



Some of you have heard this story before so please forgive the repetition. This happened at my former church not too long after I left. There was a woman in the church who was causing all manner of division and gossip. The elders held a special meeting to meet with her and her husband. The elders allowed others to attend the private meeting so this woman's best friend showed up carrying a backpack and sat quietly as the meeting progressed. After a while the friend could see that the elders were confronting the woman about her sin and it was at that point an emotional breakdown. She took the backpack she had been holding and dumped all of the contents into the middle of the table. It was a pile of stones. She picked one up and while screaming at the top of her lungs repeated Jesus' famous words. *Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.* She was so out of control that her husband had to nearly carry her out of the room.

My first thought when I heard this story was, "Wow, I'm glad I was not there!" This hysterical, angry woman illustrated how this passage is often used. It is used by people in the same way that Matthew 7:1 is used—Judge not let you be judged." It becomes a blanket statement against even the slightest hint of judging the behavior of another person. "How dare you cast judgment on me! What right do you have to judge me?!" This is one of those spiritual trump cards, that when you lay it on the table, everyone expects you to fold and give up. In a general sense, I find that non-Christians use the Matthew 7 verse and Christians use this verse from John 8. But this is most definitely not what Jesus intended.

This passage is not about overlooking all sin. Nor is it about harsh condemnation. Rather it is a beautiful intersection of God's justice and his mercy.

53 They went each to his own house, 8:1 but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. 2 Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them. 3 The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst 4 they said to him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. 5 Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?"

6 This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. 7 And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her." 8 And once more he bent down and wrote on the ground. 9 But when they heard it, they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. 10 Jesus stood up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" 11 She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more."

Before we jump into justice and mercy, I have to deal with the elephant in the room. This passage does not belong in the Bible. This is snot Rich making a joke. Even the most conservative scholars agree that John 7:53-8:11 do not belong in the Bible. So why is it here? You might remember that in John chapter five we discovered that the King James Bible has a verse four but all other Bible do not. Let me briefly review that information.

Textus Receptus
(Earliest = 5th century) { KJV

There are two Greek New testaments upon which we base our English New Testaments. One is the Textus Receptus which is much newer. The earliest manuscripts that make up the TR are from the 5th century and most are from the 9th century and up.¹ Only the KJV is based upon the TR.

Nestle-Aland
(Earliest = 2nd century) { NIV
NASB
ESV
RSV
NLT
HOLMAN
ISV
ALL OTHERS...

The Nestle-Aland Greek version is much older with manuscripts dating back to the 2nd century. And when it comes to the Bible, older is almost always better. As I explained a few months ago, newer manuscripts have extra pieces in them added by scribes over the decades and centuries. John 5:4 was just a single verse but John 7:53-8:11 is an entire

story, and an extremely popular one at that.

So what do we do with passage? Do we skip over it and pretend it is not here? Why do Bible translators remove verses like John 5:4 but leave full passages like this one and the second half of Mark 16? I think translators leave it in for several reasons. The first reason is summarized by New Testament professor Daniel Wallace.

"Much of this beloved story rings true to what else we know of Jesus' life and would almost certainly not have been the kind of account the early church would have invented."²

The second reason is related to the first. This is such a well-known story and people are so used to seeing in their Bibles (because the KJV was practically the only Bible for centuries) that it

would cause more confusion to remove it than to keep it. Third, it is just such a long passage that it would be awkward to put it as a footnote. Fourth—this is just a guess on my part—but I wonder if the translators kept it so as not to lose their readers to the KJV. After all, selling Bibles has always been big business. If all of the other versions removed this beloved story, they may not sell as many Bibles.

So obviously, I am not skipping the passage but I also wanted you to be fully aware of the fact that this story does not belong in the Bible. I do believe that this happened but I don't believe that God intended it to be infallible teaching. Therefore, we can learn from it and appreciate it and love the story, but the only thing I would not do is to build any doctrine from it. Thankfully, as Daniel Wallace said, it is so in character with Jesus' life and ministry anyway, we can trust what it says is true and accurate. I believe that this story did happen but for some reason God did not preserve it in the Scriptures.

If you have read this story you know that the whole thing is nothing but a set up by the religious elite in order to trap Jesus. So that it is clear, John tells us that it was a trap. *6 This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him.* They tried this countless times and like this story, it always backfires on them.

But it was actually a double test. Any good trap seeks to place its victim between a rock a hard place and this is exactly what the Pharisees did here. They thought that they had set the perfect trap. And in so doing, Jesus' answer to their trap teaches us about God's justice and mercy.

1. God's JUSTICE

The one side of the trap was an issue of God's justice. *"Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. 5 Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?"* Notice how they worded the question. They want Jesus to respond to the Law of Moses but they are unwilling to commit themselves, and we'll see why later.

So they are testing Jesus to see if he will uphold the law of Moses, God's revealed law? First of all, let's see what Moses did write about this issue.

Deut. 22:22—If a man is found lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman, and the woman. So you shall purge the evil from Israel.

Lev. 20:10—If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death.

As every preacher points out, the Pharisees were very selective in this trap. They brought the woman even though they knew that both the man and the woman were equally guilty. So the Law of Moses was crystal clear. It does not say that the guilty parties should be stoned but the death penalty was indeed the sentence. The Pharisees were correct about that much.

What we are not told here is that in Jesus' day, only Rome had the authority to execute a person. If Jesus had declared that she should be stoned, he would have been guilty of sedition against the

Roman government. So the law of God and the laws of men were in conflict here. The chief question was, will Jesus uphold God's justice?

Justice is something that everyone wants. Just look at the reactions to the light sentence given to the Stanford swimmer. I won't go into the gory details except to say that no one except the perpetrator himself and his family believe that the judge handed down a just sentence on a horrific crime. There are cries of injustice all over the country and petitions calling for his removal. People are incensed because we all seek justice.

But we always want selective justice, don't we? We want justice for other people but we always want mercy for ourselves. Even the Pharisees were dealing with selective justice in the fact that they did not bring the man before Jesus. That's because they really didn't care about justice at all.

2. God's MERCY

So the one side of the trap had to do with justice and following the Law of Moses but if Jesus called for her execution, he would have violated Roman law. And the other side of the trap had to do with God's mercy. If Jesus said that woman should not be stoned, then the Pharisees would have trapped him as a law-breaker.

So in this one short story we have the intersection of God's justice and God's mercy. The Pharisees had the perfect trap set for their number one enemy. And how did Jesus respond the pressure? He bent down and wrote on the ground with his finger. Even if this story is not supposed to be in the Bible this has Jesus' signature all over it. This is exactly in Jesus' character to do this. The Pharisees created drama but Jesus created the real suspense.

Imagine the frustration on the part of the Pharisees. Who knows how long they had been working on this plan. All of the details had to fall in place just right for this scene to happen. They had to get a man who was willing to go along with the awful scheme. I have no doubt the man was part of it. The Pharisees probably paid him a handsome sum of money and guaranteed him protection. And the adulterous act had to happen at the precise moment when Jesus was going to be close by. I can almost imagine this plan working its way to completion only to have Jesus leave the area before they could drag the woman to him. Maybe they had to run through the motions two or three times with a different victim each time to get the plan to come together. This was a well-planned trap and it had just sprung on Jesus. Except Jesus would not step into the trap. He bent down and wrote on the ground. Whatever else he was doing, he was also causing the Pharisees immense frustration by his slow response.

What *did* Jesus write on the ground? We don't know what Jesus wrote in the dirt. There have been some good guesses though.

Jeremiah 17:13—Those who turn away from you will be written in the dust because they have forsaken the LORD, the spring of living water.

Maybe Jesus was writing the names of her accusers in the dust because Exodus 23:1 says *You shall not join hands with a wicked man to be a malicious witness.*

Whatever we might think that he wrote is pure speculation. It might be helpful. It might be interesting, but it's still nothing but a pure guess on our part. We don't need to speculate about what he wrote on the ground. However, we do know what Jesus said to the crowd. *"Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her."* Also, look at verse nine again. *But when they heard it, they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones, and Jesus was left alone with the woman...*³ The people left when they heard Jesus' words, not because of anything he wrote on the ground.⁴ So don't get caught up in speculating about what Jesus wrote in the dirt. We don't know and it has limited effect on the events of the story.

As we learned, Roman law forbade stoning. The Pharisees could not have legally stoned the woman nor could Jesus have given the order to do so. But more than that, the Law of Moses required at least 2 witnesses to a crime. If there were no witnesses, there could be no stoning.

Deut 19:15—A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established.

Also, the Law required that the witnesses be the first ones to throw a stone at the condemned.

Deut. 13:9—Your hand shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people.

The Pharisees thought they could catch Jesus in the trap of the law of Moses when in reality he caught them in a different trap. If there were no witnesses then there could be no stoning. They tried to use the law to trap Jesus but then he used a different law to trap them. But Jesus didn't just call for witnesses, did he? He called for witnesses who were "without sin."

Now admittedly, here's is where the people who use this passage a club to beat down all of what they think is judgmentalism have a point, at least at face value. If you rip Jesus' words out of their context, then he appears to be saying that only sinless people should ever be able to judge another person. And since we all sin, that means that Jesus has effectively shut down all possibilities of casting judgment on someone. If this were true, then the woman I told you about at the start would have been perfectly justified in her rage against the church elders. Let me explain why that is a horrible interpretation.

1. To say that judgment is not allowed is itself the highest form of judgment.

This story is used as club to beat up people who would make any judgments about any sin—but such a statement is itself the ultimate form of judgment. Because if you say that I have no right to judge you, that judgment is of a higher order than merely judging between right and wrong. Do you see what I mean? Every time you make a decision about the rightness of an action, you are discerning whether it is right or wrong. You look to a standard of moral absolute—the Bible—and discern that one action is right and another is wrong. That is the way Christians are supposed to operate. But if you say that I have no right to judge, you have just judged my right to judge. You have not just said that I was incorrect about my discernment between right and wrong. You have forbidden me to even discern between right and wrong. You have declared that there are no moral absolutes by which to judge any behavior whatsoever. This makes your judgment of a

higher order than my judgment. On the one hand you have forbidden judgment but on the other hand, you have used the highest form of judgment to forbid my judgment. Such people are casting severe judgment on my judgment. Gently point this out to anyone who wants to use this flimsy argument.

2. Jesus admitted that the woman was guilty.

Jesus' final words to the woman were "from now on sin no more." Jesus knew she was a pawn in the Pharisees trap. Behind the scenes she was abused by the religious powers of the day. Nevertheless, she was a willing participant in the act. It was a case of entrapment but she still took the bait.

So then why did Jesus say that he did not condemn her? Jesus did not condemn the woman because all of the witnesses had left. The law of Moses required 2-3 witnesses and those witnesses were required to cast the first stone. But absolutely everyone had left. No witnesses, no conviction. Jesus had perfectly dismantled the Pharisees kangaroo court. In essence, Jesus got the woman off on a technicality even though he knew she was guilty of sin. So publicly he did not condemn her but privately he told her "from now on sin no more."

This was a stunning intersection of mercy and judgment. Jesus showed mercy to the woman who was a pawn of the religious elite. The Pharisees knew they could not legally stone her but still they trapped and abused her. She needed mercy and the way Jesus drove away her accusers is a supreme example of tender mercy. There is no doubt she felt that mercy deeply.

But Jesus did not pretend that she was guiltless. Do not see this story as a blanket condemnation of justice and righteousness. God's standard of righteousness never changes. Adultery is always adultery. But Jesus expertly showed tender mercy while also holding his own righteous standards.

3. The judgment Jesus condemned was final judgment.

What is the difference between a believer calling out the sin of another believer and what the Pharisees wanted to do to this woman? Of course there are many differences but the main one is that the judgment of the Pharisees was to be a final judgment. They were holding actual stones. The plan was to throw them at the woman until she was dead. This was to be a final judgment with no second chances.

Daniel Wallace chimes in again.

"So it is a huge stretch to say that when Jesus says that he who is without sin should cast the first stone he is saying that nobody should reprove someone else for sin. He was talking about severe, final punishment for sin, not merely calling someone a sinner."⁵

But anytime anyone quotes this verse, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her," they are talking about metaphorical stones. No one ever quotes this verse in the context of an actual execution by stoning. As I said before, such people are casting judgment on your judgment. So this is yet another way that Jesus' words are ripped out of their context.

4. The Bible judges, not people.

If we declare that adultery is wrong, we need to remember that we stand upon the authority of God's word. Christians do not create the standard we merely proclaim the standard. Do you have confidence in this standard?

5. Jesus himself made continual judgments against people.

Listen to the list of judgments Jesus pronounced against the Pharisees. He called them fools, blind guides, hypocrites, whitewashed graves, serpents, generation of vipers, an evil and adulterous generation. Furthermore, Jesus pronounced final judgment on anyone who did not believe in him. *Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God* (John 3:18).

6. Jesus taught us to judge others.

In Matthew 7:1 Jesus said "Judge not lest you be judged."

Did you know that this was the start of instructing us how to judge? He goes on to say that we should first get the log out of our own eye before we can see clearly to remove the log from our brother's eye. So Jesus did not forbid judging, he just put careful restriction upon it.

Paul taught us this way in Galatians 6:1. *Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.* Who is commanded to judge here? "You who are spiritual." The spiritual person is not a sinless person but rather someone who has carefully examined their own lives for sinful logs. There are actually three restrictions to confronting sin.

- "You who are spiritual"—Look for the log in your own eye first.
- "restore him in a spirit of gentleness"—How we confront sin is just as important as that we do it.
- "Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted"—After you confront a brother you can tempt you with the same sin.

All of these principles and more are contained within Jesus' portrayal of justice and mercy to the woman. This is not a story about why we should never confront sin but rather the perfect example of how to do it in love—a balance of mercy and justice. And of course the supreme example of justice and mercy is found in the cross. God's justice was poured out on Jesus and we received infinite mercy as a result.

If you are witnessing to someone, a necessary part of presenting the gospel is pointing out their sin. When you do that, it is an act of justice and mercy. If a fellow believer gently confronts you about your sin, that is an example of justice and mercy. All good parenting is an intersection of God's justice and mercy. The cross of Christ continually teaches us how to treat others.

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¹ John 7:53-8:11 does not appear in any Greek manuscripts until the 5th century. <http://www.bible-researcher.com/adult.html>

² <https://danielbwallace.com/2013/06/26/where-is-the-story-of-the-woman-caught-in-adultery-really-from/>

³ I believe that many people left when they realized that even if they did not commit the actual act of adultery (and some no doubt had done so), they were adulterous in their hearts. *You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart* (Matthew 5:27-28).

⁴Interestingly, the KJV has an extra, later addition to verse nine (in bold). “But when they heard it **being convicted by their conscience**, they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him.” This phrase was so late that even the translations based on the Nestle-Aland did not include it! This is another example of an addition that makes logical sense but should not be considered as authoritative and inspired.

⁵ <https://www.sixteensmallstones.org/go-and-sin-no-more-misinterpreting-jesus-and-the-woman-taken-in-adultery/>