

The man for guilty people

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Date: 01 December 2018

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[0 : 00] So in our world of 24-hour news coverage, there's a psychosocial phenomenon which researchers identify and study called moral outrage.

And it's everywhere, especially on social media platforms. So moral outrage is a venting of anger, a display of anger against a third party on the social media platform for some perceived wrong.

And let me tell you, I mean, you're probably in social media more than I am, but it is usually vicious.

And as I say, it's everywhere. And so, for instance, when moral outrage spews out against a large clothing manufacturing corporation protesting sweatshop environments in third world country and exploitation of workers, then it's vehement and appears as if it's motivated by concerns for justice. But research by social psychologists have shown that in spite of an appearance of justice, moral outrage is more often than not driven by self-interest.

That's a quite interesting thing, isn't it? Now, how does that work? Well, research shows that there's a connection between a person's venging or moral outrage and a sense of guilt.

[1 : 48] A person wants to prove that they're a good person in moral outrage, according to the research. And so it works like this.

When self-image is challenged, then the natural tendency for a person is to act to restore that self-image and point of security. And then add into that, says the research, since justice is often reduced to a personal feeling of what is right, moral outrage then becomes a tool by which people alleviate feelings of personal guilt.

And so it works again like that. A person buys and enjoys the cheap fashion produced by sweatshops in third world countries. They have a sense of guilt about doing so.

And they alleviate their guilt, according to the research, by spewing forth at the corporations who are perceived to be guilty of producing this stuff.

And the interesting trick of it is that they appear to be concerned for justice without actually addressing their own actions or undoing their own actions.

[3 : 10] They can present one way in social media while living quite differently in practice. Outrage against these cheap, exploitative fashions, but spending much time in the shops buying the things.

Now that same principle appears in a religious context. And moral outrage in a religious context, I believe, presents as self-righteousness.

The desire of a person to show that they are good by punishing harshly a third party rather than confronting, undoing, or changing their own behaviors and beliefs.

And that's what takes us into these verses this morning. The self-serving moral outrage of the Jewish religious leaders opens these verses. Now, if the story had been original to John's record, then I don't think he could have got a better story to fit.

So I actually think it does fit the flow of John's writings, personally. A crowd has gathered to hear Jesus teach. And, if you were looking at it as an original thing, just the day before, the Jewish religious leaders had gone out of their way to try and intimidate the crowd to turn against Jesus.

[4 : 40] But here they are, you know, if it was original, the very next day, gathering to hear Jesus. Then the religious leaders turn up and create a terrible scene.

They drag a poor woman before the crowd and they make her stand there in public. That of itself, in the culture of the day, was a shameful thing to do.

But it gets worse. Because, clearly, these leaders were determined to shame, humiliate, and ultimately kill this poor woman. It's a sordid story.

Now, what do we know? Well, we know from the story that her guilt was beyond doubt. She had actually been caught, as it says here, it's very graphic, so forgive me, but the text says it. She had actually been caught in the very act of sexual intercourse.

Since it was early in the morning, perhaps she had been caught just minutes earlier and dragged from that bed, disheveled and made to stand publicly in front of this crowd.

[5 : 55] With witnesses ever so eager to expose her guilt and see her condemned and see her killed. And so, from there, the woman's now positioned.

And the leaders attempt to force Jesus to pass the harshest judgment on this woman. They want Jesus to sanction, stoning her to death.

And they appealed to the law of Moses as the ultimate authority on matters of life and death. Now, here's the go.

The story thus far. These guys, in their moral outrage, present as guardians of justice and righteousness and holiness. But secretly, their moral outrage was directed at Jesus.

We're told there in the text that they wanted to test. And the word test is a very specific word. It means tempt or trip up into some criminal action. Jesus. And so we see their real heart's intention.

[7 : 06] Quite different from the surface presentation. They wanted to see Jesus shamed and killed. More so even than they wanted to see this woman shamed and killed.

And they're pretty clever in the way they approached it. Because, you see, if Jesus refuses to uphold the law of Moses, then he himself would be publicly shamed and rejected as a lawbreaker. That's a clever move.

But it's the horns of a dilemma. Because if he actually insists on the woman being stoned to death, then most likely, at least this is what they've been betting, that he would have appeared heartless and ruthless.

And perhaps then lost public support from the crowd for that very heartlessness. And then even again, there's a third possibility. Because the Jewish, the Roman authorities under occupation said that only they could sanction the issuing of a death penalty.

So perhaps there are even the thought that if they could get Jesus to sanction the stoning of this woman, then they could actually take Jesus to the Roman authorities and get him into trouble there and possibly get them to deal with Jesus.

[8 : 19] The point is that their outrage was so great at Jesus. Why? Because he had challenged their theology or their ideology of religion.

They wanted him dead. And they cared little, whether it was the crowd that lynched him or the Roman authorities. Now friends, I want to suggest this morning, and there's going to be a play on this idea of temple abuse, I want to suggest that this is a case of horrible temple abuse that we're seeing in the story at this point.

Remember, part of the story, and I think it's a significant part of the story, verse 2, He came again to the temple. All of this has just been playing out in the temple courts. Now why is that significant?

Well, I think it all has the hallmarks of a setup for a start. So the law very clearly and specifically said that the man caught in adultery was equally culpable as the woman.

So the question arises, why was he not dragged before the crowd? The law was clear that witnesses had to actually see the couple engaging in sexual intercourse.

[9 : 46] No good witnesses saying, well, I think she's up to no good. They actually had to see her in a compromising, or see the party in a compromising position. So the question then arises, well, how did enough witnesses happen to see this woman and her partner in the act so early in the morning all at the same time?

It smacks of some sort of setup, doesn't it? But it gets worse. When you think about the temple and what the temple represents, the context in which this is unfolding, the temple was the place where God's people came to receive God's grace, his compassion and mercy, his forgiveness, and ultimately restoration of relationship with God as sinful people.

Then you have the scribes and the Pharisees, the Sanhedrin, the Jewish religious leaders. They are actually the formal enforcers of God's purposes among God's covenant people, especially through the temple.

So their job, as it were, or part of their job at least, was to mediate God's grace to God's sinful people, bringing the two together so that forgiveness, acceptance, and relationship with God and life might continue.

But the reality for this woman is that she was dragged to the temple for shame, humiliation, and ultimately death.

[11 : 29] Do you see the contrast, the jarring that's happening there? The prospect of a painful, slow death in the courts of the temple.

And so I say, those who dragged her there were temple abusers because they actually hated Jesus more than they hated sin. So the context of the temple was just a guise for their own agenda.

Their moral outrage was not shaped by God's character, less was it shaped by God's word. It was shaped by self-interest. And this poor woman was just a means to their own ends.

And the brutality and the tragedy of this story just becomes sickening. Defending their performance-based religion against the challenge of Jesus meant that they had come to lose any sense of grace, any sense of mercy, any sense indeed of personal holiness before God.

The result was these men presented as harsh, unloving, graceless men who in fact, while they presented as honouring God, were actually dishonouring God.

[12 : 54] And friends, I want to suggest to you this morning, that's always the way with self-righteousness. Self-righteous people. Because self-righteousness is in fact self-salvation.

And so these men, following on the theme from John that we've been looking at over the last weeks, these men have no thirst or hunger for Jesus. Why?

Because they know their thirst or hunger even for God's grace. Why? Because they've already satisfied their hunger and thirst in themselves through their religious actions.

And that has been so satisfying to them that they'll protect it at all costs, even at point of orchestrating murder and exploiting this poor woman.

Abusing this poor woman. And so what you have here is a picture of self-righteousness. And it's still with us to this day.

[13 : 59] And it's still in churches to this day. Where you have people who in the name of Christ or in the name of God pursue good things, holiness and justice.

But they do it in a way that's harsh and unloving and graceless and merciless. good things gone bad.

Now I want to suggest in stark contrast then we see the moral outrage of Jesus. And the moral outrage of Jesus interestingly and perhaps even surprisingly is directed entirely at the Jewish leaders and not this poor woman at all.

So the story goes that Jesus in response to their pressure to get them to pronounce death sentence on this woman Jesus just puts his head down writing something in the dirt but essentially silent.

And they're getting more and more annoyed by the minute. We're not told how long Jesus did that but certainly we're given the impression in the story here that they were seriously annoyed. They were wanting to get this whole shabby thing over with.

[15 : 27] When he finally speaks it is the religious leaders he pronounces verdict on not the woman. He exposes the self-righteous to shame and humiliation.

I think it's not too much to say I've pondered this this week so if you think it's over the top well then forgive me for this but I think it's right. I think it's not too much to say that Jesus through this story shows himself to hate the sin of self-righteousness in these men even more than the sin of adultery in that woman.

At least the woman we get sense from the story at least the woman had a sense of her sin and her shame before God. She was in touch with herself.

The Jewish religious leaders by contrast apparently had no awareness of their sin no awareness of themselves until Jesus forces them to confront the truth about themselves and he does.

They were concerned primarily for their own agenda their own reputation and they thought they were doing something really good. The problem is they weren't concerned for God's honour at any point in this.

[16 : 56] They were supposed to care for God's people they were supposed to point God's people in their sinfulness back to truth and righteousness but they showed no concern or compassion for the spiritual plight of this woman in her shame and in her misery and they offered her no comfort and no hope.

And when you dig down into it then you see failure at a different level hypocrisy at a different level because these guys even though they appealed to the law of Moses were only selectively applying the law of Moses themselves.

So for instance the woman by definition would have been declared unclean because of her adultery. For them to associate being in the same area or touch this woman would then have made

them unclean.

Either way neither party should have been in the temple. But that seems to go unnoticed. Then again as I've hinted at it before the law demanded death for murderers as well as adultery.

If you go back to Leviticus and Numbers and look where these laws are spelled out every time there's sexual immorality and murder intentional sins they're put together and death penalty is suitable for each for both.

[18 : 30] And yet we have these guys here demanding the death of this woman while failing to say that their own murderous intentions towards Jesus equally deserve death.

And then again if you dig back into Leviticus and Numbers you will see that this notion of accusing somebody of a capital crime and that is a crime punishable by death had very very strict and clear quality control standards in respect of witnesses.

So the scripture is very very clear that the witness not that they can ever be perfect it's not as if Jesus is saying you can only be involved in this process if you've never ever sinned in any way. That's not what he's saying. The clear evidence of the law is that the witnesses must not in any way have connived in the sin that they're bringing to the court for justice.

In other words there's no possibility of a set up a mixed motive a mixed agenda. You can't use a person for your own ends.

[19 : 44] Further the person the witness must have been active must have been able to show the courts that they had been active in trying to prevent the sin and trying to redirect the person involved in the sin into paths of righteousness and truth.

In other words they can't just grab somebody and bring them before the courts as a first resort that should only be a last resort due to the intransigence of a sinner.

And then thirdly witnesses had to initiate the stoning and the reason why that is because they had to be convinced in themselves that there was no other option for dealing with this situation than to kill this person.

So whatever Jesus was writing in the dirt and we don't know what it was or whether he's just drawing cartoon figures out we don't know but when he speaks his words bringing all this to bear let him who is without sin cast the first stone.

That's sweeping all this stuff up and they would have known this. And so Jesus exposes their own shame because clearly these men clearly these men were not concerned to obey the law of Moses properly and Jesus exposes them in their hypocrisy as ruthlessly as they sought to expose this woman.

[21 : 22] And again as they had treated this woman so miserably Jesus shows them no compassion he offers them no grace rather he forces them to leave in shame and humiliation before the crowd.

And again friends I want you to see how Jesus does that so well and so repeatedly in his ministry. He reverses the roles. The one who comes in self-righteousness determined to inflict shame and humiliation on another is exposed by Jesus and retreats in shame and humiliation before Jesus. Pretty powerful picture I think. And so we ought not to be surprised at that because an unwillingness to judge yourselves according to the laws of scripture actually reduces our authority to judge others.

And then perhaps most surprisingly of all Jesus moves this woman from shame towards honor dignity and life. The contrast and the treatment of this woman could not be clear.

Verse 9 the words there say that the Jewish religious leaders they just went away the word there is abandon they just abandoned her they left her standing in front of the crowd in her shame and humiliation and misery they just walked away and there she was just standing so awful when she was no longer useful to their scheme they just abandoned her well Jesus doesn't abandon her such a warm lovely response from Jesus in fact though she is guilty as charge and Jesus doesn't move away from that she is guilty as charged and unclean because of her sin and has brought God's name into disrepute of one of God's special people though all of that's true for her and Jesus knew all that was true for her he speaks to her with compassion and offers her a fresh start a new hope for a new life now it's really important to understand how this works this is not a general acquittal or a declaration of not guilty by Jesus even though he alone was the one who was without sin and even though he therefore would have been the one who either had the authority to condemn or acquit but I don't think that's what's happening here he does not condone her sin and in fact pushes her towards genuine repentance and turning away from the sin so I think it works like this in

summary

[24 : 23] Jesus saying to this woman I'm extending you mercy and grace and that means henceforth responding to God's mercy and grace by living a life henceforth to God's glory mercy from God must result in a life lived to God and for God and perhaps my friends again perhaps that's why these verses are here because they form a book end with a story back from chapter 4 about the women of Samaria similar sort of situation they illustrate the teaching about Jesus being the bread of life the hunger satisfier and the thirst quencher she illustrates that Jesus will satisfy these deep longings she has been chasing in the so-called danger and excitement of illicit sex and we've got to understand at this point that she would have been a willing partner in that adultery so she was looking for something other than her husband she was looking for as I say the excitement or something satisfying she was looking for and Jesus is saying no no no

I'm recognizing your hunger and your thirst but you're looking for it in all the wrong places I'm giving you a chance to point you to me but once again you see that involves more temple abuse so here's where the play and the idea of temple abuse comes in the Old Testament law and temple if you go back and read through Leviticus and Numbers the Old Testament law had no recourse for the intentional sin of murder or adultery there's no sacrifice offered to sort things out with God the only option a person in that situation has is to throw themselves directly on God's mercy and grace for forgiveness forgiveness and this is exactly what Jesus knows and exactly what he points this woman to ultimately the temple always pointed God's people to

God's grace in forgiveness and new relationship the Pharisees sadly had come to see it as a place of condemnation and that's all they could see it because of their position of self-righteousness but here's the play because Jesus has already identified himself earlier in the ministry as the true temple the new temple so the new reality for this guilty woman was that the true temple pushed her to experience and know new satisfaction new grace but it wasn't about trying harder in real performance based religion it was not about what she could or would ever do it was on the basis of what he could and would do for her in his death as the true temple so ironically as we unpack this story I believe that Jesus knew that someone would die as a result of this incident the leaders wanted the woman to die but Jesus knows it will be him who will die he knows he will be condemned to death for her sin while she is freed into life and so it works like this

Jesus is able to move her towards life because he was actually in Jerusalem precisely moving himself towards death what a contrast with the self righteous leaders convincing themselves that they are good enough by punishing others whom they deem to be wicked but Jesus is preparing to be considered bad himself to be considered a criminal himself to make guilty sinners like this woman look good in the eyes of God his moral outrage is completely different she is a sinner but Jesus the true temple has not come to condemn guilty people like her he came to deliver he came to save them he came to make them acceptable to God and reconnect them into the life of God's rich blessing the life we all long for so ladies can I have a special moment of your time to make this application to you guys this morning generic guys

I would suggest to you this morning that Jesus ought to be the darling the absolute darling of the hashtag me too community he's the truly caring man that every woman hungers and thirsts for he understands this woman's deep longings he cares for women this woman in particular he speaks the truth to you in love as he did to this woman he points you to true life and points you away from a life of false intimacy false satisfaction false thirst quenching so we find ourselves living today in an epidemic of domestic abuse an epidemic of adultery as both men and women seek to satisfy their thirst and their hunger in one another or in sex outside of marriage but the real solution can only be new relationship and life in Jesus but you know it's sad isn't it that our society would rather look for the answer in legislation we've got to have legislation to stop these things or we'll have the hashtag me too we'll create a shaming culture to deal with these things rather than looking at a renewing culture of honouring in an overflow response of being renewed and honoured by God this woman in pursuing adultery was looking for validation satisfaction intimacy fulfilment happiness but she ended up broken isolated scorned and shamed in other words this woman was chasing the life chasing life as she thought it to be but she found death in the midst of that life the final reality as the story ends is that in the presence of

[31 : 51] Jesus she had the opportunity to find life in the midst of death let me pray lord help us not to trip up on some of the textual problems of this passage help us to see just the warmth and compassion of the lord Jesus Christ help us help us lord to find in ourselves those elements of self

righteousness self salvation and root them out so we might truly be people who are shaped by you and your character and your word and that we in turn lord might be people of grace who can extend grace in truth and love amen amen to who stood out he sorry to to you a can go m