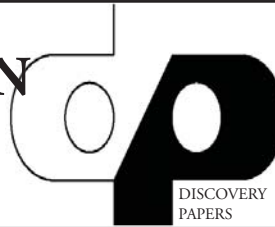




NO CONDEMNATION



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John 7:53-8:11
19th Message
Scott Grant
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What are you most ashamed of? If nothing immediately comes to mind, or if something not particularly shameful comes to mind, consider your sexuality. Oftentimes our deepest shame has something to do with our sexuality. Whatever it is you're most ashamed of, few, if any, people probably know about it. What is it? How do you deal with it? How might Jesus deal with it?

In John 7:53–8:11, a woman's private shame becomes a public spectacle. We enter the passage—and experience Jesus—through her.

Most biblical scholars, regardless of their theological bent, believe that John 7:53–8:11 was a later addition and not part of the original manuscript. The original manuscript, of course, has been lost, and what we're left with is copies of copies. The earliest extant copies don't include this passage. Therefore, it appears in brackets in the English Standard Version. Who knows whether some future discovery will lead us to conclude that the brackets should be removed? Even if it wasn't part of John's original manuscript, that doesn't mean the events described didn't take place. So, should it be included in the Scriptures or not? Quite frankly, I don't know.

I do know this, however: the passage has staying power. Although Bible translators have put brackets around it, they can't bring themselves to remove it entirely. The passage is not inconsistent with the gospel. In fact, it mirrors John 4, where Jesus interacts with a woman of dubious reputation. For my purposes, I write of these events based on the assumption that they took place. Let the reader judge.

Exploiting a woman

John 7:53–8:6a:

[⁵³They went each to his own house, ¹but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. ²Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them. ³The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst ⁴they said to him,

**“Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. ⁵Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?”
^{6a}This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him.]**

In John 5:40, Jesus told the Jewish authorities who opposed him in Jerusalem that they refused to come to him for life. Now, in Jerusalem “all the people” are coming to him, and they listen to his teaching. As Peter observed, Jesus has “the words of eternal life” (John 6:68).

“All the people,” though, doesn't include certain scribes and Pharisees. The Pharisees constituted a popular religious-political party that advocated a nationalist agenda. Scribes, who tended to be Pharisees, were experts in the Jewish law. The scribes and Pharisees detected early on that Jesus wasn't going to dance to their tune. Like the rest of the people, they come to Jesus, but not to listen to his teaching; they come to Jesus to discredit him and discourage the people from coming to him for life. They come to him to set a trap for him.

The scribes and Pharisees don't come to Jesus alone; they bring with them a woman. They announce that this woman has been “caught in the act of adultery”—which raises a few questions. Who “caught” the woman? With whom was she caught? No one commits adultery alone. If one is guilty, two are guilty. Where's the man? Why don't the scribes and Pharisees bring the offending man to Jesus for judgment? The fact that the woman was “caught,” plus the absence of the offending man, suggests that the man made some sort of deal with the scribes and the Pharisees.

Ostensibly, the scribes and Pharisees approach Jesus in the interest of justice. If justice was their concern, why involve Jesus? Why make a public spectacle of the woman's sin? No, justice is not their concern; accusing Jesus is their concern. They exploit the woman in order to get to Jesus.

Exploiting the law

The scribes and Pharisees ask Jesus, whom they address with false deference as “Teacher,” for a ruling. They say that the Mosaic Law calls for the stoning of “such women.” Is

that true? The punishment for adultery in the law is death, but the mode of execution is not specified (Leviticus 20:10, Deuteronomy 22:22). Death by stoning is only specifically prescribed for a woman and a man involved in a sexual relationship when the woman is engaged to another man (Deuteronomy 22:23–24). Technicalities aside, if the scribes and Pharisees could invoke the law and claim that “such women” should be stoned, then “such men” should also be stoned. In all cases in the Mosaic Law that called for capital punishment in the event of adultery or premarital sex, capital punishment is to be the fate of both the woman and the man. Again, where’s the man?

Upon further review, the scribes and Pharisees don’t seem so concerned with what Moses commanded after all. They’re not only exploiting the woman, they’re also exploiting the law. The woman may be guilty of adultery, but she is not the kind of woman whom Moses commanded to stone. God, through Moses, commanded justice. This scene has nothing to do with justice; it has everything to do with exploitation.

In all likelihood, having heard Jesus teach, the scribes and Pharisees expect him to go easy on the woman. They would then have grounds for accusing him of opposing God’s law. On the other hand, the laws that called for capital punishment were not popular, and rarely if ever carried out in a land ruled by the Romans, who reserved capital punishment for themselves, so if Jesus rules that the woman should be stoned, he would run the risk of losing popular support. The scribes and Pharisees think they’ve trapped Jesus in a double bind so that he will be discredited no matter what he decides.

A public spectacle

What is it that you’re most ashamed of? Imagine that a small number of people find out about it. Not only do they find out about it, they also divulge it at some sort of public gathering and accuse you before everyone present. Your shame becomes a public spectacle. Others are guilty of the same offense, or have the same problem, but only you get singled out. You stand alone in your shame before your accusers in the court of public opinion.

How do you feel?

The scenario is not entirely far-fetched. You may have already played out something like it in your mind, or it may have already been played out for you in your nightmares. In your mind, or in your nightmares, the accusers are parents or teachers or bullies or employers or spouses or ex-flames. They are all poised to throw stones

at you, so to speak. Behind them is a legion of spiritual accusers, led by Satan, who aim their fiery darts at your deepest fears to ignite feelings of shame. Such a scenario may have already worked you over to such an extent that you find yourself on the side of the accusers. That’s the worst: you become your own accuser.

Now Jesus is called in for a ruling. What will he decide?

Writing on the ground

John 8:6b–9:

[^{6b}Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. ⁷And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.” ⁸And once more he bent down and wrote on the ground. ⁹But when they heard it, they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him.]

The scribes and Pharisees asked Jesus, “So what do you say?” Jesus, though, doesn’t say anything. Instead, he bends down and writes on the ground. Why did Jesus write on the ground? What did he write? Those questions have generated endless speculation.

My guess is that the writing on the ground had something to do with a legal ruling. The mysterious writing on the wall in Daniel 5:5–9, once interpreted in Daniel 5:24–28, meant that the Babylonian king was found wanting. The prophet Jeremiah observed that all who forsake the Lord and turn away from him “shall be put to shame” and that their names shall be “written in the earth” (Jeremiah 17:3). If Jesus rendered a legal ruling by writing on the ground, it wouldn’t have been against the woman; it would have been against the scribes and Pharisees. They have been found wanting. They want Jesus to speak publicly, for all to hear, so that they can discredit him. But if they really want a ruling, perhaps Jesus is inviting them to bend over and look for themselves. If this is so, then Jesus is not publicly shaming them, as they publicly shamed the woman; his ruling is about as private as you can get in a public setting. Perhaps Jesus’ mysterious writing in the earth echoes the mysterious writing on the wall in Daniel and waits for an interpretation. In any event, the scribes and Pharisees don’t look at what Jesus wrote; instead, they keep pressing Jesus to speak.

By not speaking to his opponents, at least immediately, Jesus demonstrates that he is not subject to their kangaroo

court. Also, he gives the scribes and Pharisees time to reconsider, for he only answers them after they “continued to ask him.”

Him who is without sin

If the cryptic writing on the ground waited for an interpretation, the wait ends in verse 7, when Jesus says, “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.”

If the scribes and Pharisees want to enlist Moses in their cause, Jesus, too, can evoke Moses, who called for those who witnessed the crime of idolatry to be the “first” to put the perpetrator to death (Deuteronomy 13:9 and 17:7). Did someone witness the woman’s act of adultery? If so, who wants to fess up to being a peeping Tom? And if no one witnessed the act, the only other person who can verify that it took place is the man who had relations with her, and he doesn’t step forward for obvious reasons. Is there a witness? Anyone?

Oh, and if there is, let him be without sin. Then Jesus bends down to write on the ground again, giving the scribes and Pharisees time to respond. Jesus cannot mean that any punishment for wrongdoing must only be meted out by sinless individuals, for no case would ever be prosecuted. He seems to mean that the witness who is not guilty of this particular sin, the sin of adultery, should throw the first stone.

The scribes and Pharisees have publicly shamed one woman. As a whole, as one man, they condemn the woman. Is there one man among them who will in actuality do what they want done? It’s easier for everyone to throw stones all at once; then no one feels responsible. It’s more difficult to shirk responsibility if you have to throw the first stone. It’s easier to be part of a firing squad than to be the sole gunman. Mob justice allows those who make up the mob to feel less responsible. Jesus won’t let the mob get away with it.

Note: the men depart “one by one.” There’s a guilty man out there somewhere—one guilty man who had relations with the woman—and the scribes and Pharisees leave “one” at a time. All along the author of the narrative has been looking for the guilty man, and it turns out that each of those who brought the woman to Jesus is guilty—not necessarily guilty of the sin of adultery, definitely guilty of the sin of hypocrisy.

Jesus not only escapes the trap, breaking out of the double bind, he also manages to turn the tables on the

woman’s accusers. Kings, such as Solomon, employed such wisdom. Jesus demonstrates the wisdom of kings—the wisdom of the king.

After the scribes and Pharisees depart, the woman, who was earlier “caught” when she was alone with a man, is once again “alone” with a man.

Alone with a man

John 8:10–11:

**[¹⁰Jesus stood up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”
¹¹She said, “No one, Lord.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.”]**

Jesus, unlike the previous man, is not interested in her sexual favors. This man, unlike the men who dragged her before him, is not interested in accusing her. Jesus, like a judge, stands as if to render his verdict. There’s a problem with the case against the woman: there is no longer anyone to bring a case. All her accusers have scattered.

Jesus doesn’t simply dismiss the case, he also questions the woman. First, he asks, “Woman, where are they?” Before, since the time she was caught in adultery, if she looked up, she saw a lynch mob. Jesus’ question requires the woman to lift up her eyes and see that her accusers have departed. The second question requires her to speak. Earlier, no one was interested in her testimony; they were only interested in exploiting her. It didn’t matter what she said. It matters to Jesus, though, so he asks her, “Has no one condemned you?” She looks, and she speaks. Is there anyone to condemn her? “No one, Lord.”

What about the man she has been dragged before for a ruling? What does he have to say? “Neither do I condemn you.” Jesus apparently believes that the woman is, in fact, guilty of some sort of sexual sin, for he tells her “go, and from now on sin no more.” Jesus’ exoneration of her forms the basis for his admonition to her. She is to sin no more “from now on,” from the time of her encounter with Jesus, from the time that he rescued her from her accusers. What he has done for her, then, changes, or should change, the course of her life.

In her case, God uses evil for good. She was living in sin, and what was there to stop her until men with evil intentions dragged her sin out in the open? In one sense, she meets Jesus and a new way opens before her because the men accused her. That’s the sovereignty of God for

you. This is good news for those of us who have already had—or will one day have—our private shame dragged out into the open. God has used—or will use—it for good. The gospel is for such a time as this.

And what of the scribes and Pharisees? If the woman was guilty of adultery, the scribes and Pharisees were guilty of hypocrisy. It would do no good for Jesus to tell them something like, “Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.” It would make no sense to them, for they didn’t think they were guilty.

Jesus deals with you

Return to our earlier imagined scenario. You’re standing alone in a public setting, your shame exposed. Jesus is called in for a ruling. He deals with your accusers, and they fade away. There are no more parents, no more teachers, no more bullies, no more employers, no more spouses, no more ex-flame, and no more demons. All of them have dropped their stones and walked away. They have nothing more to say. Now Jesus deals with you. You’re alone with Jesus.

You’re looking down, afraid to look up. Who looks up when they’re feeling shame? But Jesus asks you to look up and look around. What do you see? Nothing. No one. Your accusers are nowhere in sight. Even your inner accuser is strangely absent. There’s no one to condemn you.

How about Jesus? What does he say? “Neither do I condemn you.” What? Did you hear that? What did he say? “Neither do I condemn you.” Let those words sink in, and remember who is speaking. This, according to the gospel of John, is God incarnate, the only one who has authority to condemn you. For in the end, his ruling is the only one that matters. It doesn’t matter what anyone else says. It is not for nothing that everyone save Jesus fades from this scene. Let the words sink in: “Neither do I condemn you.”

Only when you let those words sink in can you assimilate what he says next: “from now on sin no more.” This sort of encounter with Jesus can rearrange the whole of your internal thought processes, change your forever, and make you want to obey a command like this.

The right order

Jesus Christ says, “Neither do I condemn you.” Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ, says, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (a verse

no one questions as a latecomer!). He can say that because God “condemned” our sin when Christ was crucified (Romans 8:1–4). Note that Jesus does not tolerate our sin; he forgives it. If he tolerates sin, he pretends it doesn’t matter. It does matter, and it matters a great deal. If Jesus forgives sin—and he does—then he suffers for it. John 8 begins with men poised to stone a woman they caught in adultery; it ends with men picking up stones to throw at him. Jesus removes us from the firing line and steps in for us.

There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Do you believe it? Many of us would answer yes, but many of us also live as if a cloud of condemnation is hanging over our heads and then try to live up to a certain standard in order to disperse the cloud. Of course, we’re never very successful for very long. Even if we manage to banish the cloud, it always returns. Note the order of Jesus’ words to the woman. It is not (1) “sin no more” and (2) “neither do I condemn you.” No, it’s the other way around: (1) “neither do I condemn you” and (2) “sin no more.” Furthermore, Jesus doesn’t simply say “sin no more,” he says “from now on, sin no more”—from the time and based on the time that he banished your accusers and rescued you from death.

If we get the order wrong, we’re putting the proverbial cart before the horse. If we get the order right, we’re not trying to live up to a certain standard in order to disperse the cloud of condemnation. No, we live in thankfulness to God because he has already, and permanently, dispersed the cloud. The standard isn’t the driver; thankfulness is the driver. If this is so, then it’s all the more important that we identify with the woman in John 8 and envision our own scenarios. Could it be that the author doesn’t reveal her name so that we can insert our own names? Believe Jesus forgives you in order to obey him.

Frederick Buechner writes:

One summer day I lay upon the grass. I’d sinned, no matter how, and in sin’s wake there came a kind of drowsy peace so deep I hadn’t even will enough to loathe myself. I had no mind to pray. I scarcely had a mind at all, just eyes to see the greenwood overhead, just flesh to feel the sun.

A light breeze blew from the Wear that tossed the trees, and as I lay there watching them, they formed a face of shadows and of leaves. It was a man’s green, leafy face. He gazed at me from high above. And as the branches nodded in the air, he opened up his mouth to speak. No sound came from his lips, but their shape

I knew it was my name.

His was the holiest face I ever saw. My very name turned holy on his tongue. If he had bade me rise and follow to the end of time, I would have gone. If he had bade me die for him, I would have died. When I deserved it least, God gave me most. I think it was the Savior's face itself I saw.

In Buechner's vision, Jesus' appearance, in the immediate aftermath of sin, inspires obedience to Jesus. So it was with the woman in John 8. So it is with us.

In the presence of love

The scenario that we have imagined projects us into the future. For at the end of our days, according to the Scriptures, we will stand before Jesus. He will see all, and we will know that he sees all. What then will we feel? It depends. It depends on whether we are "in Christ Jesus" or not, whether we have believed in him and therefore followed him, however feebly. Suffice it to say that if you are not in Christ Jesus, standing naked before him is nothing to look forward to. If, however, you are in Christ, you will know that you are standing in the presence of absolutely pure and holy love.

Although it is true that Christ will judge those who are in him for what they have done, both the good and the bad, it is also true that this judgment will involve no condemnation (2 Corinthians 5:10). For many of us, who equate any kind of judgment with condemnation, this is difficult to imagine, because we have difficulty connecting judgment with love. When we stand before the all-seeing eyes of Jesus, however, we'll be standing in the presence of pure love, and we will know we're standing in the presence of pure love, for as John says elsewhere, "we shall see him as he is." And that will make all the difference. For when we see Jesus as he is, that which is less than worthy in us, having been judged, will be purged from us by holy love, and "we shall be like him," according to John (1 John 3:2).

Those of us who are in Christ Jesus, in view of our faith in him, have been justified, which means that the verdict of the future has been brought into the present. The verdict is in. The judge has ruled. Listen to him: "Neither do I condemn you." Now what? You know: "Go, and from now on, sin no more." Obey Jesus, not because you have

to, but because he loves you and forgives you—because you want to.

NOTES

¹Frederick Buechner, *Godric* (New York: Atheneum, 1981), 143–44.