

# THE SEARCH FOR MERCY

*SERIES: ONE TO ONE*

By Danny Hall

As we continue our study of stories in which Jesus encounters individuals one-on-one in the Gospel of John, we're going to be reminded again of the theme that it's all about people. John 8:1-11:

**But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.**

**But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.**

**At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus**

**straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”**

**“No one, sir,” she said.**

**“Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.”**

This is one of the best-known stories in John’s gospel. The line, “If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone” is often quoted. Many Bible translations note that this story was not included in some of the earliest manuscripts. Scholars have debated for a long time whether this story was part of John’s gospel, and if so, whether it belongs at this place in the gospel, because in some manuscripts it has appeared in other places. In fact, in some older manuscripts it even appeared in the gospel of Luke. Scholars generally agree that this is a genuine part of the gospel story; they’re just not sure where it fits in the text. That debate aside, it is a story that rings beautifully true about an important aspect of following Christ.

The story is interesting in a number of ways.

## **Conformity and condemnation**

We're told that Jesus is teaching, which is a common occurrence for him, and people are gathering around to hear him. And as this is happening, the teachers of the law, or scribes, and the Pharisees drag a woman in and say to Jesus, "This woman has been caught in the act of adultery."

Now, one of the interesting things about the story is what is *not* told. The first thing that comes to mind is that the man whom this woman was with is not accounted for. If this woman was caught in the act of adultery, she obviously had a partner who was discovered as well, but he's not brought with her. That tells us a couple of things. First, even though the law that the Jewish leaders are quoting actually indicates similar punishment for men and women for adultery, it was more usually applied to women than it was to men, and it was often applied more severely to women. Sometimes men got a pass when women didn't, which just wasn't fair.

Second, this doesn't appear to be about the woman and her sin, anyway. While it's true that she has committed this act, and they are upset about that and want to bring judgment on her, that's really not their concern at this time. Their primary concern is to try to trap Jesus. So they drag this woman in, publicly humiliating her, and ask Jesus to take a look at this story.

Now, if this is not about her, what is it about? I would suggest that for these leaders, the issue is power. We saw in the story we looked at in the last message (Discovery Paper 4994), and we'll see it in the next story we look at, that as Jesus continued his ministry, those who were in power, the leadership of the Jewish community, resisted him more and more because he challenged their authority and power. This whole society was built around its identity as a people who followed

Torah, the law of God, and those who were the official interpreters of Torah had an important position in society, because they were the arbiters of who was being obedient and who was not. Having been reduced to a small province on the edge of the Roman Empire, and in a search of a sense of identity and coherence, the society had rallied around the idea of being God's people, those who possessed and followed Torah. But more and more their identity was invested in the minutiae of applying the law, which put those who were the interpreters of it at the top of the heap. And their importance depended upon that whole society's following the law.

Then Jesus came along. His teaching was authoritative, and he was challenging them in all kinds of ways. In the story we looked at in the last message, he challenged them on the Sabbath laws. The same thing is going to happen in the next story we look at. So they resisted him more and more, and this resistance would escalate all the way to the point where Jesus ended up on the cross.

So in this quest to hang on to their power, the scribes and Pharisees want to have a test. They're looking for ways to lessen Jesus' popularity, to undermine his ability to speak against their authority. Ultimately they want to get rid of him. So they set a trap designed to get Jesus in trouble with somebody. They bring in this woman and point out her sin, knowing that Jesus can give only one of two answers to the question, "Moses said you should stone this woman—what do you think?" It's either yes or no. If he answers yes, he has automatically challenged the authority of Rome, because under Roman rule the Jews could not implement the capital punishment clauses of their own law. (This was played out in Jesus' own experience when he went to the cross; the Jews had to get Rome to crucify him, because they couldn't put him to

death themselves.) But if he answers no, then he's challenging the authority of Moses and the law. So they're sure they've got him. Either way he's going to be in trouble. But what they haven't counted on is Jesus' coming up with a whole new response to sin.

Now, not only do they have a test, but notice the tool that they use to do this test: the woman.

That's how they looked at her. They have absolutely no concern for her—no question about her needs, no question about how she got to this place, no sense of sympathy or compassion for her at all. That's why the man is not brought as well; they don't need both of them to test Jesus. It's all about preserving their power as played out in the administration of Torah. She is just a pawn. They are so invested in the rigorous application of the law in all of the permutations that they have developed, that all that matters to them is getting society to conform to those norms and expectations. There is no room for compassion.

What does Jesus do?

### **Hate the sin, love the sinner**

He begins by ignoring them. He bends down and writes on the ground. Now, as you can imagine, people have speculated for two thousand years about what Jesus wrote, because this is the only record we have anywhere in the gospels of his writing anything. It was common to write out a public condemnation of someone who had broken a law, and people have thought that maybe he was doing that, only in the dirt, because it would be impermanent and would disappear. Other

people have thought perhaps he wrote down parts of the law. We have no idea. But at this point he's simply biding time and ignoring their challenge.

But they keep badgering him. "What do you say? What do you say?"

So he straightens up and looks them in the eye, and then in one statement he turns the entire discussion: "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone." He shifts this discussion from a question of power to what I call a question of mission. It's not about maintaining the status quo, about conformity, but about what he came to do, and what the people of God are called to do.

Then he bends down and starts writing in the dirt again. And we're told that one by one, from the oldest to the youngest, these men walk away. Finally the only ones left are Jesus and this woman.

Now put yourself in this woman's position. She has been caught in the act of adultery, dragged out into the public square right in the middle of all that's going on, and publicly shamed, ridiculed, and used by these leaders to test Jesus. Jesus has challenged them and they have gone away, and now she is left alone with Jesus. We don't know what she is feeling at this moment—perhaps shame, humiliation, and fear of how this is going to turn out.

But Jesus, having turned the question to one of mission, reveals his own heart to her. He asks her, "Where are they? Has no one condemned you?"

“No one, sir,” she says.

“Then neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin.”

Remember after the story of Nicodemus, in John’s commentary at the end of chapter 3, he says, “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.” So Jesus doesn’t want to condemn her, but he encourages her to leave her life of sin. In this I believe Jesus gives us the paradigm for how we are to look at people. We are not to use people as tools to carry out our agendas. Our primary responsibility is not to get them to conform to some norm. They are people whom we are to love. You’ll notice that Jesus does something that is almost impossible for us to get right. All my life I’ve heard the expression, “Hate the sin, but love the sinner.” That is exactly what Jesus does. He balances those two polar opposites.

The difference between Jesus and the Pharisees is that the Pharisees say, “She needs to stop sinning,” in a judgmental, condemning tone, because all they’re concerned about is her conformity, about maintaining the authority of the law. So they apply it in as harsh a manner as possible for fear that they will lose control. Jesus, on the other hand, encourages her to stop sinning not because he is judging her, but because he wants to save her from something that will destroy her. That is a huge difference.

When we love people, it doesn’t mean that we condone their sinfulness. It means that we invite them to a place of healing, restoration, and freedom. The difference between compassion and

condemnation is stark in this story. Both the Pharisees and Jesus consider that this woman has sinned. But Jesus offers her something totally different from what the Pharisees do.

In my own life, I tend to bounce back and forth between hating the sin and loving the sinner. We as Christians are usually pretty good at one extreme or the other, but we have a very hard time finding the balance on this issue. In my younger days, when I knew everything and was pretty good at being able to tell everybody else what they should and shouldn't do, I had hating the sin down really well. Like a lot of young, arrogant preachers, I could make people feel very guilty. It's a skill that preachers learn pretty early on. "You shouldn't do this." "You shouldn't do that." "I can't believe you did this!" "The Bible says don't do that." You can pretty much manipulate people into feeling awful about themselves, and sometimes you get to the point where you actually judge whether or not you've done a good job by how low everybody feels when they leave.

As I grew older, I realized that this wasn't helping people very much, and the more I worked on that, the more I tended to bounce way over to loving the sinner, and I've found that at times I love the sinner almost to the point where I'm afraid to say anything about the sin.

In the church we've pretty much done that, too. But whether we've earned this reputation or not, the popular media portrays evangelical Christians as those who've got hating the sin down, and that's all they have to say. The reaction to that is to love the sinner and not even talk about sin or call people out of that.



But Jesus would instruct us in this story that to say nothing about sin is to be unloving. While we don't want to judge people, we talk about sin because Jesus offers to rescue people out of the things that will destroy them. That is a tremendously important issue. So Jesus calls us to balance compassion with encouragement to stop sinning.

The story starts as a question about authority. Jesus turns it into a question about people. It's not about preserving the status quo, about keeping the organization running smoothly, about getting people to conform to the way we think a good Christian ought to behave. It's about people. But love for people has to have both aspects. It has to care deeply and compassionately and nonjudgmentally about the needs of every person. But it also has to lead people out of sins that will destroy them. And we can achieve that through the power of the Holy Spirit living through us.

## **Redeeming love**

Ginger and I have some dear friends from our days in Vienna. We practically lived together, and we worked together all the time. Our sons grew up together. They also had a couple of older daughters living in the States who would come at Christmas time, and our families would go skiing together. We knew their kids well, and our families were very much intertwined.

During a lot of this time, one of the two older daughters was in a state I would describe as cocky rebellion. She was living her own life, thumbing her nose a little at her parents' faith. Even

though she liked us and got along with us, it was quite clear that spiritual things were not front-and-center in her life. Even when she was hanging around us, that rebellion was part of her attitude. She often spoke condescendingly about her parents' faith and about some of her parents' friends who obviously were committed to the Lord.

Then, rebounding from a broken relationship, she hooked up with some guy and ended up pregnant. That just devastated her. She didn't know what she was going to do. She was in her early twenties, and she'd led a party life, having her own way on things. Her parents, of course, were heartbroken about all this. They invited her to move to Vienna and just live with them. She didn't have anywhere else to go, and she wasn't exactly sure what to do, so she came. She said later, though, that she came to Vienna with some fear, because she was absolutely sure that all of her parents' friends, whom she had arrogantly ridiculed, would certainly condemn her. She would be looked down on as a single woman who got pregnant, and she was afraid we were all going to have the attitude that she got what she deserved.

But the community of our church just enveloped her and loved her. There was not one of us who thought what she did was a good thing, or that it didn't matter. No, we were brokenhearted for her. We knew she'd made a sinful choice. But we enveloped that young woman in love.

She stayed there, and her baby was born in Vienna in the midst of our community. The Lord used the love of that community to change her life, and she gave her heart to the Lord in a new way. She started walking with him and growing. And we were praying about the next step for

her, because she knew she had to move back to the States and get established, get a job, and so on.

Well, unbeknownst to her, God had brought some people into the life of the father of her baby, and he'd come to know the Lord. Now, she had no intention of getting together with him; after all, they'd only had a very brief relationship. But when she got back to the States, the father had never seen the child, so they were going to get together. To make a long story short, God brought that couple back together, and one of the coolest things I ever got to do was perform their wedding, and see God restore that family. They now have three beautiful children who love the Lord, and they serve the Lord together.

But what made all the difference was that for once I think we got it right. We didn't have a judgmental spirit, we just enveloped this girl in love. We walked with her through a difficult circumstance, and we called her to leave what was destroying her life and cling to Christ. God reached down and did a miracle in her life. This young woman, in a place of absolute desperation, saw the power of Christ redeem her through a community who loved her and did not condemn her. And that's the beauty of what God calls us to.

Think for a moment, in closing, about which character in this story in John 8 you are like. Maybe you're like the woman, and you've made choices that have taken you far away from the Lord. Maybe you feel shame or embarrassment or guilt over it, and you don't know how you're going to get out of that. Jesus reaches out to you and says, "I don't condemn you. I want to take you out of what will destroy you." Perhaps you're like the Pharisees, and your reaction to things is very

judgmental. Every time you see someone step out of line, there's something in you that wants to speak a word of judgment. You need Christ, through the Holy Spirit in you, to change you and melt that harshness, so that you don't condone sin, but you have compassion for the sinner. Or maybe God has allowed you to be like Jesus a few times, when you've been able to love a sinner but also call him or her out of that sinfulness.

I hope that all of us through the work of the Spirit will become the kind of community that embraces the broken, yet does not put up with sinfulness—not out of a judging spirit, but out of a rescuing spirit.

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Fourth Message

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