

## John 8:1-11: The Woman Taken in Adultery

Wherefore the Lord said, Forasmuch as this people draw near *me* with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men:<sup>14</sup> Therefore, **behold**, I will proceed to do a marvellous work among this people, *even* a marvellous work and a wonder: for the wisdom of their wise *men* shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent *men* shall be hid. – *Isaiah 29:13-14*

Often maligned and reduced to a cliché, the story of the Woman Taken in Adultery provides God's people with an excellent example of how to use "The Law" lawfully (1 Tim. 1:5-8). The story is found in John 8:1-11, but the preceding chapter sets the stage.

### The Backdrop – John 7

It's during the Feast of Tabernacles where we find Jesus teaching at the Temple in Jerusalem (14, 28). Among the common folk, some thought him to be a "good man" while others believed him to be a "deceiver" (12). Many were impressed with his miracles and by the boldness of his message; while others were impressed, but had lingering doubts (26, 31). This was due in part to confusion over the place of his nativity (40-44). From the prophets, they knew that Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (Mic. 5:2; Mt. 2:4-6). But because Jesus had been raised in Nazareth of Galilee (Mt. 2:22-23), they just *assumed* he'd been born there as well. But had they stopped and asked, Jesus would've explained that he was born in Bethlehem, but that at a very early age, his parents had moved him to Nazareth. But they didn't and so their opinion of him was divided (43). Needless to say there's a lesson in this: better to ask for clarification from the source instead of making decisions based on speculation or what others *think* is true.

But the scribes and Pharisees were also present. They wondered how Jesus came to know so much about the Bible, especially since he hadn't graduated from Bible college (to put it in modern terms – 15). But this was quickly overshadowed by their hatred of him: a hatred that soon blossomed into thoughts of murder (19-20, 25, 30). But why?

To them, Jesus was a Sabbath-breaker. And since working on the Sabbath was forbidden by Law, and since the penalty for working on the Sabbath was death, then by their logic, Jesus should be put to death (Ex. 31:12-17).<sup>1</sup> And if Jesus is a Sabbath-breaker, then he can't be the Messiah because they all knew that the Messiah would never sin against God. So in accusing Jesus of being a Sabbath-breaker, not only are they trying to put him to death, more importantly, to them, anyway, they're trying to discredit him as being the Messiah, God come in the flesh. But what had he done? He had healed a man (23).

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<sup>1</sup> They weren't only angry because Jesus had broken the Law or their interpretation of it; they were also angry because they couldn't put him to death themselves. This, in part, led to their murderous thoughts (19-20).

True, their reasoning is logical, but not biblical – and Jesus reproves them for it (21-24). He asks, If you fulfill the Law by circumcising a child on the 8<sup>th</sup> day, even if that 8<sup>th</sup> day falls on the Sabbath, and you don't consider this "work," then why are you faulting me if I heal an entire man?<sup>2</sup> Ouch!

The chief priests and Pharisees claimed to be disciples of both Moses and the Law (19), but this example proved that they were disciples of neither. If they were, they'd be able to recognize Jesus for who he claimed to be and they'd be able to understand the things he said. These being true, they'd in turn would be able to judge righteous judgment, but they can't thus proving that everything that Jesus was saying about them was true (15-19, 24).<sup>3</sup> They claimed to be teachers and experts of the Law, and yet they can't discern the simplest passage.<sup>4</sup> But this of course was hampered by the fact that none of them were saved (28). So not only has Jesus insulted their knowledge and understanding of the Law – of which they took great pride – he's also told them, in so many words, that they're all going to Hell. Embittered, they'll seek revenge; and it's with this backdrop that Chapter 8 begins.

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**Jn. 8:1** Jesus went unto the mount of Olives. <sup>2</sup>And early in the morning he came again into the temple, and all the people came unto him; and he sat down, and taught them.

Jesus had taught down at the Temple the day before, and so he's returned again for a second day of instruction (7:14). Only the priests were allowed to enter the Temple (Num. 3:9-10), and so Jesus isn't teaching from within the Temple proper, but from one of its courts. From without to within, the first court was the Court of the Gentiles. This was as close to the Temple as a Gentile could get, even if they were a believer. Stairs and a gate led into the second court known as the Court of the Women (Treasury; 8:20). It's from here where Jesus is teaching and from where he'll encounter the woman taken in adultery.<sup>5</sup> This was followed by another set of stairs that led into the third court known as the Court of Israel, which was as close as a non-Levitical Jewish male could travel, which was distinguished from the Court of the Priests in which only the (male) Levitical priests could attend. And from here, yet another set of stairs led upward into the Temple proper.

But God's original design was for one court where the priests and Levites ministered, and then the people standing without. So the typology here is that you're either a priest serving within the court of the Lord or you're not; i.e. you're either saved or lost. But notice the contrast: in or out. But because religion always widens God's narrow scope (Mt. 7:13-14), it deceives people into believing that they're within God's plan when in fact they may not (Mt. 7:21-23). So in

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<sup>2</sup> Gen. 17:10-13; Lev. 12:1-3

<sup>3</sup> God's people today are often guilty of the same sin. We seldom judge righteously because most of God's people don't know God's Law nor do they exercise the faith that Moses had towards God.

<sup>4</sup> We fare little better.

<sup>5</sup> Having been named the Court of the Women doesn't mean that it was "women only," it means that it was as close to the Temple as a Jewish woman could travel. Jesus is there with a mixed multitude of people ("all the people"), and since Jesus was called to the Jew first and then the Gentile (Mt. 15:24); and since this court is as far as a Jewish woman could travel, then logic dictates that this is the courtyard from which he's teaching.

constructing these additional courts, the Jews have *added* to God's Word (Dt. 4:2; Pr. 30:5-6 etc.) therefore leaving people with the impression that there's a "wideness" in God's plan when in fact there's only one narrow gate (Mt. 7:14). In other words, because there's a court for *everyone*, everyone is made to feel as though there's a place for them. This muddies the contrast between "saint or sinner" and leads to a "sinless gospel" where people see no need for repentance: where people are encouraged to have a "right relationship" with God or a right relationship with whatever their "god" or "higher power" may be.<sup>6</sup>

But there's more. In expanding the Temple courts to provide a place for *everyone*, organized religion always creates for itself a caste system to separate itself to obtain and maintain control over men (and their money). So while appearing inclusive of all people, it's really very exclusive (Mt. 23:15). Structurally, the closer you got to the Temple, the more exclusive each court became: only certain people were allowed beyond certain points. The elevation of each court increased, their size decreased, and each was separated from the other by walls, pillars, and stairs, or some combination thereof. So as you progressed, the more exclusive each court became. This creates within the mind of an observer that closeness with God is reserved for only an increasingly select few, with the "priests" always being at the top! So while organized religion is fond of claiming to be inclusive of everyone (by preaching a sinless gospel), in reality it does nothing more than divide and separate men from one another and God. In contrast, the court of the Temple (Tabernacle) was originally constructed level with the area surrounding it; and all that separated its one court from everything outside of it was a linen fence and a gate (where decisions are required). And so all men are on "the same level," but you're either within God's plan through repentance (Heaven-bound) or you're outside (Hell-bound). So as this lesson unfolds, it does so with Jesus sitting in the midst of a false religious system – a false religious system that's added to God's Word thereby further separating man from God for the personal benefit of a select few. But that aside, on this day, all seems well. It's early in the morning and Jesus is sitting and teaching from the Court of the Women.

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<sup>3</sup>And the scribes and Pharisees brought unto him a woman taken in adultery; and when they had set her in the midst, <sup>4</sup>They say unto him, **Master**, this woman was taken in adultery, **in the very act**. <sup>5</sup>Now Moses in the law commanded us, that such should be stoned: **but what sayest thou?**

Jesus is holding a quiet and peaceable "Bible study" when he's rudely interrupted by a band of scribes and Pharisees who've barged in and thrown a woman at his feet, demanding to know what's to be done with her. And to make matters worse, they're citing Scripture.

She'd been caught "in the very act" of adultery, which means that she was taken from her lover's bed during intercourse, and so it's likely that she's barely covered – perhaps a sheet, at most. She's undoubtedly fearful and afraid – wondering why this is happening to her and what she's done to deserve it. Having been taken from her lover's bed, she has no idea where they're taking her or what they plan on doing with her. She's been (publicly) dragged through

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<sup>6</sup> As often expressed in ecumenicalism; i.e. "We all serve the same God," "We're all a part of the family of God," "We're all God's children," the "brotherhood of all men," and of course the nonchalant, "God loves everybody."

the streets of Jerusalem and into the Temple, only to find herself thrown at the feet of Jesus who happens to be in the middle of a Bible lesson. So very soon, Jesus and *all* of those with him are going to know who she is and what's she done. It's not unlike being caught in sin and being dragged in front of *your* church and thrown to the floor in front of *your* preacher who's right in the middle of a Sunday morning service – and all this occurring while people are texting and posting pictures of you on Facebook and YouTube, and so this story isn't too difficult to understand.

But did you notice the sarcasm? They call him “Master” (not “Lord”), which means “teacher.” But from John 7, they didn't perceive him to be the Messiah much less a teacher of the Law. This is immediately followed by, “Moses and the Law demands that this woman be stoned, Jesus. But what do YOU say?” (“what sayest thou?”). And this they ask in hopes that he'll contradict God's Word. This reveals that what Jesus said about them earlier was true: that they didn't know him or his Father or their doctrine (7:16-18, 28; 14:7-9), and so the sarcasm here is telling. They're saying one thing with their mouth while their heart is saying another (Is. 29:13). But anytime a peaceful setting such as this is interrupted, it's usually for one of three reasons: there's a real emergency that demands your attention, you're being warned of imminent danger, or ulterior motives are involved: someone is trying to get you to make a rash decision for some reason – and Jesus has discerned that it's the latter. But how did he know?

But, to a certain point, the scribes and Pharisees are correct. Moses' Law, which is really God's Law that Moses penned, does command that those caught in adultery should be stoned. But the hitch is that the Jews weren't allowed to try capital cases (Jn. 18:31-32). So if Jesus tells them to stone her, they'll turn him over to the Romans for sentencing. But if he tells them *not* to stone her, they'll accuse him of being a lawbreaker thus discrediting him as the Messiah. So no matter how he answers, he's in a pickle, it seems.

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<sup>6</sup>This they said, **tempting him**, [Why?] **that they might have to accuse him**. But Jesus stooped down, and **with his finger** wrote on the ground, **as though he heard them not**.

Jesus has perceived that this was nothing more than a well-designed ploy intended to trap him in his words (they came “tempting him” so they could “accuse him.”). The scribes and Pharisees knew what the Law said, and so they could've judged her themselves, but they knew better. The day before Jesus had schooled them concerning the Law of Moses – so today they were going to return the favor. But for now, Jesus just stoops down and begins to write with his finger on the ground. And as he does, he does so as if he hadn't heard a word they'd said.

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<sup>7</sup>So when they **continued** asking him, he lifted up himself, and said unto them, **He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her**. <sup>8</sup>And again he stooped down, and wrote on the ground.

The scribes and Pharisees just didn't stroll-in and casually make their request. They came storming in – screaming and shouting – and causing a furor. They were still upset from the day before, and had likely been up all night concocting their little ruse; and so they were of the

mind that they were going to be heard and that they were going to be heard until they received an answer – and so the screaming and shouting continued, but Jesus just keeps on writing.

Finally, he rises. Up until now he's been completely silent. But when it becomes apparent that he's ready to give an answer, the scribes and Pharisees silence themselves. And no doubt pointing to what he'd just written, he says, "**He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.**" {Gasp}

Up until now they probably hadn't noticed what he'd been doing. Or if they had, they probably didn't pay it much mind. They probably just thought he was doodling – stalling for time. But in what he said, Jesus was merely reiterating what he'd told them the day before: that they didn't know him, his Father, or their doctrine, and that they weren't disciples of Moses or his Law. If they were without sin, they could cast a stone. But they were full of sin: they were judging unrighteously. So before he even addresses their question, he first reminds them of their sinful state. And as implied, they're in violation of the Law themselves – the very Law of which they claim to be experts. So having drawn their attention to what he's written on the ground, he again stoops and begins to write. Except this time, he remains until they're all gone.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>And they which heard *it*, **being convicted by their own conscience**, went out **one by one**, beginning at the eldest, *even* unto the last: and Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst.

Notice that Scripture doesn't say that they "read it," but that they "heard it." In other words, between what Jesus said and what he wrote, there existed the power to convict; and the reason for this is because God's Word is a Living Word (Jn. 16:7-11). Thus the Law did its job in that it made them aware of their sin (Rom. 3:20; 7:7 etc.). The proof of this is seen in what happens next. Convicted by their conscience, they all begin to leave, beginning with the eldest to the youngest. The older men quickly realized they'd been bested, but it took the younger a little longer. But as they saw their elders leave, they too lost heart and followed. And her accusers having left, Jesus was then left "alone" with her. This doesn't mean they were "all alone" by themselves; it meant that of the second group of people that arrived, only the woman remained with Jesus. Those in the Bible study group are still present. And notice that we never hear a word from them. They're just sitting there in stunned silence.

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<sup>10</sup>When Jesus had lifted up himself, and saw none but the woman, he said unto her, Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee?

After he'd written the second time, Jesus remained stooped until they all left. This he did as a subtle means of telling them that "The conversation is over. Make a decision." In other words, Jesus just let the Word speak for itself. Had he stood, it would have given them the impression that he had more to say. But he didn't and so that's why he paused. He wanted them to take the time to meditate on what he'd written and then decide for themselves what they were

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<sup>7</sup> For an explanation as to what Jesus wrote on the ground, see the article entitled, "What Did Jesus Write on the Ground in the Story of the Woman Taken in Adultery" written by this same author.

going to do, and so he just patiently waited – and he didn't have to wait long because although they were convicted, they weren't convicted enough to repent, and so they all began to leave "one by one" (9).

Jesus then stands and asks the woman where her accusers were. He knew the answer; he was just trying to make a point. She committed the crime and was deserving of the death penalty, but Jesus *can't* judge her because by Law there was no man and no witnesses, of which there must be two or more – they'd all left!<sup>8</sup> It was his way of saying, "You may have avoided the death penalty, but it doesn't mean that you're not guilty of it."

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<sup>11</sup>She said, No man, **Lord**. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and **sin no more**.

In their initial address, the scribes and Pharisees called Jesus "Master," which means "Teacher." But notice that the woman calls him "Lord." This suggests that she's a Christian woman who's been caught in the sin of adultery. Had Israel not been under Roman bondage (Jn. 18:31-32), then by Law both she and her lover would have been put to death. Their spiritual salvation was secure, but their earthly life would've come to an end (1 Jn. 5:16-17). But notice that Jesus didn't tell her to repent, he just told her to "sin no more." And so this suggests that she was a Christian woman. Were she a sinner, she would've been told to repent rather than to just "stop sinning." This can't be stated dogmatically, however, because Scripture teaches that many who call Jesus "Lord" aren't saved (Mt. 7:21-23). On the other hand, known Christians in the Bible have committed murder, suicide, and adultery, and they didn't lose their salvation, and so it's this author's opinion that she was a Christian woman caught in the sin of adultery.

But she did sin. If it weren't true, Jesus wouldn't have told her to "sin no more." But this doesn't mean that she got off the hook. Her sin has been made public and so now everyone knows who she is and what she's done – including the people in her "church." She's experienced public humiliation, may have become pregnant, contracted a STD, and may be facing a divorce. So while Jesus didn't judge her, he did discipline her. So just because she didn't face the death penalty, it doesn't mean that she won't have to face some consequences. Which ones we do not know. So though she were guilty, she couldn't be judged because the Law required that the man also be judged, and he wasn't there. She also couldn't be judged because there weren't two or more witnesses. So in the case, the Law actually protected her. It didn't protect her sin or turn a blind eye to it; it only protected her from the "punishment phase" of her charge due to a "lack of evidence." And so the Law *is* good if it's used lawfully (1 Tim. 1:8). And the proper use and application of the Law is what made both the woman and her accusers aware of their sin. (We call this "grace.") And whereas the woman undoubtedly received the grace of God as a result of what happened, the scribes and Pharisees chose yet again to turn away from the gospel. Jesus had told them to judge righteous judgment (7:24), but they could only do this after their own sin had been exposed. And it's in their failure to

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<sup>8</sup> Dt. 17:6-7, 19:15-19; Ex. 23:1-2; Jn. 8:17-18

repent as to why they chose to walk away.

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## Conclusion

O LORD, the hope of Israel, **all that forsake thee shall be ashamed, and they that depart from me shall be written in the earth**, because they have forsaken the LORD, **the fountain of living waters.** <sup>14</sup>Heal me, O LORD, and I shall be healed; save me, and I shall be saved: for thou *art* my praise. – *Jer. 17:13*

From this story, there are several important lessons that can be learned and applied. First, we need to be careful of those who rush in and demand that we provide them with a quick answer. It could be for ulterior motives. We should pause and pray, especially when a crowd is present, being careful not to allow peer pressure to overcome us. Scripture speaks of it:

Thou shalt not raise a false report: put not thine hand with the wicked to be an unrighteous witness. <sup>2</sup>Thou shalt not follow a multitude to *do* evil; **neither shalt thou speak in a cause to decline after many to wrest judgment:** – *Exodus 23:1-2*

And as the verse says, we shouldn't render judgment based on what the crowd wants to hear. Jesus knew God's Word and so he was quickly able to discern the situation for what it was. And although he spoke only 15 words (in English), he was able to diffuse the entire situation.

Second, Jesus turned the tables on the scribes and Pharisees who've once again fallen into their own snare and trap (Pr. 26:24-28; 28:10 etc). They used the Law to try and trap Jesus, but he used it to reveal their sin and deliver the woman. And if they set a trap for Jesus, they *will* set a trap for you, and so we need to be wary (Jn. 16:1-4; Mt. 10:16).

Third, this lesson illustrates the attitude of religious people who by any means necessary will always seek to preserve their own misguided notions. They cared nothing for the woman; she was only a "means to an end." They claimed to love the Law but were willing to let her die to suit their purposes. But Jesus used it to bring life. He said they were murderers (7:19), and this days' actions proved him correct.

Fourth, this lesson also exposes the shallowness of many professing Christians – many of whom are fond of saying, "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone!" It's been repeated so many times that it's become a cliché. Jesus didn't judge this woman and so it's thought that we can't judge or make judgments about others. But this is foolish, at best, because everyone on a daily basis devises opinions about others without any evidence to support their conclusions. We call it *gossip*. But this isn't what the Bible teaches: the Bible teaches that we ARE to judge, but to do so righteously (7:24). In our story, Jesus couldn't judge her because he didn't have the authority. Rome did, but they really didn't care as they had no laws against adultery (Jn. 18:31-32). Jesus couldn't judge her because the Law required that both the man and the woman be charged, and there was no man. Jesus couldn't judge her because the Law required two or

more witnesses, and they'd all left! So by the Law Jesus couldn't judge her even if he desired to do so.

But although Jesus didn't and couldn't judge her for her sin, he did reprove her for it. And there are yet unknown consequences that she may have had to face. Legally she may have "beaten the case," but it doesn't mean she didn't sin. The same thing happened to Cain. He too "beat the case," but was disciplined (Gen. 4:10-17). In addition, Christ's first appearing wasn't to come as our Judge, but as our Saviour (Jn. 3:17). But he'll later return as both King and Judge and he *will* sit upon an earthly throne and render righteous judgment.

But how unfortunate it is that most Christians quote this as a general statement that's equally binding on all when in fact it was said to address a *specific* situation. When Jesus said, "**He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her**", he was addressing the sin of the religious leaders in not bringing the man. If they did bring the man, they could cast a stone! Also recall that these comments were directed to these *unsaved* religious leaders and not God's people of whom this cliché is usually targeted. Therefore those who glibly cite this passage as a catch-all to avoid discipline are no better than the religious scribes and Pharisees in this story. They're not rightly dividing the Word (2 Tim. 2:15). And not rightly dividing the Word is what leads to sin and death – as these scribes and Pharisees learned. Selah.

These six *things* doth the LORD hate: yea, seven *are* an abomination unto him: <sup>17</sup>A proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, <sup>18</sup>**An heart that deviseth wicked imaginations, feet that be swift in running to mischief,** <sup>19</sup>**A false witness that speaketh lies,** and he that soweth discord among brethren. – *Proverbs 6:16-19*