

Jesus and The Pharisees

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[0 : 00] Shall we now study God's Word? And if you'd like to have your Bibles open at John chapter 8, verses 1 to 11.

And that's on page 1077-78. The sermon will be in three parts.

The first part will be to understand what is actually going on here. What's actually going on in this passage? The second part will be to try to understand what did Jesus write?

What did he write on the ground? It's the only record we've got in Scripture of Jesus writing. So what did he write on the ground? And the third part will be to ask, what does this mean for us now? Because all Scripture's application, since it's living Word, it is application even for us now at this time in history. So three parts. To work out what's going on here.

[1 : 12] Secondly, to ask, what did Jesus write? And thirdly, what does it mean for us now? Now, each of the sections will be different lengths, and they'll get steadily shorter and shorter.

So the first bit will be the longest. So let's begin. What is actually going on here? The scene opens with Jesus sitting, as rabbis do, teaching.

Whenever rabbis had their disciples around them, or those who wanted to hear their teaching, the rabbis sat to teach. But a very ugly scene develops.

In the midst of all of this, the scribes and the Pharisees bring in a woman who's under an accusation of adultery. They drag her in, and they interrupt this very placid scene of teaching.

And they want Jesus, they want Jesus to act as the judge over this woman. We have to realize the seriousness of what's going on here.

[2 : 20] They didn't have to come to Jesus. They didn't have to bring this woman to Jesus. They could have just taken her, probably outside the city walls, and they would have then stoned her to death.

So if we work out how long that would have taken, with the haste they were in, this woman was going to be dead within 30 minutes of what we've read here.

These people were in a hurry. But having caught this woman, they thought, ah, let's use this woman. She doesn't matter. She doesn't count for anything.

But let's use her as a trap. Let's use her as bait to trap Jesus. So they've set a trap. And we need to understand what the trap is.

There are two parts to the trap. It all comes down to how the Old Testament law should be interpreted. But they're going to use that in quite a deceitful way.

[3 : 20] The challenge to Jesus, if he's going to be a judge, is to say either this woman deserves death or she doesn't.

Now, if he says, yes, she deserves death, what the Pharisees and the scribes were going to do was say, well, actually, you're not allowed to say that.

Because our country is occupied by the Romans. And the death penalty can only be pronounced by the Romans.

And if you think about it, what that means is they were going to say that Jesus was usurping Roman authority. And when you fast forward things to Jesus' trial before Pilate, that's the very accusation they brought against Jesus.

The very accusation. They said, this man claims to be a king. But we have only one king, and that's Caesar. And so here you can see the beginnings of the trap, of the charge that they were going to bring against Jesus.

[4 : 31] That he was usurping Roman authority. And then they were going to get the Romans to kill Jesus. So that's the first part of the trap that we read about here. The second part of the trap is that if Jesus said, no, she does not deserve death.

This woman does not deserve death. Then the Pharisees and the scribes would say to the people who were idolizing Jesus, they would say, this man fails to uphold the law of Moses.

How can he be the prophet? How can he be the Christ? How can he be any of these persons that you are discussing that he might be? How can he be the prophet?

How can he be the prophet? And that stops things dead. The trap hasn't worked. And the woman also lives. This phrase, let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her, is the turning point in the whole thing.

But how are we to understand it? Let's go a bit deeper into this to understand what's going on here. If we go back to who brought the challenge.

[6 : 17] The challenge to Jesus is from the scribes and the Pharisees. And if we work out who they were at that time in history. They were the holy and religious people of their day.

The Pharisees. The Pharisees. In modern terms, we would call them the Puritans. They stood for holiness in life. They stood for purity in religion.

The scribes. The Greek behind this says Torah teachers. Which means the teachers of the law. So these were the people who knew the Old Testament law inside out.

These were the people who taught others God's ways. So both of these groups, we would assume, should have been good people.

These should have been the best people that this society could produce. So remember that. These should have been the good people. The next thing we have to examine.

[7 : 23] Is what does the Old Testament law actually say on adultery? Now, what I'd say here is the English word that we have translated here, adultery.

Has been, for the last 500 years, in English translations, toned down. Again, the Hebrew of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New is much more expressive and much more vivid.

But in English, we've deliberately toned it down. Now, since there are young years here and tender hearts, I won't go into what adultery is.

All I would say is this. It takes two to commit adultery. A man and a woman who are not married to each other. Enough said.

But it takes two. And if we go back in the Old Testament law, and you can check this for yourselves later, here are some things to remember. Leviticus chapter 20, verse 10.

[8 : 22] So Leviticus 20, 10. Or here's an easier one to remember. Deuteronomy chapter 22, verse 22. So Deuteronomy 22, 22.

But I'll tell you what basically it says. It says both parties to the wickedness of adultery should die. Both parties. So that's what the Old Testament law actually says. Now, if we compare it to the event here, we can actually work out that both parties to the adultery had actually been caught.

And it's because the Pharisees and the scribes say, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery.

So that means if she was caught in the act, it meant the man had been caught as well. The man had been caught as well. But only one of those has been brought to judgment here.

[9 : 22] And the question that runs right through this for Jesus is, where's the man? Where is he? You brought the woman, but where's the man?

The implication is, they'd allowed him to get away, scot-free. They let him go. And as has happened all through history, with these sorts of offenses, a woman always pays a far higher price than a man does.

You wonder what their thinking was. Maybe they knew the man. Maybe they thought, oh, well, he's young, and it's a bad mistake he's made, but we should really let him off.

He's got great prospects. He'll do really well. But the woman, she counts for nothing. She can face the full wrath for this crime herself.

In fact, in the way they say this woman was caught in the act of adultery, what the Greek actually says is, she was caught in the very act.

[10 : 31] And there's almost a glee in the way they say it. A glee that 2,000 years on, we can still hear. It's almost like a tabloid journalist saying this.

There is a glee in saying, we caught her in the act. But in doing that, they'd given the game away. They'd caught the man as well. But where's the man?

Where's the man? And that means for them to quote the law of Moses and bring this woman and demand that Jesus act as judge was inherently deceitful and sinful and wicked.

They were committing an awful sin. On the one hand, by using the Old Testament law to arrange for someone to be killed and let someone else go.

And also, in using the Old Testament law wickedly to try to trap Jesus, this was a complete misuse of the Old Testament law.

[11 : 47] Now remember, in the previous chapter, we'd read about the Pharisees criticizing the crowd who'd been idolizing Jesus. And what they said was, this crowd that does not know the law is accursed.

They'd said that about others. And here were they who should have known the law inside out. And they were misusing it.

It says the older ones were the first to leave. And you wonder why. Maybe the penny dropped for them first that Jesus had found them out. But we have to remember, though, the person they were up against who they didn't recognize was actually the second person of the Godhead.

And remember, this was God's law. This was his law. He had had a hand in writing it. And in fact, his whole life being God was a full working out of the law.

Some of the older ones, though, might have remembered. Here we are. Jesus, he's in his early 30s. But 20 years earlier, as a boy of 12, he had got lost in Jerusalem.

[13 : 05] Do you remember? When his parents went up to one of the feasts. And after searching for him for three days, they eventually found him in the temple discussing things of the law with the teachers of the law.

And they were amazed at his understanding. And you almost wonder, some of the older ones would look and say, oh no, it's him. We remember him from 20 years ago.

He ran rings around us then with his understanding of the law. And he's doing it again now. They had been found out. All of them.

So, with them knowing that their use of the law was sinful and Jesus knowing it, Jesus then says, let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.

And that is the signal for them to go, to get out of his sight. And he's diffused a very, very ugly scene. A scene that has started so well with him teaching and one where wicked men wanted a woman dead.

[14 : 18] Not just that she would die so that they could accuse Jesus and also cause his own death. Just before we finish this first part of the sermon, and I promise you the next part will be much briefer, there's something to recognize here between Jesus and the woman.

There's a sequence. Notice what Jesus did for this woman. If you just look at the two of them, he saved her from death. He said, go and sin no more.

And she calls him Lord. So he saved her from death. He said, go and sin no more. And she calls him Lord.

Now, was this her journey, her personal journey from sin to salvation? We don't know. The scripture is silent. But we can only guess for someone to have had their life touched by Jesus so powerfully, for someone to have come into contact with Jesus like this, their life could only have been changed for the better.

But we have to leave that between Jesus and her. But what we can say, there's a sequence, if we expand the sequence, it's this.

[15 : 40] Here was a woman found in sin. She's facing death, which is the right punishment for her sin. And she meets Jesus.

And he rescues her from the effect of her sin. He rescues her from death. And she calls him Lord. Now, we'll come back to that at the end of the sermon.

But just remember that. Remember that sequence. Now, that's the end of the first part of the sermon. And the next bits will be much briefer. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. The second part I said would be to try to answer the question, what did Jesus write on the ground?

Here's the only record in scripture of Jesus writing. Commentators, theologians, ordinary people have puzzled for hundreds of years trying to work out what did Jesus write?

[16 : 39] And you'll find all sorts of different answers to what he wrote. What I want to present to you now is just one commentator's opinion. And it's only an opinion. But all I would say is see if this works for you.

We'll follow it through and see if it works. It's all tied up, this commentator says, in the fact that the Pharisees and the scribes presented a challenge to Jesus.

And the challenge was that he act as a judge over this woman. They wanted him to be a judge. and the writing is bound up with the fact that he accepts the challenge.

He says, you want me to be a judge? Okay, I will be a judge. And you've got to notice something here in the sequencing in our passage in John 8.

It's very simple, but if you look, there's a sequence that repeats itself. If you look at Jesus' actions, he writes, he stands, he speaks. Then he does it again.

[17 : 44] He writes, he stands, he speaks. First, he writes, he stands, he speaks, and addresses the scribes and the Pharisees. Then he writes, he stands, he speaks, and addresses the woman.

And what this commentator says is we're probably seeing here some sort of court procedure. Jesus has said, okay, I will be the judge. I'll be the judge on my terms, not yours.

I'll be the judge. And we'll follow court procedure that you understand, which will be, I'll write something, I'll stand, and then I'll speak. So, it's very clear in the ESV.

It's not so clear in other translations, but it's clear here. So, he writes, he stands, he speaks. And the court procedure seems to be this, that after a guilty verdict, and in this case, this woman was guilty beyond all reasonable doubt, witnesses had found her caught in the act of adultery.

After a guilty verdict, what the judge had to do was write down the sentence, he then had to stand up to deliver it, and as he stood, he spoke the sentence.

[19 : 06] And what seems to be happening here is that Jesus does this twice. He pronounces a sentence first against the woman, and then he pronounces a sentence against the, no, he pronounces a sentence first against the scribes and the Pharisees, and then he pronounces a sentence against the woman.

So, the first sentence reads this. He writes on the ground, he stands up, and he reads what he's written, and what he's written is, let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.

Then, he writes on the ground again, he stands up, and he addresses the woman, and what he's written on the ground, he then says, which is, go, and from now on, sin no more.

Now, those might seem like very strange sentences, the scribes and the Pharisees were expecting either death or not to die, but these are very strange sentences, and what really surprised them was when, what the first sentence was against them, but what Jesus has done here is he's tempered justice with mercy.

If he had really sentenced the scribes and the Pharisees to what they deserved, they would not be left alive, and these wicked men, thankfully, we know from the book of Acts that a number of them would have come to faith in Jesus, did come to faith in Jesus.

[20 : 35] They were stopped in their tracks here. Basically, what Jesus spoke was what he'd written on the ground.

What he spoke was what he'd written on the ground. And here's one last intriguing thought.

Do you notice the point at which the scribes and the Pharisees leave is the point where he starts writing again. Do you notice what the first word is of the second bit he writes down?

It's go. It's go. When he wrote the word go, they left. Now that might be because in those days it was only boys who were sent to school, not girls.

Girls were not taught to read. But boys were. And maybe some of them had actually realised what he'd written on the ground was what he'd just said to them. He is without sin among you, cast the first stone at her.

[21 : 35] So this time they were very careful to watch. Oh, oh, he's writing again. What's he writing? And they saw the word go. And they thought, we have to get out of here because they didn't want him to stop.

What if he'd kept writing and this accusation was against them? Curiously, if they'd stayed, what he wrote actually applied to them, which was go and from now on sin no more.

That applied as much to them as it did to the woman. But they were off at high speed. He could have written something much more serious against them. Now that's the end of the second part of the sermon.

And we're now moving on to the third part, which is very brief. What does all this mean for us now at this time in human history? What does it mean for us?

And could I suggest two things? The first is that when we approach the living God and we approach him in Jesus.

[22 : 40] In fact, we approach him, the Trinity, through him as the Holy Spirit. It is that person of God who is amongst us now. And yet, because the three persons of God cannot be separated by meeting with the Holy Spirit in our gathering now, we actually meet with Jesus in our private prayers.

We meet with Jesus through him as the Holy Spirit. And there is something that we're taught here that our motives and our attitudes must be proper.

They must be right. We mustn't come like the scribes and the Pharisees with deceitful motives. We've got to come with honest motives.

In a way, we've got to be like this woman. We've got to come just as we are. We've got to come just as we are with all the badness, all the worry, all the desperation of her life.

We're actually allowed to come like that. And we're allowed to talk to Jesus about these things. And the thing is, do you notice, the one person who was not sent away in disgrace was the woman.

[24 : 01] And he'll do that with us. He will not send us away in disgrace. So as long as we come with honest motives, he'll hear us. The second thing is, I want to go back to that sequence I mentioned that the woman went through.

Remember I said there's something intriguing about the woman's experience as we read this passage. Here was a woman. She was found in sin. She was facing the consequences of her sin. And she met Jesus. And he rescued her from the consequences of her sin. And she calls him Lord. So she's found in sin. She's facing the effects of her sin. She meets with Jesus. She's rescued from the consequences of her sin.

And she calls him Lord. Now that sequence, all of us in this building are somewhere along that sequence. All of us.

[25 : 14] And those who have come to a saving faith in Jesus know that they've got to the point where they can call him Lord. The crucial part in the sequence is you have to meet with Jesus.

And just as I said in the children's address, that's the most important thing you can do in all of your life. Meet with Jesus. Discover the wonderment of what he came to do.

Discover the absolute wonderment of his love for you. Discover the wonderment of his sacrifice which was made for ordinary men and women, boys and girls.

And then accept that for yourself. Realize sin, your own sin, has got a powerful part in that sequence. But leave that at the foot of the cross because that's what he's provided for us as the way that we then come into proper right covenant relationship with the living God.

And we can call Jesus Lord. So work out where you are on that sequence and just make sure you get the step that involves meeting Jesus.

[26 : 41] Amen. And that's the end of the sermon. That's the third part over and therefore the end of the sermon. Shall we stand for a very short prayer?

Amen.