

The Condemned Woman

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Preacher: Emma Amyes

[0:00] Just before I start this morning, Anne and Kim are going to hand round stones. I'd like to encourage each one of you to take a stone.

And don't worry, I'm not going to invite a stoning session at some point this morning. Please don't be alarmed, although you might feel you want to stone me after I've preached, I don't know.

Anyway, all will be revealed. I just encourage you to take one and to hold it and feel its weight in your hand. And as I preach, as I say, all will be revealed.

While Kim and Anne are doing that, I'll just pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you and praise you for your word.

And we thank you for the many encounters that took place between you and people that are portrayed for us in your words.

[1:10] And we think particularly this morning of the dear, condemned, sinful woman. And Lord, I pray that you would pour out your spirit upon us and speak to each one of us as we think about this passage, as we look into it.

May we learn more about you and our relationship with you and with each other. In Jesus' name, amen.

So I'll just make a start while Kim and Anne continue. So Jesus is in the temple teaching. Let's just try and picture it.

The crowd is overflowing, drawn to this man who amazingly turns water into wine. He feeds 5,000 and he heals the sick.

He's the talk of Jerusalem. But not everyone is thrilled. Enter the Pharisees and the scribes. They're not there to listen or learn.

[2:26] They're there to trap Jesus. They burst onto the scene, dragging a woman caught in adultery. Now, the first question is, where is the man?

The law in Leviticus and Deuteronomy requires both parties to be brought forward. But he's noticeably absent. But of course, the Pharisees aren't really interested in justice.

They're using this woman as a pawn to corner Jesus. It's dehumanizing and wrong to use someone's pain for your own agenda.

And we see it all the time. In politics, in the media, social circles, places of work, everywhere.

Imagine, for a moment, the woman's terror.

She's been dragged from a private moment into public shame. Every eye is on her. What must that feel like? How did they catch her?

[3:31] They must have been peeping in windows instead of feeding the poor or helping widows. Instead of addressing the oppression of their people, they were more concerned with who was in whose bed.

Too often, we as Christians act like the Pharisees, more focused on judging personal lives than doing God's work of justice and compassion.

So who is this woman? Last week, Mike talked to us about a man who was little, loaded and loathed. And he was called Zacchaeus.

After meeting Jesus, he turned his life around. Now, we don't know the height of our woman. We don't know how much wealth she had. And we don't know if people hated her.

We're not even told her name. But we know that with the Pharisees making her sin public, she would have been embarrassed, humiliated and ashamed.

[4:34] The Pharisees throw the woman before Jesus, demanding, what do you say? The law says to stone her. They think they've trapped him.

If he condemns her, he loses the crowd's favour. If he shows mercy, they can accuse him of breaking the law. But Jesus doesn't take the bait. Instead, he stoops and writes in the dirt. And scholars have debated for centuries about what he actually wrote. Maybe he was listing the sins of the Pharisees. Maybe he was just doodling to disengage from their antics. Personally, I like to think he wrote, Where's the man? Whatever he wrote, it made them squirm. And then they press him again. And he stands and delivers that famous, well-known line. Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone. [5 : 40] Imagine the tension in that moment. Stones are gripped even tighter. The crowd is silent. And then one by one, the stones thud to the ground.

We have self-righteousness versus righteousness. Self-righteousness separates us from others, while righteousness connects us to God and each other. The Pharisees embodied self-righteousness, using their scriptures as binoculars to scrutinise others, rather than as a mirror to reflect on themselves. As Walter Brueggemann puts it, The word of God is a mirror, not a magnifying glass. To read the Bible as a mirror is to place ourselves in the story. For example, one day when I was reading Matthew chapter 26, when Jesus announces, One of you who breaks bread with me will betray me. [6 : 43] From a window approach, looking in, I feel safe. I know exactly who Jesus means. It's Judas. But the mirror approach places me at that table.

I can smell the fresh bread and the scent of the wine. I'm looking around at the disciples, and suddenly I'm part of the story. I'm no longer detached, thinking someone else has failed. Instead, I'm asking, I wonder if it's me, have I failed? Now, the focus isn't about our shortcomings, but about the abundant grace of God. Imagine this in John chapter 8. You're standing there with your stone in your hands, which you've got to help you imagine. The woman is on the ground, humiliated and scared. You feel the rough surface of the stone in your palm, its weight, familiar and heavy. Jesus looks at you. [7 : 47] His eyes meet yours, and you can't tell whether they're filled with sadness or understanding. What does he see? What does he know about the weight of the stone that you're carrying?

The shift is profound. Rather than putting others on trial, the mirror approach makes us all active participants. It challenges us to see ourselves as the Pharisees, holding stones in our hands. It makes us ask, where am I clinging to judgment instead of offering grace? When the Pharisees slink away, Jesus turns to the woman, where are your accusers? Has no one condemned you? She replies, no one, Lord. And Jesus says, neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more. This moment is transformative, both for the woman and for us. It reminds me of Les Misérables, when Jean Valjean steals silver from a bishop, and instead of condemning him, the bishop gives him more. [9 : 05] That single act of grace changes Valjean's life forever. Grace has that power to restore and transform. Jesus doesn't ignore the woman's sin, but he offers her a new path forward.

He sees her not as a sinner to condemn, but as a person to restore. And God sees each and every one of us here this morning as people to restore. God's in the restoration business. We can see that throughout the Bible. It says in Joel chapter 2, verse 25, I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten. God doesn't just restore, he redeems. I wonder how the woman's life turned out after this encounter. Her life now free of guilt, condemnation, and shame. Jesus had set her free and restored her. She walks away accepted, loved, and forgiven. Grace has won the day. [10 : 16] Think about how grace transforms our own lives. Maybe there was a time when someone forgave you when you didn't deserve it. Or maybe you've seen the healing that comes when you choose to forgive.

Grace doesn't erase what happened, but it opens the door to what can be. So what stones are we holding?

Maybe it's a grudge against someone who wronged you. Maybe it's judgment against someone whose choices you don't really agree with. Maybe it's a hurt you can't seem to let go of. Whatever it is, that stone is heavy. It's weighing you down. You can feel the weight of it in your hand. Imagine it carrying every grudge, every judgment, every hurt you've struggled to release. Forgiveness is a process, and healing can take time sometimes. And that's okay. In a moment, I'm going to invite you to come forward and lay your stone at the foot of the cross, the place where it needs to be left.

[11 : 33] If you would like to, this can be your act of letting go of grudges, judgments, failings, hurts, or pain.

Or if you'd rather take it home, please do. Let it remind you of this wonderful encounter of Jesus and the woman and his call to grace and growth.

As you lay your stone down, think about what it represents for you. Picture it, feel its weight, and let it go.

The stones we carry don't just hurt ourselves, hurt others, they hurt us. Their weight drags us down, and Jesus invites us to put them down, to lay aside judgment and embrace grace.

That's his invitation, to trade judgment for joy, condemnation for compassion, and burdens for blessing. What might your relationships look like without the weight of judgment?

[12 : 43] How might your heart feel without the burden of grudges? Jesus shows us a path forward. He says to each one of us this morning, neither do I condemn you.

Go and sin no more. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your amazing love, your wonderful grace, and your power to restore, transform, and redeem.

Thank you, Lord, that like the woman, we can hear Jesus Christ say to us, neither do I condemn you.

Please fill us with your Holy Spirit afresh, and give us the resolve to accept your forgiveness, and heed your call to go and sin no more.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.