

The Greatest of These.3.Truth and Love

John 8:2-11

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February 16, 2020

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At dawn (Jesus) appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. 3 The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group 4 and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. 5 In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" 6 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. 7 When 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." 8 Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.

9 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. 10 Jesus 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."

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We're in John's gospel this morning...chapter 8. If you can find a Bible, why don't you turn there with me?

Once upon a time there was a young king who sat as judge over his country. Two women, who shared a home, came to him with a problem. It seems both women had, at about the same time, given birth to sons, but shortly after, one of the babies died. Now, both women claimed that the living baby was her own.

How could anyone tell, for sure, in the days before DNA testing anyway, who was the real mother? It was just one woman's word against the other.

This was the king's judgment...he said, "Let a sword be brought and the living boy cut in two, and give half to each woman."

Of course it was the reaction of the women to that judgment that revealed the truth: one was satisfied with the verdict; the other begged for the boy's life...even if she had to give him up to her rival.

In the end, the true mother was revealed by her self-giving love.

That instance was the very sort of thing that earned Israel's King Solomon his reputation for wisdom...wisdom that was able to cut through persons' deceptions and hypocrisies and schemes...and arrive at truth.

Scripture tells us that his great wisdom was nothing less than God's gift to him, so considering that, we shouldn't be surprised to see that same sort of wisdom appearing in Jesus' life...as it does here in this passage that John / Levi read for us.

Now, to be fair, my Bible, just like most of yours, begins this segment here with the warning: "Danger...ignore this passage because it can't be trusted."

Isn't that what yours says?

No, mine doesn't either, although in truth, that line there and the disclaimer that's inserted, however it's worded, makes us wonder, doesn't it?

Why is there this footnote added here?

Well, for several reasons, including the fact that these verses are missing from all the earliest manuscripts of John's gospel, and also because this account does appear in later manuscripts, but in different places, and also because the sort of language here...the words that are used and the way they're arranged is much more like the language of, say, Luke, than it is to the way John writes.

There's more that could be said, but most scholars agree that this account was probably not part of John's original gospel.

At the same time, however, most scholars also agree that the event itself is quite true and so, trustworthy. It rings true and similar to other events in Jesus' life, especially those sorts of events where people were trying to trap Jesus.

Which was what was happening here.

The fact is, this chapter...John 8...includes some of Jesus' harshest words. He calls the Pharisees "children of the devil" here, for example.

That sort of response from Jesus tells us that something bigger than we may notice, at first glance, is going on here. This is not the way any normal person, let alone Jesus, would respond to people who were genuinely seeking...people who were truly interested in knowing about Him.

No, this is more like the sort of response that we'd expect toward people who are hostile...toward people who had already made up their minds, but who were hypocritically and deceptively trying to seem sincere and open and legitimately questioning.

Which, again, is just what we have here.

The religious professionals...verse 3 says they're some combination of teachers of the law and Pharisees, weren't really out for Jesus' wisdom or opinion. The whole thing...the timing and the circumstance was a set up to trick Him into saying or doing something that would turn the crowd against Him at worst or get Him killed at best.

And Jesus knew this.

You know, God really, especially detests deceitful hearts. Scripture's pretty clear about that...God just does not get on well with two-faced people.

God loves honesty. He handles, always with tremendous grace, honest questions...even honest doubts...and even honest anger. But this business of pretending to be something we're not...or to be double-dealing...to try to intentionally put one over on God...that really bugs Him, I think, particularly when it's done, as was done here, at the expense of someone else.

Of course, that's not to say this woman was innocent. But by Jesus response to all this, I'd say He saw her sin differently than that of her accusers. I'd conclude from this chapter that self-righteousness is far more offensive to God than even adultery.

Maybe there's parts of our economy of sin that we need to re-think.

Anyway...how did this all come about?

We don't know for sure. Since these guys were rather lying in wait for Jesus...looking for a way to take Him out...who knows? Could it be that they set up this woman too...so that she would get "caught" at such a convenient time? We don't know it for sure, so we don't want to stake anything on it, but it's certainly possible.

Either way, whether by their *design* or their “good” *fortune*, this woman became their pawn...which seemed to only have made the situation more inciting to Jesus, because God always sees people as people...with eternal, intrinsic value...and never as mere tools to be used.

She is brought to Jesus, in front of all these people. How humiliating and fearsome this would have been for her.

Of course, the reality is, sin always carries the potential for that sort of humiliation...no matter how careful we may be to hide it. You get away with it and get away with it and get away with it...for years, maybe, you get away with it, so long that you begin to think you can *always* get away with it...and then...one day...you don't.

One day, suddenly, everyone knows about it.

That's the way sin is, and that's why it's far, far better to deal with your sin before it deals with you.

So whether by design or by chance, this woman was caught, and her accusers announce that the Law of Moses says she must be stoned because of what she'd done, which was a pretty extreme proclamation.

There is little evidence that stoning was widely used by this time. And...the Law was fairly clear in saying that stoning was only commanded when it was a virgin who was engaged to be married that committed adultery, and then, both she and the man were to be stoned.

So if this was the case, where was the fellow? Was this a selective use of the law?

Of course that didn't matter, since the whole point of this display on the part of the accusers was not justice. Their point was to trap Jesus, and here's how it could have been done:

If Jesus, by His response, seemed to treat the law lightly or disrespectfully, then He could be accused of disobeying it, and so be discredited. That's probably what these guys expected. They expected Him to forgive the woman, but that would mean He was teaching the people to ignore something in Moses' Law...which would subject Him to their punishment.

At the same time, if Jesus enforced the law at this point, that would get Him in trouble with the Romans, who did not allow the Jews to execute people.

(Incidentally, that second issue is precisely why Pilate becomes such an important person in the condemnation of Jesus later on...they needed a Roman to sentence Jesus to death.)

So you see, these religious professionals...they think they have Jesus here. Not only are they enjoying their declaration of moral superiority over this woman before all the people who were gathered there, they're also convinced that they have Jesus cornered.

You can imagine the smug looks on their faces as they're thinking, “OK Jesus, let's see you get out of this.”

N.T. Wright says, “At this point, the temperature in the room was rising, and with it, no doubt, Jesus' anger” at what they're doing and how they're doing it.

So verse 6 tells us that Jesus bends down and begins writing something in the dust on the ground.

No one knows what Jesus wrote. Was He writing words...maybe words like “hypocrisy, slander, lying, contempt, arrogance;” maybe making a list for those accusers to read?

Some have suggested maybe he was doodling...which would be treating their question with exactly the seriousness it deserved.

Whatever Jesus wrote, He must have taken His time...there must have been quite a delay, since verse 7 there says, "They kept demanding an answer."

They shouldn't have been in such a hurry, because when the answer finally came, it was devastating. Verse 7 there: **"Jesus stood up and said, 'Let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone.'"**

Ah, you see...be careful about pointing your finger at someone, because when you do, you may well find **three** fingers pointing back at you.

I'd imagine everyone stood in silence for a moment. But then, their heads dropped, the accusers, one by one, began to walk away. It was all they could do.

Interestingly, we're told that the oldest were the first to leave. The most mature, the most insightful, the most respected maybe? Maybe the ones with the most to lose.

Which left there, then, just Jesus and the woman...and really...the most important part of this event. Jesus shows true love to this woman by giving her two gifts: a word of forgiveness, and a word of command.

Verse 11 there, Jesus says to her, **"I don't condemn you...now go and sin no more."**

Contrary to what many people think today, love is not tolerance. Love...is not giving people permission to simply do as they choose, to live as they like, to go where they please.

If love were tolerance, then forgiveness would never be necessary.

Jesus' forgiveness of the woman means He recognized the wrong she had done...the sin she'd committed. Yet He chose to pardon her anyway.

You see, forgiveness doesn't mean that sin doesn't matter. Forgiveness means that sin **does** matter, but that **grace matters more**, and so in **love...because of love**, the offense is pardoned...the wrong is subdued by grace.

It's an act that is wholly undeserved. Unearned, unmerited, unjustified. There is no reason whatsoever that required Jesus to forgive her. He chose to, because of love.

That's what love does...it forgives when forgiveness is called for.

Yet Jesus also, because of love, gave her this command, **"Now go and sin no more."**

Why did He say this?

It was not to embarrass her.

It was not so He could feel morally superior to her.

It was not to assert Himself, or exercise His authority as "teacher.

It was not so that everyone else there would know that He was in charge.

And it was not to use her, like those other men had done.

Jesus told this woman to stop her sinful behavior because of love...because He loved her...because real love does not just stand by saying nothing while watching a life self-destruct.

You see, in her behavior...in the choices she was making and what she was doing, this woman was hurting herself.  
She was hurting others.  
She was diminishing the person God created her and intended for her +to be.  
She was creating all this false intimacy in her life.  
She was contributing to a practice that was destructive to families...to communities.

And beyond all this, she was heaping judgment upon herself and upon those she was with.  
So Jesus told her to stop...not to diminish her, but to lift her up.

He told her to stop precisely because He loved her...because He wanted her to be all she could possibly be...because love always seeks the best and the highest for the other.

In order for Jesus to really love her, you see, He had to involve both forgive and call for the end of the sin in her life.

That's love. Love involves both.

Did she listen to Jesus? Did she stop her sinful behavior?

We're not told.

At other times, we know, a few did, but most did not. Most people Jesus talked to about these sorts of things didn't really listen to Him, and Jesus didn't make them. To force people would be manipulation, and Jesus doesn't manipulate. Jesus loves and asks us to love Him in return by listening to Him and obeying Him, you see?

John 14:15 – Jesus said, “If you love me, you will keep my commands.”

Love doesn't control a person's will, but love does present truth and asks people to choose that truth, for the sake of the good.

The world is so broken in it's conception of love.

The world says that love is telling people what they want to hear.  
Jesus says love is telling us what we *need* to hear.

The world says love means letting people do what they want.  
Jesus says love is calling people to do what God wants.

The world says love is tolerating all behavior.  
Jesus says love is calling sinful behavior what it truly is, but then offering the sort of forgiveness that overcomes and overwhelms sin with grace and mercy.

You know, when you lay the world's idea of love and Jesus' idea of love side by side, it's easy to see which world will actually work...which world would be pleasant and happy...which world any reasonable person would choose to live in.

Living in a Jesus sort of world like that, though, begins by adopting and practicing Jesus' sort of love.

Love that forgives...really forgives.  
Love that speaks truth.

Love that calls people higher than the world's ways.

Love that calls people deeper into God.

Of course the world resists this sort of love. I mean look...this chapter begins with a group of people who want to stone a woman and ends with a group of people wanting to stone Jesus.

The world resists Jesus' sort of love.

But the only way to save the world is through this sort of love...forgiveness and truth...working hand in hand, both driven by love.

Are we forgivers, like Jesus is?

Are we truth tellers like Jesus is?

In all things, are we motivated by love, like Jesus is?

If you want to be, but need more power to be...a forgiver motivated by love...a speaker of truth motivated by love...why not ask God for this sort of love...this love like Jesus had...that Jesus lived?

This is the way God wants all His people...His children...to live and to love.