

# Neither Do I Condemn You

by John Piper

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*John Piper explores the complexities of a disputed biblical text while emphasizing the themes of grace and righteousness in Jesus' teachings.*

**Duration:** 40:54

**Scripture:** Deuteronomy 22:22, Matthew 9:13, John 7:23, John 8:7, John 8:11, Romans 8:1, Ephesians 2:8-9, Hebrews 4:16, 1 Peter 1:16

**Topics:** "Textual Criticism", "Gods Mercy"

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## Description

This sermon delves into a controversial passage in the Bible, discussing the authenticity and significance of the story of the woman caught in adultery. It explores the scholarly debate around the inclusion of this story in the Gospel of John, highlighting the importance of textual criticism and the reliability of the New Testament manuscripts. The sermon emphasizes Jesus' exaltation over the law, his establishment of righteousness on the foundation of grace, and the call to pursue holiness in light of God's forgiveness and mercy.

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## Transcript

Let's pray. Father, we love your word. We love your word.

We would be utterly lost and undone without it. It is our life. It's our hope.

It's our joy. It's our food. It's our drink, because only by it do we have any sure access to you, what you're like, what you've done.

And so may I be faithful to your word. And I thank you for the promise in your word that what is possible, what is impossible with man is possible with you. There are impossible desires I have for this message, and so I ask that you would bring them to pass.

I ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, this is one of those messages that I will give once every 10 or 20 years.

I even wonder if I should call it a sermon, and you'll see why in a moment. The reason for the rareness of the kind of message it is is because of the rareness of the kind of text we're dealing with here in this passage. Most New Testament scholars don't think this text belongs in the Bible.

Let me give you a few examples, and you need to know ahead of time I agree with them. And that raises really strange questions for us. So you see how strange and rare a sermon would be from a text that, if they're right, doesn't belong here.

So what are you gonna say? Okay. Don Carson, who I think is one of the world's greatest and most faithful New Testament scholars, says, despite the best efforts to prove that the narrative was originally part of John's gospel, the evidence is against them, and modern English versions are right to rule it off or put it in a footnote. And you'll notice in your text, unless you have perhaps the King James, that it's got a double bracket around it or it's in the footnote.

Bruce Metzger, one of the world's most authoritative scholars on the text of the New Testament until he passed away in 2007, said, the evidence for the non-Johannine, that means doesn't belong in the gospel of John, origin of this pericope, which is a fancy word for paragraph, of the adulterous is overwhelming. Leon Morris, who's gone to be with the Lord also, but one of my teachers and a great, great scholar, the textual evidence makes it impossible to hold that this section is an authentic part of the gospel. Andreas Kirstenberger, who teaches, oh dear, Southeastern or Southern? What? Southeastern, yeah.

And I love his commentary, I use it and get so much help from it. This represents, he says, overwhelming evidence that the section is non-Johannine. And one last one, Herman Ritterbos, whose commentary I also love, wrote, written a couple of decades ago.

The evidences point to an unstable tradition that was not originally part of an ecclesiastically accepted text. So there they are, these are the best that you can have, in my judgment, and they all agree, and I think they're right, that this text that was just read is not originally in the gospel. It got added centuries later, and that's the position I think is accurate.

So one of the things this gives me a chance to do now, and I don't think Sunday morning is, Saturday night is the best place to do this on a weekend, but I think it has to be done when we're faced with something like this. Namely, I'm going to talk for half the time about the kind of scholarly work that is behind this, and the situation of textual transmission for the last 2,000 years that brings about situations like this. So pretend like you're in school for a minute or two, and I will close by preaching.

And I will get a point from this text, and I will warrant it by saying that it agrees with everything else in the New Testament. So that's the way we're going to handle it. And I do believe that I can worship as I do this, and I think you will see reasons to worship as I try to open the situation for you.

So let me summarize, first of all, the reasons that all of these scholars give for why they don't think this story was in the gospel when John wrote it, but got added later. Let me summarize those and then give you some background about the transmission of the text in the New Testament, and then draw out a lesson for us, both biblically for its authority's sake and spiritually for our souls. Here are the reasons.

Number one, the story is missing in all the Greek manuscripts before the 5th century. Number two, the earliest church fathers omit the passage in commenting on John and pass directly from 752 to 812. Third, the text flows amazingly well if you drop the story and connect 752 with 812.

Number four, no Eastern church fathers cite the passage until the 10th century when dealing with this gospel. Number five, when the story starts to appear in biblical texts, surprisingly, it occurs in four other places besides the one here. Some manuscripts put it after 736, some put it after 744, some put it after

2125, and some have it in the Gospel of Luke after 2138.

And number six, the style and the vocabulary are more unlike the rest of the gospel than any other paragraph in the gospel. Those are the reasons that scholars think it didn't belong and doesn't belong in John's gospel as he wrote it. Now, saying all that, I've used even language that assumes so much of you, expects so much of you, so much more than you should be expected to bring to the table right now, and I don't expect you to bring to the table much knowledge about the history of the transmission of texts at all.

So this will be a very basic introduction, and I hope not to burden you but to help you just have enough knowledge so that what they're saying makes sense and doesn't undermine your confidence in the Bible. It involves, at the upper levels, this science called textual criticism, which is what it's called when you're trying to figure out what's original and what's not. At the upper levels, this requires not only a knowledge of Greek and Hebrew, which the original manuscripts of the Bible were written in, but it requires the ability to read them in the way they were handwritten and preserved in the texts found in libraries all over the world, which are very difficult to read in many cases.

This is a really high-level kind of scholarship that has to trickle down to us ordinary folks. And so let me try to introduce you to it. The New Testament as we have it was originally written in Greek.

Most of you know that probably. The first printed Greek Testament coming off a printing press happened in the year 1516, which means that for 1500 years the text that John and the others wrote was handed down by handwritten copies. For 1500 years, it was copied by hand and passed on and on and on.

That's significant. When this was printed in 1516, when the New Testament was printed in 1516, it simply turned the world upside down. And I should just pause here and say, if you want to read one of the best biographies that I've ever read, read David Daniel's biography of William Tyndale to read about that era and the heroism and sacrifice and reformation that this printing, so that anybody could read it, not just a few monks tucked away making faithful copies, but anybody who would take the time could have it in their hand.

It simply turned the world upside down in 1516 and just beyond. But for 1500 years, it came down to us in handwritten form. We do not have the original manuscript of any of the New Testament books.

That is, the very piece of parchment or paper that John or Paul or Matthew or Mark or Luke wrote on. We don't have that piece of paper. Everything we have is copies.

And the question is, did they get it right? Were they faithful with it? And frankly, I think it's probably just as well that we don't have those originals because we'd make idols out of them and charge money, probably, for people to come worship at the shrine of the original manuscript of the Apostle Paul. So the books of the New Testament are all preserved by these faithful, hard-working scribes, copyists for all those centuries. Let me describe those manuscripts to you and give you some amazing facts.

There are four ways that those manuscripts appear. One is a group called unseals, and I'll risk three or four technical words on you. We've got some STEM guys in the room, they know what we're talking about.

Unseals mean capital letters in the Greek, and these are very old manuscripts. I'll tell you how many in a minute. The next group is minuscules, and they're the little Greek letters.

So some were written in all caps, and some were written in little letters. And then there's a group called papyri. These are the oldest, and fragments, and written on papyrus, which was a plant common along the Nile in Egypt.

Very precious manuscripts. And then the other group is lectionaries, collections of texts used in public worship. Not in the order they were written necessarily, but just, here's what you read this Sunday, here's what you read next Sunday.

So we've got all those. Now, here's what's simply amazing. The abundance of those manuscripts in those four different forms is so startling compared to the oldest manuscripts of any other manuscript coming from the first century, it's simply breathtaking.

Let me give you some comparisons here so you can see what these so-called text critics, the scholars who are working on this, have to work with, and how that is a problem and a solution. Caesar's Gallic Wars, written about 50 BC, has 10 surviving manuscripts in the language in which it was written, and all of them date from the 10th century AD and after. Livy, the historian, his Roman history, dating from the time of Christ, 20 manuscripts survive of Livy's, which are all late.

Two manuscripts survive of Tacitus, histories and annals, written about AD 100. Two manuscripts, and they're all from the 9th and 11th, they're both from the 9th and 11th century. Eight manuscripts exist for Thucydides' history, which was written in 400 or so BC.

So typically when you're a historian working with manuscripts that come from the period that we're talking about, very early, first century or so, you have 2, 8, 20 manuscripts to work with, and they're all 9th, 10th century, not earlier. And virtually all those historians working in universities around the world are confident they're interpreting Caesar and Thucydides and Tacitus. Compare the numbers of the manuscripts that we have of the New Testament.

These numbers come from Münster. There's one main large think tank called the Institute, I'll give it to you in English, for New Testament textual research in Münster, Germany, who have the data all collated. These manuscripts exist in libraries around the world, but of course they've been digitized now and the numbers of these are plain for everybody to see, and if you have the energy you can go look at them.

There are 322 of those unsealed texts. There are 2,907 minuscule texts, manuscripts. There are 2,445 lectionary portions, and there are 127 papyri, papyri adding up to about 5,801 manuscripts or fragments.

They're not all complete New Testaments by any mean, but they are either whole or fragments of the New Testament. So these handwritten copies, these 5,000 handwritten copies of the New Testament are in existence today and now are visible to the scholars who want to work with them to try to discern what the original words were that our biblical authors wrote. Now as you can imagine, the copying of those texts produced variations for all kinds of human reasons, variations.

So the multiplicity of the numbers of manuscripts increases the problem of variations and increases the powers of control by which we can assess which are the most original. The more you have, the more you can test which the original ones were. Just a simple example, if we only had, say, two manuscripts of the Gospel of John, and one of them included this story about the woman taken in adultery, and one of them omitted it, and they're both old, what would we do? It would be very difficult to decide.

That's not the situation with any texts. The variations are many, but we have hundreds of texts, and so we can say, well, here it is in these one or two or three or four or five, but here, the number of these texts, the antiquity of these texts, the geographical distribution of these texts makes it crystal clear that's the original right there. So the number, while creating more variations, also creates the very control that scholars are able to use in order to decide which is original.

Here's the way F. F. Bruce from a generation ago put it. He wrote this in 1943. If the number of manuscripts increases the number of scribal errors, it increases proportionately the means of correcting such errors so that the margin of doubt left in the process of recovering the exact original wording is truly remarkably small.

But what's most significant for the reliability and the authority of the New Testament is that the variations that remain that we still wonder about do not affect any biblical doctrine. Here's the way Bruce puts it. The variant readings about which any doubt remains among textual critics of the New Testament affects no material question of historic fact or of Christian faith and practice.

Now, nothing in the last, what, 70 years or so since he wrote that has changed in that judgment, in my judgment, except the fact that some very popular teachers, especially Bart Ehrman, have become renowned for calling the New Testament into question precisely on the basis of textual critical issues. His book is called *Misquoting Jesus*. There are other books, but that one especially.

On the other hand, Paul Wegner, writing in 2006, reaffirms Bruce's judgment, and it would be mine. He writes like this, five years ago. It is important to keep in perspective the fact that only a very small part of the text is in question.

Of these, most variants make little difference to the meaning of any passage. And then he closes his book with this quote from Frederick Kenyon. It is reassuring at the end to find that the general result of all these discoveries and all this study is to strengthen the proof of the authenticity of the scriptures and our conviction that we have in our hands, in substantial integrity, the veritable word of God.

So I agree with Don Carson and the others that this story was not in the Gospel of John when he wrote it. And when I say that, I don't at all mean for you to respond, oh my, everything then is up for grabs. Or how can I count on any text? On the contrary, you and I should be very thankful, very thankful that in God's sovereign providence over the centuries, these thousands and thousands of manuscripts are so abundant today that in the science of textual criticism as they are compared one with the other, there is a high degree of certainty that we have the original wording.

And where there isn't a degree of certainty, it affects no doctrine of the Christian faith. Now, the question is, what should I do with it, the story? That's the background I intended to give you. That's the lecture on textual criticism, and I'm done with it almost.

The reason I say almost is because, very interestingly, both Don Carson and Bruce Metzger think this event really happened just the way the story says, just wasn't part of John's Gospel. So here's what Carson says. There is little reason for doubting that the event here described occurred.

Oh, really? Metzger writes, the account has all the earmarks of historical veracity. Well, perhaps. I would like to think so.

Who doesn't love this story? Kind of a gut punch tonight to hear me say it doesn't belong in the Bible. That's a downer. But neither of those judgments, even if true, give the story the sanction and the authority of Scripture.

So what I'm going to do with it is this. I'm going to preach, and I'm going to say that what we have in this text is not a basis for its truth, but a pointer to its truth in the rest of the Bible. Does that make sense? I'm not going to say that what I'm about to preach to you is true because of this text.

I don't think I have the warrant to do that. I preach the Word of God. I don't think this is part of it, even if it happened.

Therefore, what I want to hear is, what's the point of the story? Why did the early church love this so much that they preserved it? And is it true on the basis of what we do know? That's what I want to know. So that's where we're going in the last few minutes of this sermon. Here's what I think the point of the story is.

Jesus exalts himself over the law of Moses, changes an appointed punishment in the law, reestablishes righteousness on the foundation of grace, and I don't doubt that that's why this story was loved and preserved. Jesus exalted, law altered, righteousness reestablished on the foundation of grace. That's what I think this story is doing, and that's the point of the New Testament, which I'll try to show now.

So the woman is caught in adultery. Verses 4 and 5, the scribes and Pharisees, interesting little tidbit here, the word scribes never occurs anywhere else in the Gospel of John. It's always chief priests.

That's the kind of thing that scholars notice. The scribes and the Pharisees, because they're all over the other Gospels, so no problem with this really happening like this, they come and bring her to Jesus, and they say, teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now, in the law of Moses, the law of Moses commanded us to stone such a woman.

So what do you say? So this is a blatant test of Jesus. Perfectly historically understandable, this is happening all the time. This has the ring of, this is the sort of thing that happened.

There's nothing new, nothing weird here. This is the way it happens all over the Gospels. What did the law say? Well, here's what the law says.

In two places, Deuteronomy 22, 22 and Leviticus 20, 10, here's Deuteronomy. If a man is found lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall die. And that's what Leviticus 20 says as well.

So something is fishy here, because there's no man about to be stoned. This is fishy. They don't like it.

Verse 6 tells exactly what they're up to. This they said to test him that they might have some charge to bring against him. These men don't love the law, they hate Jesus.

They don't care about the man, they don't care about obeying the law. This is not about law keeping, this is about tripping somebody they can't abide. So the law is becoming a pretext in the mouth of these scribes and Pharisees, becoming a pretext.

There is no such thing as adultery with one guilty person, ever. So where is he? Well, they're just not interested in that. They want Jesus in trouble by giving a wrong answer to this question and contradicting the law.

That's what they want. And Jesus knows that. He's seen it over and over again.

We've seen it in the Gospel of John. Verse 7, middle of the verse, Jesus gives his verdict. Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.

Now, of course, that won't work as a basis of social justice. No criminals would be brought to justice if all judges had to be sinless. This won't work as a basis for social justice, which is not what he's doing.

What I said at the beginning was, Jesus, in this text, is re-establishing righteousness, re-establishing holiness, and re-establishing justice on another foundation than the Pharisees are offering. They get the new law piece, abusing it, twisting it, not really obeying it, but making it a pretext. And he knows justice is important, righteousness is important, not committing sin is important, adultery is wrong.

And you men, it's not what you care about. You care about getting rid of me. Throughout the Gospels, and here we're broadening out to the basis, throughout the Gospels, Jesus' stand against this kind of thing in the Pharisees comes up again and again.

Let me give a few examples. Matthew 9, 13, Jesus says to them, go learn what this means. I desire mercy and not sacrifice.

And he said that to them when they were criticizing his disciples for picking grain and eating it on Saturday. Law-breaking. He says in this amazing quote from Hosea, go learn what this means.

I desire mercy and not sacrifice. Like, if you understood the Old Testament, you wouldn't use the law like that. Or we've seen this one just a couple of weeks ago, John 7, 23.

If on the Sabbath, a man receives circumcision, this is Jesus talking now to the crowds, if on a Sabbath, a man receives circumcision so that the law of Moses may not be broken, are you angry with me because on the Sabbath I made a whole man's body? Well, how would you do that? What kind of a law keeping people are you that you could get the circumcision right here? We'll even do it on Saturday if we have to. But healing a whole man by one word, that can't happen on Saturday. What kind of a crazy use of the law is that? And Jesus is just drawing that out.

This is what's happening in this story as well. You can see why probably Metzger and Carson say, has the ring of truth. It looks like something that would happen just like this.

Okay. Verse, I didn't write it down. You can find it at the end of the text.

Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on, sin no more. Neither do I condemn you.

He did not say, neither do I condemn you because adultery doesn't matter. He didn't say, neither do I condemn you, so what you do next doesn't really matter because there is therefore now no condemnation. That's not what he said.

He said, go and sin no more, which is also found in chapter five, verse 16, verse 14. Remember, when the man was healed and he came and found Jesus and Jesus said, you're well. Now see that you don't sin.

Again, another ring of truth. I think what Jesus is saying is this. I am reestablishing your holy life, my friend.

I'm building it again. You threw it away in adultery. I'm building it again.

I don't want you to commit adultery anymore. So I'm sending you away not to commit adultery anymore, but here's the difference, woman. I have just put it on a new foundation, my grace.

Do you hear this, woman? I'm not lessening the command to you, don't do this again, but now I have just forgiven you totally, which is why I say this is exalting Jesus big time, which is why they would love this text, want to preserve this text over against the Pharisaic mishandling and the misunderstanding of Jesus. Woman, I am rebuilding justice. I'm rebuilding righteousness.

I'm rebuilding holiness, and I'm building it on grace. You have to have an experience of grace in your life before you can pursue not sinning. If you try to pursue not sinning without an experience of amazing grace, what do you get? Pharisaism.

That's what you get. You get heartless misuses of the law. You get hypocrisy through and through.

You get moralism. So he's not saying the law had a bad idea when it told people not to sleep together except when they're married. That's a good idea.

That's right. That's God's way for us. But it doesn't mean anything to God ultimately if you stay out of bed with no grace in your life, no experience of sweet forgiveness, and imagine what she must have tasted in this story.

Really, I was just about to be horribly killed. I don't know if you saw the movie *The Stoning Soraya M*. It was horrible. If you've ever watched or imagined what a stoning is, buried up to here in the ground with her hands tied behind her back and rocks this big hurled at your face, she was just about to taste this horrific death, and they're gone.

No condemnation. And until you taste that for your sin, you're about to be stoned in hell, and now it's not going to happen. Now you have a whole different reason for not sleeping with the girlfriend, boyfriend, other man's wife, husband.

Your life is built on a whole new foundation. I love this story, and it's true. It's a true story, meaning the lesson in it is exactly what Jesus would want us to see, whether it happened or whether it belongs in this gospel or not.

So let me end like this. The story points us to the entire message of the New Testament. I don't have to base the point of the story on the story and thus leave you with a wobbly foundation tonight.

You shouldn't have a wobbly foundation for this point. God is speaking here, and this story is illustrative. It's a pointer.

It's an echo. It's not the foundation of this sermon. It's an echo of the authority of the Bible, which from cover to cover is designed that Jesus come into the world to put holiness on a foundation of grace.

That's the point of the Bible. Be holy, for I am holy. But don't pursue this holiness until you have heard the words, neither do I condemn you.

That's the point of the Bible, to the glory of God. So very simply, you know when I said -- I have one more sentence before I give it to you. When you heard me pray, what, 30 minutes ago when it was, 40 minutes ago, I have impossible desires, and you're the God who's able to do the impossible, what I meant was, could somebody get saved hearing a sermon like this? I feel like, I don't like preaching like this.

I don't want to spend three-fourths of a sermon talking about scholarly stuff. That's not what preaching is. Could you do that? Maybe.

I mean, yes, you can. Will you? You out there watching this, or Sunday morning, downtown, south, downtown, downtown, tonight, north. So my last sentence is, come to Jesus for grace, and set your face to sin no more.

Come to Jesus for grace, wherever you are on your spiritual mess up, and go and set your face to sin no more. Let's pray. So, Father, have mercy upon my imperfect efforts to try to manage a very complex situation in the text.

Anything I have said amiss, have mercy and forgive. Anything that's true, confirm it in the lives of your people. Thank you for this story.

Thank you this is the way Jesus is, and that the whole New Testament, this precious book, is designed to make it plain to us for our salvation and our holiness. I pray this in Jesus' name, amen.

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