

John's Gospel - After Condemnation, What?

by John Vissers

Jesus teaches that we should not use the sins and failures of others as an opportunity for our own gain or to exalt ourselves, but rather we should seek restoration and healing for the sinner.

Duration: 42:54

Scripture: John 7:53, John 8:6

Topics: "Condemnation"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses a story from the Bible where Jesus encounters a woman caught in adultery. The religious leaders set a trap for Jesus by bringing the woman to him, hoping to catch him in a dilemma. However, Jesus responds with compassion and forgiveness, telling the woman that he does not condemn her but urges her to leave her life of sin. The preacher emphasizes that this story demonstrates Jesus' ability to offer forgiveness and transformation to those who seek it, and highlights the importance of understanding and applying this message in our own lives.

Transcript

Let's pray together. Gracious Lord Jesus, we've been praying and singing that you would come and that you would feed us. We confess that we are hungry and thirsty and we need to be fed from your word, and so tonight we pray, O God, that you would come.

That, Lord Jesus, you would come, that by your Spirit you would teach us from your word, that you would fill us with things of eternal value and speak to us words of life, gospel, health, giving, salvation words. For in the name of Jesus we pray, amen. Welcome tonight to our evening service.

We are returning tonight to the Gospel of John after about a seven-week hiatus, I think, during the Christmas season and into the early new year, and so I invite you tonight to turn to John chapter 8, and we're going to read verses 1 to 11. Actually, we'll start reading at chapter 7, verse 53, which is really the first line that leads into chapter 8. So let us hear God's word together. John writes, then, each went to his own home.

But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery.

They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say? They were using this question as a trap in order to have a basis for accusing him.

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

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. Jesus straightened up and asked her, Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you? No one, sir, she said, and neither do I condemn you. Jesus declared, Go now and leave your life of sin.

Amen. May God bless to us this reading from his word. Our passage this evening really records a very remarkable encounter.

An encounter between Jesus and a committee of the religious leaders who had come out to test him, to try him, to entrap him, and this woman who had been caught in adultery. Jesus, you will recall, had been teaching in the temple during the Feast of Tabernacles, and in John chapter 7, as we worked our way through that chapter, we saw the encounters that Jesus had in the temple, the conversations that he had, and the teaching that he gave. And we saw there that the crowds were whispering about him.

They were trying to figure out who he was, and rumors about Jesus were circulating everywhere, and the religious leaders were getting more and more concerned about Jesus. They were getting agitated with his presence because, in fact, it seemed that he was quite a threat to them and quite a threat to the religious institution of his day. And at the end of chapter 7, it says, then each went to his own home, but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.

Now we need to understand that the Mount of Olives was one of the places that Jesus often went to pray. When the pressure upon his own soul was great, when he struggled to maintain his strength against the attack of his enemies, when he needed some time to regain his composure, when he found himself at the center of the fray, our Lord was often found retreating with drawing into the presence, into the Holy Presence of God his Father. And there's no question that this was such a time.

Things were heating up. Many of his disciples, you remember, had already deserted him when he began with the hard teaching, and the religious leaders were plotting against him. And Jesus was out there, out in public, front and center.

And so he was at the center of all kinds of things swirling about him, but even more than this, he knew. He knew where all of this was leading, because he had a clear vision that all of this was leading to the cross of Calvary, that it was leading to his death. And Jesus knew that the judgment of the world was about to be heaped on him.

He was going to be despised and rejected, and he knew that the judgment of God itself was going to be cast on him, that he was going to be suffering and agonizing death. And it says at dawn he appeared again in the temple courts where all the people gathered, and he sat down to teach them. And so it's out of that situation, out of that context, that Jesus enters the fray again, and it's not going to be very long before Jesus is called upon to act as a judge.

Now before we proceed any further, I think it's important to address a question that I'm sure comes to your mind as you look at this text and as you read this text. We need to pause over this text for a moment, because if you have an NIV translation of the Bible, you'll notice that this story is introduced by the comment which says this, the earliest and most reliable manuscripts do not have John 7, 53 to chapter 8, verse 11. And so of course the question immediately comes, what are we to make of this text? There is in fact a bit of a problem with this text.

It is virtually absent from all of the earliest Greek manuscripts. None of the early church fathers who wrote commentaries on the Gospel of John included it. Many commentators, many scholars wonder in fact whether it was an original part of John, and a few of the early manuscripts include it in Luke's Gospel at the end of chapter 21.

And so many people in fact think that it might belong more properly in the Gospel of Luke. Some think that it might have been left out of the early manuscripts, because on the surface at least, it appears to express a liberal and a lax attitude on the part of Jesus towards sexual sin. The interesting thing, however, is that all of the scholars and all of the commentators and all of those who have studied this passage agree on one thing, that it definitely belongs in the New Testament.

They're not agreed as to where it belongs, but that it belongs there seems to be a unanimous voice. Its message is so powerful and the text seems so authentically filled with the teaching and with the reality of Christ. And there's a great deal in fact to commend its place here in John chapter 8. The attention to detail which one finds in this text is very typical of John's Gospel.

For example, the practice of incorporating aside remarks which interpret what was happening is something that John often does. Look at verse 6, where he kind of puts this in, they were using this question as a trap in order to have a basis for accusing him. And so it seems that it's, it appears that it's very much like John's writing.

I like what Calvin has to say about this passage. This is how Calvin handled it. He said, it is plain enough that this passage was unknown anciently to the Greek churches, but as it is found in many old manuscripts and contains nothing unworthy of an apostolic spirit, there is no reason why we should refuse to apply it to our own advantage.

One modern New Testament scholar puts it this way, there is nothing in the story itself or in its language that would forbid us to think of it as an early story concerning Jesus. Well, enough of that kind of an excursus. We're going to treat it as an authentic part of John's Gospel and try to understand its message.

I think that it belongs here for a very important reason, and that has to do with the theme of judgment. Because the theme of judgment is very strong in John chapter 7 and in John chapter 8 as this story unfolds. Look at John chapter 7 verse 24.

Jesus said, stop judging by mere human appearances and make a right judgment. John 7 24. Stop judging by mere human appearances and make a right judgment.

And then if you go forward into chapter 8 and verses 15 to 16, Jesus says, you judge by human standards. I pass judgment on no one, but if I do judge, my decisions are right because I am not alone. I stand with the Father who sent me.

And here at the beginning of John chapter 8, this story presents Jesus standing in the temple, and he's coming from the holy, quiet, restful, reassuring presence of God his Father back into the fray. And he's going to face the judgment of men and women, and they want to find a basis for judging him by asking him to judge a woman who was caught in adultery. In other words, they want to ask for his judgment so that they in turn can judge him, that they can judge his judgment.

And as it turns out, this is telling itself because they are testing the very judgment of God. So let's look at this passage then with these few preliminary thoughts before us as we move into what the story is about itself. Now the first thing that we come to is in verses 1 to 6, and I want you to notice the situation as it unfolds and the context as it's explained, that what's really going on here, the essence of this story, is a carefully baited trap by the religious leaders.

It's a carefully baited trap set for Jesus, and we see here very clearly the attitude and the action of the religious leaders. Jesus here is confronted by a committee of religious leaders who come out to test him, who come out to try him, to come who come out to entrap him. They parade a woman before him who was caught in the act of adultery.

And one cannot help but realize that what's going on here is a very carefully planned, a very carefully executed plan. It's not as if they sort of just thought this up on the spur of the moment. There was obviously some kind of a committee meeting, and one might even imagine that they sat around and took minutes so that they'd get everything right.

They were going to go and test Jesus. They were going to go and try to trip him up. They were going to go and try and entrap him.

And they want to know from Jesus what he thinks ought to be done with this woman caught in adultery. Now you need to understand that Jesus, as the case is presented before him, is caught here between a rock and a hard place. The facts of the case don't seem to be in dispute at all.

The woman has sinned. She was caught in the act. And further, the law of Moses seems quite clear.

There doesn't seem to be very much question about it. A married woman convicted of adultery, according to the law of Moses, should be executed. It appears, both on the facts of the case and the law of Moses, that this is an open and shut case.

And so the Get-Jesus Committee, if we might call them that, has set things up in such a way that it appears that Jesus has only two choices. And the trap that they've set is really a very clever one. On the one hand, if Jesus refuses to uphold the sentence, if Jesus refuses to uphold the stoning of this woman, he would confirm the suspicions of the religious leaders that they have about Jesus, that he stands loose to the law, that he doesn't really take the law very seriously.

And the religious leaders could then pronounce Jesus a heretic. They could say that all of his claims about truth, all of his claims to teach the truth, all of his claims to be an interpreter of the law of God, all of those things could be rejected. And Jesus would be seen as, for what he is in their eyes, someone who compromises the very law of God and who condones sin.

So that's the one option that Jesus has to follow. On the other hand, if Jesus goes along with their reading of the law, and if he condones the stoning of this woman, he would have been discredited in the eyes of the people. I mean, if you think about it, what made Jesus so popular amongst the people? What made

him so popular among the masses? It was always that he was taking their side over against the religious leaders, that he stood on the side of the oppressed, that he stood on the side of those who were victimized, that he stood on the side of those who were abused, those who were downtrodden.

He was seen as someone who championed those who were put down, especially those who were victimized by others. Oh, certainly a few hardliners might have applauded, but most people knew what was going on here, and if Jesus acceded to the request to have this woman stoned, no doubt he would have lost a lot of prestige, a lot of admiration amongst the people. So you've got these two options that Jesus has, and the religious leaders and this committee that comes and presents Jesus with this knows this full well, but there's even a further wrinkle as if that's not enough.

There's one further wrinkle in this case of entrapment, and that is that the Roman authorities had denied the Jewish religious courts the right of capital punishment. The Roman authorities, as they inhabited Palestine as they dominated it in the first century, reserved the right of capital punishment for themselves. They guarded that right jealously.

That's why Jesus himself was first tried, first brought up before the Sanhedrin, before the religious courts, but he had to be sent to Pilate, because only Pilate, in the end, could issue an order to have Jesus killed. And if Jesus authorized the stoning, he may have brought down upon himself the wrath of the Roman authorities, which of course is precisely one of the things that the religious leaders would have loved, to get Jesus entrapped, entangled amongst the Roman authorities so that, in fact, they would have taken care of him. So what's going on here? Well, let's be very clear.

The religious leaders are up to something very specific. They were using this situation as a trap in order to have a basis for accusing Jesus. They set things up.

Oh, the case was real enough. I know it's adultery, but the thing that we need to understand, as this story is told, is that the religious leaders didn't really care about the law of God, and they didn't really care about sin, and they most certainly, as is evident in this passage, did not care about the woman. They wanted one thing and one thing only to get Jesus.

They were using this situation, and they were victimizing this woman to get at Jesus. And I want to suggest to you, let me pause here, I want to suggest to you that that's the first thing we need to get into our heads in order to understand what this passage is really about, in order to understand the response of Jesus to the religious leaders and to the woman. You see, Jesus sees this situation for what it really is.

It's really not a case of judgment. It is a case of entrapment. It is a case of victimization.

And the religious leaders are using the sin, which is real, and the failure, which is real, of this woman, of another person, for their own purposes. They are using that and manipulating that in order to get at Jesus. They're not really interested in the woman, in what happens to her.

In fact, even if she receives this sentence, they are using this situation for their own purposes. And that, my friends, I want to suggest to you is an abomination to God. You see, by treating this woman, and by treating this sin in this way, what was going on is they were really judging themselves.

They were laying themselves open to judgment. You see, in the Bible, the sword of judgment is always double-edged. In judging others, we in fact judge ourselves.

In exposing others, we in fact expose ourselves, our own motives, our own hearts. In judging others, we expose our own attitudes and often our own relationship with God. And that's why Jesus says in that famous passage on the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapter 7, Do not judge, or you too will be judged.

For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. You see, what happens in judgment is often our own pride is uncovered. Our own attitudes are uncovered.

Our own relationship or lack thereof with God is uncovered. And we often think that somehow we are putting ourselves above someone else or even placing ourselves in the position of God. Now, don't misunderstand the situation here.

Don't misunderstand what is being said. There is no hint that sin should not be taken seriously. In fact, we'll see in a moment that Jesus takes it very seriously.

But what is clear in this passage and what makes it such a powerful word to the Church of Jesus Christ, to all of us today, is that we should never use the sins and the failures of others as an opportunity for our own gain, as an opportunity somehow to exalt ourselves, as an opportunity to manipulate things in such a way that we're going to get things to our own advantage. That runs contrary to the principles of the kingdom of God, and we see, in fact, in our world every day those principles worked out. Think about in politics.

Think about what's going on in politics either in this country or south of the border today. In business, in education, in the church, how often are people willing to go for the jugular? Not because, necessarily, they're convinced that the sin itself needs to be dealt with, but somehow, in doing it, there's gain to be had. That's what makes Jesus sick here.

That's what is an abomination to the Lord. If we enter into a spirit of judgment and condemnation of others with a kind of motive that it's going to exalt us, God help us, and yet that's precisely, so often, what goes on in the church. You see, the truth of the gospel is that, in fact, when you enter into judgment in that kind of an attitude, you don't expose the other person, you expose yourself.

You are exposed for what you are, a sinner trying to make gain out of the sin and condemnation of another person's failure. And a right attitude, a godly attitude, a Jesus attitude, looks beyond that, not for personal advantage, but for restoration and for healing and for the salvation of the sinner. Now, if we understand that basic point, if we understand that framework as this story unfolds, then, and only then, can we understand the response of Jesus.

First, to the religious leaders and the people, and then secondly, to the woman. Let's come then, in the second place, to the response of Jesus to the religious leaders, in verses six, the end of verse six and through to verse eight. It's interesting, notice that Jesus doesn't give an immediate answer.

In fact, there's a deafening silence. It would have been one of those awkward moments, you know, here the case has been presented, this woman has been paraded before Jesus and before the people, before these religious leaders, and they've asked him to render a judgment, and there's this deafening silence. It would have been an awkward moment, and what does Jesus do? He bends down and he starts to write on the ground with his finger.

Now, the interesting thing is that we're not told what Jesus wrote. There have been many ingenious suggestions by commentators and by preachers throughout the history of the church about what Jesus might have written on the ground, but the fact of the matter is the text doesn't tell us, and probably the text doesn't tell us for a very good reason. What is clear is that it was a very dramatic gesture, which would have heightened considerably the tension of the moment.

Now, what is very interesting is the image of Jesus bending down and writing with his finger in the ground, because, in fact, the image of the finger of God in the Bible refers to divine authority. Jesus himself, for example, in Luke chapter 11 says that he drives out demons by the finger of God, and you remember in the Old Testament that the law of God, the law given to Moses, the image that's used, the way that it's described is that it was written by the very finger of God, and it may be that as Jesus bends down and writes with his finger in the ground that that image is very much coming to the forefront. The people and the religious leaders nevertheless keep on questioning him.

They keep on pressing him for an answer as he's bending down there, writing whatever he wrote in the ground, and he straightens up and he says to them, if any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her. And then he bent down again and he wrote some more on the ground. Now, what are we to make of Jesus' response here? What are we to make of what he says? Well, Jesus really displays astonishing wisdom and insight, because in Jewish law, the witnesses of the sin, those who witnessed the sin, those who were the real witnesses to what had happened, were required to fulfill a special responsibility by initiating the stoning.

That is, they had to be true witnesses who had no self-interest whatsoever. They were the ones who would initiate the execution by picking up the first stones and begin the execution, begin the stoning. And so, you see, this is not a general statement.

It is very specific. What Jesus is saying here is, if any one of you is not complicit in this situation, if any one of you can do this with a clear conscience, if any one of you is not connived to use this woman's situation to entrap me, if any of you is doing this without any self-interest or any hope of personal gain whatsoever, if any one of you is doing this without the intent of getting me, then go ahead. Be the first one to pick up the stone and throw it at her.

And it's a brilliant response, because on the one hand, Jesus exposes the situation for what it really is, and on the other, and this is often forgotten as this passage is interpreted and as it's preached and as it's studied, on the other, he has at the same time, in effect, given permission for the stoning to take place. You see, Jesus doesn't reject the judgment out of hand, but he gets at the heart of what constitutes real judgment, and he makes it clear that under these conditions, no legitimate judgment can be rendered, at least not by the woman's accusers. And what we have here, my friends, is a picture of Jesus in the New Testament that is far richer, and far more complex, and far deeper than many of us often understand.

You see, when it comes to Jesus and this kind of business of judgment, what we usually do is we fall into one of two camps. There's those of us who want to see Jesus as meek and mild and loving. Jesus, you know, as the person who only affirms us, who only gives us positive strokes.

And then, of course, Jesus, who would never judge anyone. And then we assume that's what the Christian life is like. We just need to be positive.

We just need to be affirming. We just need always to give positive strokes to other people. And then, on the other hand, there are those who see Jesus as the sovereign judge whose wrath knows no end and whose judgments are severe.

And then many Christians, of course, incorporate that kind of an attitude into their Christian lives. But you see, Jesus is far more complex than that. The book of Revelation really has a wonderful phrase to capture the richness of the identity of Jesus at this point.

The book of Revelation describes the wrath of the Lamb. Jesus is the Lamb of God. He is meek and mild, but he is the triumphant Lamb whose right alone it is to judge the living and the dead.

He is the one whose right alone it is to judge and the one whose death alone is the atoning sacrifice for our sin. And so it's that picture, that richness of Jesus that is revealed here, which informs our understanding of the judgment that is going on. Now, Jesus is not saying that you have to be perfect in order to pass judgment, but what he is saying is that judgment must be pursued with honesty and integrity and consistency and equity and compassion, that it must always be rooted in a right relationship with God.

If you dare to place yourself in the seat of judgment over someone else, you better be very certain that you are living with your life centered in the reality of Jesus, because it's only then, it's only then with the heart of Jesus and the understanding of Jesus and the compassion of Jesus and the equity of Jesus and all that the New Testament describes, with the eyes of Jesus looking at the situation of others, that you can truly enter in to the reality of understanding and of dealing with situations that confront us. The desperate need, of course, in the Church of Jesus Christ today is for pastors, for teachers, for elders, for leaders in the Church to have the mind of Christ at this point. How desperately we need the mind of Christ.

The other interesting thing, just as an aside here about the religious leaders' sense of judgment, is that they use the situation not only to entrap Jesus, but the question, of course, is where is the woman's partner in crime? The law prescribed the death penalty for the man as much as for the woman, but the man nowhere appears in this passage. Then finally, notice the response of Jesus to the woman caught in adultery, and this is the marvelous pinnacle, really, of this passage in verses 9 to 11. The story concludes on a series of the most famous phrases uttered by our Lord, and those who heard what Jesus had said to the religious leaders began, now the text says, to go away one at a time.

I mean, you can imagine in your mind's eye what's going on here. They were steaming, some of them. They realized that Jesus had not only met their challenge, but had bettered them.

Some of them may have walked away with their heads held in shame. Others may have walked away simmering with anger within them, knowing that they'd been beaten, but willing to come back at Jesus at some day in the future. But they leave until only Jesus was left with the woman.

You can imagine Jesus getting up from his crouched position, turning to the woman, looking at her in the eyes, and saying, woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you? No one, sir, she said. Then neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin.

Go and sin no more. The astonishing reality is that Jesus sets this woman free, but he also summons her to a new life, to a new obedience to the will of God. He gives her a new opportunity.

It's a mistake to interpret this story as though sin is unimportant. Jesus takes her sin very seriously. He upholds the law.

But Jesus, at the same time, offers her the opportunity to find a new life, and he calls her to a new life in the will of God. And if we enter into the spirit of this story, and if we begin to really understand what's going on here, we begin to have a pattern, it seems to me, for understanding how we ought to relate to one another and relate to situations and relate to others in the world in which we live today. Let me give you an example.

In our culture, in the aftermath of the sexual revolution, sexual sin is rampant. We live in a sexually permissive culture, a sex culture, really, where sexuality is everywhere. It infuses the culture all over the place.

And sexual activity before and alongside and outside of marriage has become the norm. And all of us as disciples of Jesus have to come to terms with the society in which we live. We have to come to terms with a society where pressure towards promiscuity are subtle and indeed unrelenting.

So how do we deal with that? How do we deal with those who struggle and, in fact, with many around us who fail, who stumble, and who fall in all sorts of areas of their sexuality? Well, let me give you three practical principles, and with this I'm going to conclude. The first is that we have to deal with those who fail with sensitivity and with understanding, not with blanket condemnation. That's what's clearly not taught in this text.

We need to deal with those who stumble and with those who fall into real sin, whether inside or outside of the church, with sensitivity and with understanding, and make sure that we do not add to their victimization and to their sin by heaping more upon them. But secondly, we must point them to the reality of God's forgiving grace. That it's not a matter of simply overcoming this on your own, but you need the grace of God and a real relationship with Jesus Christ in order to deal with these realities.

And then thirdly, we need to call people to a new obedience to the will of God. God's grace not only offers forgiveness, but God's grace transforms lives. And for this woman, Jesus offers her not simply a kind of setting free to do whatever she wants, not just a kind of grace of forgiveness so that she can now go on and live as if she had never met Jesus, as if in fact she could go on and go back to her former life, but she's now been set free to live with this transforming moment ever shaping her life, this encounter with Jesus.

And surely, in our culture, as we deal with people day in and day out, these three principles ought to shape our understandings, our attitudes, our actions, our judgments. Anything less, anything less falls short of the principles of Jesus. Well, what do you make of this story tonight? Jesus, in fact, may this evening be calling you to a new life of obedience.

He may be calling you to repent of your judgmental attitude in judging others for self-serving purposes. You may find that in this story you identify most with the religious leaders, and you need to hear a word of grace and forgiveness as you repent of that sin. Or, Jesus may be calling you to leave a life of sexual sin, like the woman caught in adultery.

I can't help but think that even in a congregation like this, this evening, knowing the culture in which we live, knowing the realities which confront us day in and day out, that there are some of you here this night who are struggling with sexual sin. Tonight, Jesus offers you forgiveness if you will come, and he will set you free to transform your life. You see, whatever your situation tonight, beyond the condemnation is the reality of God's forgiving and transforming grace.

You know, as I was thinking about it this week, this story is one of the real miracle stories of the Gospel of John. We think about Jesus turning water into wine. We think about Jesus walking on water.

We think about Jesus feeding 5,000. We think about Jesus healing a lame little boy. All of these things we've already seen in John's Gospel to this point, but this, my friends, is a miracle.

This is a real miracle. None of these miracles, nor all of them together, compares with the glorious miracle that Jesus said to this woman, neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin.

Do you hear that word tonight? Do you hear that word in your own life and in your own heart? Let us pray. Lord, these are challenging words and, in fact, hard words. And I pray this evening for all of us in this place, whatever our struggles, whatever our situation, you know our hearts tonight.

Father, some of us need to repent, perhaps, of the sin of the religious leaders, where we've not only been too judgmental of others, but in fact we have tried to use judgment of others somehow to aggrandize ourselves. Oh God, forgive us. Forgive us for the manipulations and the motives that so easily, so easily infect our lives and help us, oh God, to see clearly with the eyes of Jesus.

Lord, some of us tonight may be struggling with the reality of sexual sin. We pray, oh God, that we might know not only your forgiveness as we come and as we repent, but also that we might know the assurance of your Word that you send us forth, not with condemnation, but with a direct command to a new obedience in the name of God. Lord, minister to our hearts tonight, we pray in the name of Jesus.

Amen.

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