at this point fits John's pattern. In each of the last few chapters, a story was used to set the theme for the teaching that followed. The healing of the man at the pool of Bethesda, in chapter 5, becomes the text of the sermon that follows. The feeding of the multitude in chapter 6 leads into the discourse on the bread of life.

The last verse of chapter 7 and the first two verses of chapter 8 give us the setting for our text this morning:

And everyone went to his home. But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. And 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.

There is a note of emotion in this statement. Jesus had no place he could call home. This passage and others confirm that he spent many nights alone on the mountainside. As he himself said, "Foxes have holes, birds have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." It is moving to picture the Savior of the world, huddled in his robe under an olive tree.

Early in the morning, Jesus left the Mt. of Olives and went to the temple. He gathered his disciples and began to teach them, but he was interrupted by shouts and scuffling as a group of religious leaders pushed their way to the

front of the startled crowd. They unceremoniously deposit before him a woman whom they have dragged to the temple courtyard. Loudly they shout above the noise of the crowd:

"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?" And they were saying this, testing Him, in order that they might have grounds for accusing Him. But Jesus stooped down, and with His finger wrote on the ground.

Clearly they feel they have trapped Jesus. They have an airtight case. This woman is thrown into the crowd, her sin shouted aloud for all to hear. They have no compassion, no desire for justice for her. Malice was what lay behind their actions. Far from caring for her; they merely wanted to entrap Jesus. She was bait, nothing more. We could well ask, where is the man in this story? Was he part of the plot to trap Jesus? Was he allowed to slip through a window by prior arrangement? We don't know. In any event, this behavior of the Jews does indicate a double standard that was very much in effect in those times, as it has been throughout history.

They Jews had a seemingly open and shut case. The law was clear: Adultery was a capital offense (Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22ff.). If Jesus took issue with Moses' law, his critics could legitimately assail him as a lawbreaker and discredit him as a teacher. On the other hand, if he upheld the law's judgment, he would no longer be the sinner's friend (they knew he sided with losers). They had him either way. In chess you would call their move a "fork." Their innuendo is clear: *"Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?"*

To their great disappointment, Jesus does not enter into a debate. He ignores them, and stoops over and begins to write with his finger in the dirt. The silence was deafening. You could cut the tension with a knife. Many have wondered what Jesus wrote, since this is the only time in Scripture it is reported that he wrote anything. Some scribes have tried to supply answers to this question and they have inserted into the text what they thought he wrote. Their guesses (and that is all they are) appear as variants in old manuscripts. Some say that he wrote on the ground the sins of every one of them. Others say he recorded names of the prominent leaders. Whatever he wrote, it was for their eyes, not ours.

Perhaps Jesus was biding his time so that he could deal with his emotions, since he was outraged at their abuse of this woman. Whatever the case, his writing had no effect on the rulers, who rudely continue to press for an answer. Verse 7:

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." And again He stooped down, and wrote on the ground.

Jesus finally stands up, looks them right in the eye, and utters the words that have become so famous: *"He who is without sin among you, let him (be the) first to throw a stone at her."*

They are stunned, speechless! He has taken the wind right out of their sails. They are sure he is going to let the woman go, but instead he completely upholds the law of Moses. He says, in effect, "Yes, she deserves to be stoned. But I am going to rightly appoint the executioners." Jesus understood the law. He knew from Deuteronomy that the witnesses of the crime were to be the first to throw the stones, and they must not be participants in the crime itself.

Jesus upholds the law. He recognizes that adultery is sin, that it wrecks homes, injures innocent children, and destroys everything that God holds dear. But he saw more than that: He saw through to men's hearts. He knew the double standard that existed when it came to sexual sins — that a man could lead a respectable life while covering up the same sexual sins with a knowing wink. He cuts through that double standard and drives hard to reach the conscience.

And 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 midst. And straightening up, Jesus said to her, "Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you?" And she said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go your way. From now on sin no more."

One by one, the stones are allowed to drop to the ground. Beginning with the oldest (who would have the longest track record of sin), the woman's accusers slowly drift away. One of the marks of youth is its sense of infallibility, but a substantial benefit of age is its mellowing effect. It is when we are older that we begin at last to "see ourselves as others see us."

Jesus stoops to write again. They are alone now, lawbreaker and Lawgiver. The only one who is qualified to condemn her has her heart in his hands. He stands up a second time. The first time it was to defend her, now it will be to free her. *"Did no one condemn you?"* he asks. Timidly, she replies, "No one, sir." She waits for a reply. She probably expected to hear a sermon from Jesus, but no sermon comes. What she hears instead are words of grace: *"Neither do I condemn you."* It is important to notice that Jesus did not overlook her sin. Oh, he denounced her adultery. He knew the harm and the heartbreak of it, and he upheld the law. But, despite what we have been led to believe, God has no desire to throw stones. Judgment is his unusual task (Isa. 28:21). He longs, rather, to save. And Jesus is the incarnation of that longing, the answer to God's bad reputation.

The only sinless one, the one who could throw stones with impunity, did not do so. Why not? we might well ask. It is because God did not send his Son into the world to condemn it, but to save it. His words anticipate the cross. He paid the price for sin so that justice could be satisfied and judgment averted. Paul put it this way in the letter to the Romans: *"There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."*

I am sure this woman must have realized that the Lord's sympathies lay with her, not with her accusers. He was *for* her, and she was drawn to him. She saw that he wasn't going to use her, but to save her. And save her he did, not merely from sin's guilt, but from its power. Her chains fell off, and she was free.

This is a great story. It is what J.R.R. Tolkien would call a "eucatastrophe," where things end right after seeming to go irrevocably wrong. The villains are foiled, the prisoners are freed, and justice is finally done.

The power of this story is that this woman's moment of deepest shame becomes instead her glory. That can be true for us as well.

While I was doing some landscaping in my back yard recently, I turned over a two-by-six board that had been lying on the ground for a long time. A well-populated city of several kinds of bugs had taken up residence underneath it. There must have been thousands of them living in that dark and dank place. When I lifted the board, they scurried away in every direction. It was clear they did not appreciate my discovering their hideaway. As I watched them, I thought about the church. There is an underside to the church, too. How many dark secrets lurk behind those forced smiles and Sunday clothes, secrets we never ever want to see uncovered, festering secrets that we take great pains to disguise? I know, because I was a secret-carrier myself. Until recently, it would have been extremely difficult for me to admit that I did not have a very good marriage. It took my wife's bravely facing up to things and lovingly telling me I needed help to uncover what was going on. She told me that I needed to tell the elders! There was no way I wanted my shame exposed. I didn't want anyone to know that I was not the man I thought, or perhaps they thought, I was. However, I will never forget that morning almost two years ago. I found, not condemnation, but acceptance, love and support when at last I shared with my brothers. I share this with you this morning because I know there are many uncovered festering secrets among us. I know because they are uncovered in my office weekly during counseling. But I want to encourage you that your moment of deepest shame can be the beginning of true freedom for you. It is because the only One who has the right to throw stones will not be throwing any at you. He bore the condemnation for you and me.

What a wonderful story for us to ponder. It is about us, our sin, God's reluctance to condemn us because of it, and his willingness to save. It teaches afresh that God is for us, not against us. He forgives our sin on the basis of the cross, and grants us the power to live a new life. As the chorus goes:

Something beautiful, something good;
All my confusion he understood.
All I had to offer him was brokenness and strife,
But he made something beautiful of my life.

Or as John Newton put it in these unforgettable words:

Amazing Grace! how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

Those are probably the sentiments this woman kept in her heart for the rest of her life. She thought of them in later years when she looked at her children asleep in their beds, or when she waved goodbye to her husband as he left for work in the morning. A marriage she never would have had, a family she never would have had were it not for such

a wonderful Savior. A Savior who stood up for her when others wanted to stone her. A Savior who forgave and granted her power to live a new life.

There is another purpose in this story. I confess there have been times when I have not only stood condemned in the midst of the accusers, but also when I stood in the crowd, condemning. There have been times when my hands have been filled with stones.

And this story is included also, I believe, to make us like God — to encourage us to view sin as he does; to encourage us to give our hearts to him so that he in turn can give us new hearts to befriend and save sinners; to look upon them with compassion and concern rather than scorn; to be like Jesus, "full of grace and truth."

We could take a lesson from those at Alcoholics Anonymous who have learned this truth and practice it every day. When they introduce themselves at meetings, they say, "My name is so and so. I am an alcoholic." It would be a good thing for us to introduce ourselves that way: "Hello. My name is Gary. I am a sinner . . ." When we feel the urge to be judgmental and condemning about the stumblings of others, we need to preface our remarks with, "Brothers and sisters, I, too, am a sinner. I, too, am guilty," for then we are kneeling on the ground next to the accused, not standing over him or her in judgement.

Of course we must be discerning, too. It is a mark of maturity to discern between good and evil (Heb. 5:14). It is certainly wrong to condone what God calls sin. But it is also wrong to damn sinners. If God were to stone sinners, where would we be? Sin is sin, and we should bear in mind that, apart from the cross, all sin calls for God's judgment. And, in fact, though we make sexual sins the most reprehensible of all, the secret sins of the spirit are far worse. C.S. Lewis, in his book, *Mere Christianity*, has a salutary word for us in this regard. He wrote:

If anyone thinks that Christians regard unchastity as the supreme vice, he is quite wrong. The sins of the flesh are bad, but they are the least bad of all sins. All the worst pleasures are purely spiritual. The pleasure of putting other people in the wrong, of bossing and patronizing and spoiling sport, and backbiting; the pleasures of power, of hatred. For there are two things inside me competing with the human self which I must try not to become. They are the Animal self, and the Diabolical self. The Diabolical self is the worst of the two. That is why a cold, self-righteous prig who goes regularly to church may be far nearer to hell than a prostitute. But of course, it is better to be neither.

May God grant that we will learn well this wonderful lesson on forgiveness from the lips of the Savior.

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