

THE FIRST STONE

SERIES: PORTRAITS JOHN PAINTED



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John 7:53-8:11
5th Message
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The fifth message in this series—*Portraits John Painted*—is found in the eighth chapter of the gospel of John. In most English Bibles there are brackets around verses 1-11 since they are not found in the oldest Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. However, most scholars conclude that this passage is an accurate telling of truth. It records an event from Jesus' life that John taught—one which was remembered by his disciples and later included in the written text. These verses are God's word to us and we will do well to learn from them.

The account has a hard edge to it. Our passage could be seen as a pre-technology version of today's daytime reality TV (think Jerry Springer) which revels in scandal and tragedy. Like these shows, our text combines sex, religion, humiliation, judgmentalism, rising tension and a threat of violence. There is a core of hypocrisy that shapes events in this story. We encounter those named teachers of the Law and Pharisees who are in fact voyeurs. They intend to trap Jesus and find themselves caught in their own noose.

Our text can be divided into three scenes. The first is dominated by men who insist on having their questions answered—they are brusque and bullying. The second scene is dominated by Jesus; what he says and does. Then finally there is a third scene in which Jesus and a desperate woman are left alone.

First Scene

7:53-8:6a

⁵³Then each went to his own home.

¹But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. ²At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. ³The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group ⁴and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. ⁵In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" ^{6a}They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.

Teachers of the Law and Pharisees sought out Jesus, bent on creating a scandal. They dragged a woman from her tryst at dawn, presumably disheveled and before she had a chance to clothe herself. These enforcers of the Law, with leering looks exposed her in a public gathering to maximize her humiliation—enjoying her discomfort. They certainly aren't interested in justice, as her equally guilty partner is left behind.

Further, although they appear to ask Jesus a legitimate question it is clear they are trying to put him in a bind. In a tone of superiority they proclaim, "In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" (vs. 5).

These men commandeered a Bible study Jesus had begun with a crowd gathered to hear his teaching. In the presence of his followers they intended to make Jesus either support their cruelty and acknowledge their authority by agreeing with them or to fail as a teacher by speaking against the Law of Moses.

Before moving on, we should note that sexual sin is an important matter and that Jesus has a good deal to say on the subject. It is right to ask what the Bible teaches about adultery. But, of course, their actions betray the real motives of these accusers. They are voyeurs and tyrants who want to discredit Jesus. And, as on so many other occasions in the gospels, those who attempt to trap Jesus find themselves under judgment.

Additionally, we might do well to ask whether we are at all similar to the Jewish leadership in this account. Like them, Jesus' followers are stewards of the truth regarding God's intentions in making us male and female. But are we also like them in hard-hearted application of truth? When we stand against the proponents of sexual sin do we acknowledge our own vulnerability? Do we love (rather than humiliate) sinners?

Second Scene

The second of three scenes begins in the middle of verse 6 and Jesus is central here. What he does and says now becomes our focus.

John 8:6b-9:

⁶But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. ⁷When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” ⁸Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.

⁹At 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 first takes an action—stooping to write—that draws the gaze of the crowd away from the humiliated woman.

I believe that what Jesus wrote—though a source of much scholarly speculation—is not as important as the act of writing, specifically writing with his finger. Jesus’ opponents had spoken of what ‘Moses commanded.’ But in fact Moses only reported on what God had commanded. The Law forbidding adultery was spoken by God and etched with his finger on a tablet of stone. “When the Lord finished speaking to Moses on Mt. Sinai he gave the two tablets of the testimony to Moses, the tablets of stone inscribed by the finger of God” (Exodus 31:18). The woman’s accusers were claiming Moses’ authority. Jesus was drawing on the authority of One much greater than Moses.

The leering bullies had lost control of their circus. Jesus’ silence was powerful and his mysterious writing was frightening, recalling in a subtle way the ancient occasion when God wrote on tablets of stone. The ‘theology thugs’ who knew nothing of the heart of God were at a loss. Their façade of self-importance cracked and their consciences began to speak to them.

Then Jesus stood up, stared at them, and with a clear voice said, “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her” (vs. 8). Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.

These men who enjoyed humiliating a woman and attempted to trap Jesus were now being accused by their own hearts. They once directed Jesus to answer their questions and now he is the one giving orders. And he stooped down again.

One by one (bullies are diminished when the gang is fragmented and they become individuals) they dropped their stones and walked away. The oldest left first. And now that I am one of the oldest ones I see the reason for this. People who have lived awhile have more failure to regret.

Jesus awakened the conscience of each man and each fell under conviction.

Jesus clearly had compassion for this woman. We will consider his statement to her in a moment. But he loved these men, too. He loved them enough to expose proud self-righteousness. He didn’t verbally denounce them, rather he made them see themselves and discover the depth of their own sin.

Third Scene

John 8:10-11:

¹⁰Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”

¹¹“No one, sir,” she said.

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

All we know about this woman is that she was caught in the act of adultery and then exposed in a place of public humiliation. But the phrase “caught in adultery” can have a more subtle meaning. Betraying a spouse one time leads to pretense, to cover-ups, to depression, and to more sin. Being “caught in adultery” can indicate a web of desire, shame, and hypocrisy that seems impossible to escape.

Jesus did not condone adultery in his grace-filled response to this woman. She was in the process of destroying one or more marriages and stood guilty before God. But in addition to the burden of her sins this woman needed freedom from bondage. Though the phrase “hate the sin and love the sinner” is sometimes used as a cover for rejecting people we don’t like, it is clear that for Jesus hatred of sin flowed from love of sinners. Love led him to challenge both failure and misery in the life of this woman. His words joined forgiveness (“neither do I condemn”) and freedom (“leave your life of sin”).

Those of us who follow Jesus must learn to hold these things together as well. Gospel proclamation must include identifying sinful behavior which requires forgiveness and a clear offer of freedom from bondage, leading to new life. “Your burden is taken from you. Go and sin no more.” No condemnation. Real freedom.

Before we conclude I want to make an observation about representing Christ in our time and place. Regarding sexual sin, I think we do well to speak less and say more.

In most debates we have with unbelieving friends they will already know what we believe about proper and improper sexual behavior. Rather than frequently re-stating what is familiar perhaps we can listen more and leave room for the Spirit to touch the conscience of the one who doesn't yet believe. The Lord did not participate in an academic argument on the proper interpretation of Exodus. He was more concerned for his questioners than their questions. In this text Jesus had very little to say. What he did say was powerful.

Conclusion

Finally, we should look for ourselves in this account. Am I one of those who is blind to sin like the Pharisees and teachers of the Law? There is none without sin who can cast the first stone.

Are you among those who are weighed down with sins? Then hear Jesus' tender word, "I do not condemn you."

Are you caught in a web of failure and deception such that freedom seems impossible? Jesus speaks of new start—"go and leave this life of sin."

May the Spirit speak the word of life each heart most needs to hear.