

The Justice and Mercy of God – *John 8:1-11*

Introduction – “*Mercy and truth have met together; Righteousness and peace have kissed. Truth shall spring out of the earth, And righteousness shall look down from heaven*” (Psalm 85:10-11). The justice and the mercy of God through Jesus Christ comprise a glorious balance of the love and holiness of the Triune God. Interpreting this pericope through the lens of all that we know about Jesus is critical in order to avoid erroneous applications. Unbelievers who hate God’s law love to misquote v7, “*Let him who is without sin throw the first stone*” along with Matt 7:1, “*Judge not, lest you be judged.*”

Misinterpretations abound, which is possibly why these verses are not found in the two oldest known copies of the New Testament (4th Century). In that same century, Augustine said that it had been cut out of some manuscripts because men were afraid that this passage would grant women the right to commit adultery without penalty.

The Setup (vv1-6a) – It appears that it is early in the morning after the end of the Feast of Booths. Jesus goes into the temple and again sits down to teach (v2).

“*All the people*” came to Him, and we can make a quick side note. Just as in 3:26, we see that “all” can be used relatively rather than absolutely. This is important to avoid the heresy of Universalism which demands that 12:32 mean that every last person will be drawn to Christ without exception. Rather, “all” in these passages is relative to the entirety of a population or “all without distinction,” “all kinds of,” people of varied age, social standing, and nation (also 1 Tim 2:1-4).

The scribes and Pharisees, having been unable to lay hands on Him earlier, now try to set up a situation to “accuse Him” (v6a).

Let’s introduce the players in this scene. The scribes and Pharisees are not exactly one and the same. The scribes were lawyer-types, Jewish theologians hired to make expert interpretations on the law. The Pharisees were a movement, outwardly committed to conservative religious practice. “*Pharisee*” came from the word meaning “*separated one*” and so they emphasized the holiness and cleanliness practices of the law with passion and zeal. But by the time of Christ, this group had gone to seed and Jesus knows it. Later (probably at the next Passover) He would condemn their hypocrisy along with the scribes (recorded in Matt 23:1-7, 13ff). In addition, there is the crowd that has gathered to hear the teaching of Jesus. And there is a woman, brought before Jesus, whom they claimed they have caught in the very act of adultery (v4).

“In the Very Act” – In order for a person to be charged with adultery, there had to be two or three witnesses to the very act in progress (Deut 17:6, 19:15) and both the man and the woman would be guilty of adultery (Deut 22:22). The fact that they only brought the woman demonstrated that these scribes and Pharisees were not guiltless. Were they hiding someone?

In all of this, the woman is not on trial. Jesus is on trial. It is Jesus whom they want to accuse. If Jesus said the woman should be put to death, the Pharisees would run to the Romans and report Jesus as violating their laws (the Romans would not allow the Jews to perform executions). If Jesus let her go, they would claim He was not upholding the Law of Moses.

Writing on the Ground (v6b, 8) – Jesus responds by stooping down and writing on the ground with His finger. We are not told what He wrote but we are told that He did so to appear “*as though He did not hear.*” Maybe He was writing out the Deut 22:22 requirement of two or three witnesses and so He would not hear the case. Maybe He was writing out Jer 17:13 since they had “*forsaken the LORD, the fountain of living waters.*” Maybe He wrote out “*MENE, MENE, TEKEL*” (Dan 5) for they had been weighed in the balances and found wanting.

True Justice (vv7-9) – Regardless, when they continued to ask Him, He answers their unanswerable question with an unanswerable question of His own. This is not a new requirement of sinless perfection to be a witness in a criminal trial. The law required that the witnesses be the ones to cast the first stones (Deut 17:7). But in this situation those witnesses would be guilty of sin, for they would not have come forward as eyewitnesses with the woman and the man. Behind all of this, these passionate law-keepers represent Israel who has been charged with harlotry by the Lord (Hos 4:12, 5:4) and who would in fact be stoned as a nation by the judgment of God (Matt 23:37-38, 24:1-2).

And while Jesus is true to the Scriptures demands for a criminal case (and adultery was a crime), He was never light on the sin of adultery and fornication. It was Jesus who said that even to lust after a woman was to commit adultery in your heart and to take violent action upon one’s own body to avoid lusting was better than going to hell (Matt 5:27-30). It was Jesus who took the strongest view on the sanctity of the marriage relations (Matt 19:3-6). Know it well: Jesus does not play light with sexual sin (Rev 21:8).

But this whole scene is a setup, a farce. Jesus knows it. There is no guilty male and no individual stepping forward as a witness. They are not interested in keeping the law (remember, they were scrupulous about the details). They were interested in using and abusing this woman to catch Jesus. The accusers hear it and get it. They are convicted by their conscience and leave, beginning with the oldest even to the last (v8).

Jesus and the Woman (vv8b-11a) – Jesus is left alone with the woman (alone from the accusers, but the crowd is still in the midst). She has not protested her innocence and Jesus does not deny their charges. It must have been a tense moment. And it might be at this moment a good thing to see yourself in the story. There. Before Jesus. In your sin. *“Has no one condemned you?”* *“No one...”* you might say – no one except maybe yourself, your own conscience convicting you. But then you might say, *“No one.....Lord.”* We are not told whether or not that was a confession of faith. But you know more clearly today than this woman knew then that *“if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved”* (Rom 10:9-13).

True Mercy (v11b) – *“Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more.”* *“For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved”* (John 3:17). *“There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus...”* (Rom 8:1).

God would soon set forth His Son as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His justice, His righteousness. He would pass over this sin in His forbearance to demonstrate at the cross that He was just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom 3:23-26). True justice. True mercy.

And it is that way to all who call upon Jesus in faith, to all who come before Him standing in their guilt. He takes our sin and proclaims to us, *“no condemnation.”* *“Let the wicked forsake his way, And the unrighteous man his thoughts; Let him return to the LORD, And He will have mercy on him; And to our God, For He will abundantly pardon”* (Isaiah 55:7).

However, do not despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering (Rom 2:4). This is not a story about Jesus not caring about sin. This is a story about Jesus caring about justice. And this is a story about Jesus loving mercy. But mercy is mercy because we are not receiving what we deserve. And we are not receiving what we deserve because God has brought His just punishment down hard upon His Son for us. Therefore, in the power of the Spirit granted to you, *“go and sin no more.”* That is also what mercy does.

Dave Hatcher – May 1, 2022