

John 7:53-8:11
(Psalm 51; Romans 6:1-14)
“No Condemnation: Now Stop Sinning!”

Introduction

We should note, before we begin studying these verses, that this well-known and dearly loved story is not found in the earliest manuscripts of the New Testament. Why then should we study it, if there is question as to its authenticity? For at least two reasons: First, we are told twice toward the end of this gospel – once in the final verses of chapter 20, and then again in the final verse of chapter 21 – that Jesus did many other things not recorded in John’s gospel, but that the particular stories John recorded were chosen in order to show the reader that Jesus is the Messiah, and that by believing in him, we may have life. Many other stories from Jesus’ ministry circulated orally among the early Christians. Some had the ring of truth and were accepted as authentic, while others were rejected. This particular story was considered from its earliest mention to be an authentic record from Jesus’ ministry.

Secondly, the story is clearly ancient and is referred to by such magisterial church fathers as Jerome, who noted that he found the story in many of the manuscripts he worked with in making his Latin translation of the Bible, and Augustine, who suggested that overly zealous scribes – thinking that Jesus was too easy on the woman caught in adultery – had removed the story from the gospel texts. So, the Bible that the church has been using throughout virtually all of its history has included this story and has considered it to be authentic.

Three lessons clearly emerge from even a casual reading: first, we see the dark and destructive side of graceless religion; secondly, we see in stark contrast the wise and compassionate grace of our Lord Jesus; and finally, we see that grace is not license to sin, but rather is new life in Christ.

Body

1. First, we see the dark, destructive side of graceless religion.

This was no ordinary case of someone caught in adultery: This was almost certainly a set up in which a woman was seduced precisely for the purpose of trapping Jesus in a legal conundrum. First century Jewish law was stricter than the OT law with regard to evidence. Two witnesses had to have observed the act of adultery. Circumstantial evidence was not sufficient. Note that the man was not brought forward as the law required, suggesting that he was involved in the plot. Why would the authorities go to all this trouble? It seems clear that they were trying to place Jesus in an impossible situation, a situation in which he either set aside the Jewish law, and thus lost credibility with the people, or he encouraged them to stone the woman to death, and thus violated the Roman law. The religious leaders were willing to destroy this poor woman, in order to destroy Jesus. No religion is immune from this dark and destructive side when preserving the system matters more than preserving the people it is meant to rescue and restore.

2. In stark contrast, we see the wise and compassionate grace of Jesus.

In his wisdom, Jesus turns the tables on his enemies, and makes the woman's accusers face their own sin. All attempts to answer the question of what Jesus was writing in the dirt with his finger are sheer speculation and fruitless. But what is clear is the power of his words and their affect on the accusers, beginning with the oldest: "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her" (8:7). Thus Jesus upholds the law, and the prescribed judgment, but reminds these men that God alone is worthy to enforce the judgment of sin.

In his compassion, we see Jesus offer this humiliated and broken woman a new start, free from guilt and shame. "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" Awful sinner that you are, you share the shame of sin with all the religious folk who have looked down their noses at you. You are not some uniquely awful person beyond the pale of God's grace. "Then neither do I condemn you." The mercy and grace of God! This is the holy judge speaking. Only his judgment finally counts. And his judgment is staggering: Yes, you have broken my law. Yes you are a sinner. Yes, you deserve death. But I have chosen not to condemn you.

3. Finally, we see that God's grace offers, not license, but freedom.

"Go now and leave your life of sin." Christ has set you free! This is perhaps the most frequently missed aspect of the power of God's grace in this story. Not only is God able to forgive, he is able to make all things new. Jesus is not putting this woman back under the impossible standard of law. He is calling her to fullness of life in the covenant of grace. Jesus never forgives us so that we will be encouraged to sin with impunity. Far from it! The New Testament is filled with warnings to those of us who have been forgiven not to return to the life from which we have been rescued. Christ calls us to new life in him; he gives us his Spirit, and calls us to begin to live as those who have been called from death to life.

Conclusion

Is there a text that more clearly and compelling addresses the particular brokenness of this present age? Do we not see in our world both the allure of law, the attraction of religious systems that assure us that we are in the right and that God prefers us to other people, as well as the allure of lawless views of grace that assure us that no matter how selfish and faithless we are it doesn't really matter because God loves us so much that he does not care how we live our lives? Yet both views are spiritual counterfeits that lead to the soul's withering away, and finally to its death. How much better, how wonderfully life giving, to hear the words of grace, "Neither do I condemn you," followed by the bracing call to new life: "Go, and from now on sin no more."