

Tough Topics: Anatomy of a Tough Passage—John 7:53-8:11

John 7:53-8:11:

And each journeyed back to his house. Now Jesus journeyed to the Mount of Olives. And early in the morning, He again arrived at the Temple precinct. And all the people came to Him and when He had sat down, He began to teach them.

*Now the scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst they said to him, “Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now in the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?” This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. And 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.**” And once more he bent down and wrote on the ground. But 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.*

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

I. Why This Story Is Not in the Gospel of John

a. The Textual Witnesses—the earliest Greek textual witnesses (late 2nd through 4th centuries) do not contain this pericope in any form. The first (earliest) to do so was Codex Bezae (D) in the 5th century. There were some “old” Latin manuscripts that did have it, and due to that, it made it’s way into Jerome’s Latin Vulgate (ca.384). This was the bible of the Roman Western Church for 1500+ years.

b. The Literary Context—we can also look at the literary flow of the story in John and see that this account doesn’t quite fit. While plausible, it seems disjointed. In other words, if you take it out and then reading John’s “story”, the narrative flows much better.

c. The Grammatical/Vocabulary Evidence—There is also internal evidence from the Greek text itself. There are words, phrases and syntax (the arrangement of words) that seem “foreign” to John’s normal style and vocabulary.

d. Should We See This Story as *True*? While this story is not discussed by most of the earliest Church fathers, there are some who know of a “story about a woman accused falsely of adultery...” (Eusebius reporting from Papias ca. 120). There is a clearer allusion to it in the mid-3rd century in the Syriac Church. Jerome also seems to know of both Greek and Latin witnesses that have this story.

We have some warrant for considering this story as not canonical but true. We know of at least one statement of Jesus that is cited by Paul in Acts (20:35) that is not found in any of the Gospels. There seems to be “oral tradition” that got codified, so true statements or accounts that we are some point written later.

The other way to get at this is through deductive reasoning: why would a well-meaning scribe insert a story if he knows it’s not true? Well this is not conclusive, it certainly is more plausible than someone putting something in that Jesus didn’t say (though there are many “false gospels” floating around!). Bottom line—this is not authoritative but certainly seems true. It is congruent with Jesus’s teaching in other places (see Luke 7:21-35), and even something that fits with what we see his opponents doing (see Mark 12:13).

II. The Details of the Story

a. The Old Testament Background—there are several passages from the OT that help us get some of the details of the story. Leviticus 20:10 is one: *If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death.* Note both the man and the woman are to be condemned to death. Another passage is Deuteronomy 22:22: *If a man is found lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman, and the woman. So you shall purge the evil from Israel.* Again, it is to be both that shall die. What about the stoning? That would be a way of executing the sentence. We can look at Deuteronomy 13:6ff:

If your brother, the son of your mother, or your son or your daughter or the wife you embrace or your friend who is as your own soul entices you secretly, saying, ‘Let us go and serve other gods,’ which neither you nor your fathers have known, some of the gods of the peoples who are around you, whether near you or far off from you, from the one end of the earth to the other, you shall not yield to him or listen to him, nor shall your eye pity him, nor shall you spare him, nor shall you conceal him. But you shall kill him. Your hand shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people. You shall stone him to death with stones, because he sought to draw you away from the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. And all Israel shall hear and fear and never again do any such wickedness as this among you.

Note the context for the stoning—someone seeks to draw one away from the Lord God!

b. The New Testament Background—in the time of Jesus, the Jews were governed by Roman Law and could not have killed anybody. Even the death of JTB by Herod would have likely been sanctioned by Rome. This calls into question their true motivation. In other words, that weren’t being serious about keeping the Law to the letter, but trying to trap Jesus into going against it.

c. The Details of the Narrative

Now we get to the details, which are interesting. What are some of them?

- Caught in the Act
- Writing with His “Finger” in the Dirt (Twice)
- They will leave, starting with the older ones
- The Woman Who Stands before Jesus

What is the relevancy of these details?

III. The Lessons We Learn from The Woman Caught in Adultery

a. Adultery Is a Grievous Sin—contrary to how people try to massage this story, Jesus does not dismiss the woman’s sin. He does not overlook it. He does not condone it. This isn’t a story about condemning hypocrisy and thereby permitting sin. If anything, this story makes us look more closely at the sin of adultery than merely being one of “doing the deed”. See below.

This pericope makes us examine what adultery entails. At its core adultery is interacting or behaving (in thought, word and deed) with another as if they are they are your spouse. This sin is broad and is pervasive. And in many instances, it is looked at as “harmless”.

b. The Law Accuses All Sinners and All Stand Condemned (Though in Society and Human Relationships Clearly Some Sins Are Worse Than Others)—the function of what Jesus does and says is first to condemn all as sinners before the Righteous Judgment of God. No one is exempt from God’s wrath. What Jesus says to all causes all to “drop their stones”.

We can also speak against an overreaction that can happen from this conclusion. While all sin is condemnable, we must also say that according to the way God orders society, and the way we live together, not all sin is the same. Some have greater consequences and ripple effects. IOW, thinking about adultery and actually doing it are different. We shouldn’t be afraid to say this. Even Jesus says later in John, “Therefore, he who delivered me over to [Pilate] has the greater sin.” (19:11)

c. Jesus Pardons All Sin on the Basis of His Word and His Cross/Resurrection—

While all stand condemned by the accusation of the Law, only Jesus can pardon sin. The woman is not dismissed due to hypocrisy or legalism, she is dismissed due to the Word of Jesus. “Neither do I condemn you.” This is sweet Gospel. When Jesus says we are free, we are free indeed.

This word of course points to the cross and empty tomb. This is the locus of the Word of pardon—the place where all sin went to die. What Jesus says has a trajectory beyond this story and lands at the cross, where His work (is finished). We are justified eternally through His resurrection (Romans 4:25).

d. We Are Commanded to Leave Off with Our Sin and Sit at the Feet of Jesus—In response to the Gospel we are also to “go and sin no more”. We are not to turn Jesus’ Word into a form of “cheap grace”. We are to repent of sin (all of it) and live regenerate lives in God’s Kingdom. Many are more comfortable with ignoring sin or turning sin into something okay. But Jesus condemns all, that He might forgive all...but His command to the woman leaves us with a clear path.

To put it crassly, there is no way that this woman went back to the one she was committing adultery and continued in that sin! Or the Samaritan woman went back to the man who was “not her husband” (4:16-18) and continued living in sin. So, Jesus calls all to repentance, and to keep standing before Him for His free gift of grace.