

The Only Just Judge

⁵³ And everyone went to his own house. ¹ But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. ² Now early in the morning He came again into the temple, and all the people came to Him; and He sat down and taught them. ³ Then the scribes and Pharisees brought to Him a woman caught in adultery. And when they had set her in the midst, ⁴ they said to Him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in adultery, in the very act. ⁵ Now Moses, in the law, commanded us that such should be stoned. But what do You say?" ⁶ This they said, testing Him, that they might have *something* of which to accuse Him. But Jesus stooped down and wrote on the ground with *His* finger, as though He did not hear. ⁷ So when they continued asking Him, He raised Himself up and said to them, "He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first." ⁸ And again He stooped down and wrote on the ground. ⁹ Then those who heard *it*, being convicted by *their* conscience, went out one by one, beginning with the oldest *even* to the last. And Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst. ¹⁰ When Jesus had raised Himself up and saw no one but the woman, He said to her, "Woman, where are those accusers of yours? Has no one condemned you?" ¹¹ She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said to her, "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more." (John 7:53–8:11)

One of the greatest stories about guilt is Shakespeare's play, *Macbeth*. In it, lady Macbeth, the wife of Macbeth, encourages him to murder the king. He does so, and they become king and queen of Scotland. But steadily, guilt begins to overcome Lady Macbeth. The guilt starts to make her hallucinate, and see blood on her hand, when there is none. Her guilt eventually leads her to suicide, and ends up destroying Macbeth, too. Shakespeare's moral lesson is that you might get away with a deed, but the guilt from the deed will catch up and defeat you.

A huge part of life is people fleeing from guilt. The way people deal with guilt is a massive feature of human behaviour. They are either amusing themselves to death, trying to turn the music up so loud that they can't hear the accusation anymore. Some are medicating themselves so that the voices in their head go away. Some try to bury themselves in more of the thing that made them guilty in the first place, so that their conscience will acclimatise and stop bothering them. Some try to balance out the scales, trying to afflict themselves or do enough good to outweigh their bad.

All of these are wrong strategies. Fleeing guilt doesn't work. Excusing yourself and minimising your guilt doesn't work. Blaming others for your guilt doesn't help, comparing yourself with others whom you think are more guilty doesn't help.

There is only one who can help you with your guilt, and that is the one without guilt: God. God is the only just judge. God the Son is the perfect judge because He is both sinless, but also sympathetic. He is both God and Man. He will neither mercilessly condemn you, nor sentimentally excuse you. Jesus is neither a legalist, nor a libertarian. He doesn't cruelly punish, nor does He lazily give you license.

This is a passage that teaches us about Jesus the Just Judge. Jesus is like Solomon, only perfect. When Solomon was brought hard cases, like two women each claiming to be the mother of a child, Solomon had superior judgement to adjudicate. So Jesus, as John is persuading us, is truly the Christ, because only He judges perfectly.

Some people avoid God, because they think He is a malicious judge. Some people avoid God because they think He will be a permissive judge. But this passage shows us the perfect balance of holiness and mercy, righteousness and grace. Today, if you are tending towards avoiding God, avoiding truth, it may be because of unresolved guilt. If you find yourself despising others because of their sin, or despising them because of their strictness, or their looseness, it may be that you have been listening to the wrong judge. The judge of the world. The judge of Satan the accuser. The judge of your own fallible conscience.

Now before we go much further, there is an elephant in the room I need to briefly deal with. Some of you may have Bibles with some kind of footnote or brackets around this section, and often the

note will say that the verses from 7:53 to 8:11 may not be original. Some of you may have done a bit more reading on this and want some insight. I don't like to talk about the Bible; I want to preach from the Bible, but this is one of the rare moments when I have to say one or two things, because this is the most controversial textual portion of the New Testament, along with the ending of Mark. I take the minority view that this passage is original. Yes, the majority scholarship view is that it is not, but there are some who still hold that the apostle John penned these words and they belong. It's found in over 80% of Greek manuscripts. It's found in a Christian writing dated to the 200s (*Didascalia Apostolorum*). The ancient Bible translator Jerome included it in his translation in 385. Ambrose and Augustine quoted it. It fits the flow of the passage, and without it, there is a real jolt from 7:52 to 8:12. So why the controversy? It's not found in a family of early texts that originate from ancient Alexandria. But there are plausible reasons why it was omitted. In fact, Augustine tells us one of the reasons. He said the passage shocked some people, and they thought it gave permission for people to commit adultery, so he says, "they struck out from their copies of the Gospel this that our Lord did in pardoning the woman taken in adultery: as if He granted leave of sinning, Who said, 'Go, and sin no more!'" There's more we can say, but it is a longer discussion of textual criticism that belongs in the classroom, or over a cup of coffee, and not in the pulpit. So, in summary, I think this passage is original, it is not an addition, the copies that have it missing have an omission.

The scene is Jerusalem. Jesus is in the lion's den. Jerusalem is a hive of Jesus-haters, a swarm of religious rulers that see Jesus as public enemy number 1. But Jesus is here in obedience to the Law of Moses. Every Jewish male was to come up to Jerusalem three times a year: Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. This is the Feast of Tabernacles, which lasts seven days. He came up in secret, but once here, He has gone public. He goes straight to the Temple area, where He can teach large portions of people. Sometimes the safest place is in large crowds. John 7 records plenty of confusion from some of the people interacting with Him, some are Jerusalem dwellers, some are pilgrims, some are the religious rulers. His enemies send the Temple Police to escort Jesus away, but they are stopped in their tracks by the power of His words.

Well, if they can't arrest Him, if they can't discredit Him, if they can't refute Him, they can try to trap Him. They can lay a snare, provide the bait, and lure Jesus in. So we can see this event happen in three phases. Man's condemning trap, Messiah's Convicting test, Messiah's Comforting truth.

I. Man's Condemning Trap

⁵³ And everyone went to his own house. ¹ But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. ² Now early in the morning He came again into the temple, and all the people came to Him; and He sat down and taught them. ³ Then the scribes and Pharisees brought to Him a woman caught in adultery. And when they had set her in the midst, ⁴ they said to Him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in adultery, in the very act. ⁵ Now Moses, in the law, commanded us that such should be stoned. But what do You say?" ⁶ This they said, testing Him, that they might have *something* of which to accuse Him.

The previous day was the last day of the feast, so now everyone went to their own house, instead of sleeping under booths, as was the command for the Feast of Tabernacles. After the previous day's controversy, Jesus heads east to some lodging He was using on the Mount of Olives, and returns the next day to the same spot to teach. Then come the scribes and Pharisees. This is the only time the word *scribes* appears in John, but that makes sense because the scribes were the law-experts and this is a legal test they are about to throw at Jesus.

They interrupt Jesus' teaching, dragging a humiliated woman, who, according to them, was caught in the very act of adultery. They put her in front of Jesus, like exhibit A in a court case. They ask

Jesus, “This woman was caught in adultery. The Law of Moses says she should be stoned. But what do you say?”

Now why are they asking Jesus? If the Law of Moses has already given detailed instructions, why are they asking Jesus? Do they need more information? Are they unsure? Is this the first incident like this? No, we know these are not the reasons. Had they caught a murderer red-handed, would they have taken a detour to find Jesus, place him in front of Jesus and ask Jesus what should be done with the man? No.

All of this smells of a set-up, an engineered event designed to bring about this moment. After all, adultery is not usually a public act, and in order for a crime to be punished, there need to be witnesses, two of them, in fact. Furthermore, where is the man? According to Mosaic Law, both man and woman were to be punished for adultery, but where is he? Was he really so fleet of foot that these witnesses could not capture him?

No, it looks like provision had been made for him to escape. Perhaps he was a paid scoundrel who was supposed to entrap a woman they had some special vindictiveness towards, or some woman they knew would be easy prey.

One can smell reek of dirty tricks, bribery and entrapment all over this. So why are they trying this particular tactic on Jesus? Well, it was already known that Jesus was particularly gracious towards sinners. That's not how his enemies put it. They said that “This Man receives sinners and eats with them.” (Luke 15:2). Sinful women had been at the feet of Jesus washing His feet with tears, and receiving pardon. His enemies probably saw it as impure tolerance, weak permissiveness, giving license to sinners to keep on sinning.

So the trap looked like this. They bring a Mosaicly-verified adulteress to Jesus and demand He render judgement. If He, as they think He will, has pity on her and says she should be set free, they can instantly show everyone that Jesus violates the Law of Moses, and no Messiah could be a Lawbreaker. On the other hand, if He says she should be stoned, He would be guilty of disobeying Roman law, for the power of capital punishment lay with the Roman governor, not with any individual Jew. Either way, they could trap Jesus – a breaker of Mosaic Law or a breaker of Roman Law, a sinner, or a political rebel.

John tells us that they wanted to have something to accuse Him with. This was a trial, an exam, a fitness test. They were not there to get information.

In many ways, false guilt is just like a trap. It is not honest. It either excuses you when you should not be excused, or it tests you cruelly and unfairly when you are already pardoned. False guilt never leads you towards God. It always leads you into yourself, or towards something out there to distract you, or make you feel better.

But some of the most wonderful moments in the Gospels are when God in flesh responds to the traps that they laid for Him. When they thought they had Him on paying tax to Caesar, His answer left them speechless: if Caesar's picture is on it, then it belongs to him, so give it back to him, and keep giving God what belongs to God. Jesus' response to them is one of these moments.

II. Messiah's Convicting Test

But Jesus stooped down and wrote on the ground with *His* finger, as though He did not hear.

⁷ So when they continued asking Him, He raised Himself up and said to them, “He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first.” ⁸ And again He stooped down and wrote on the ground.

Jesus stoops down and writes on the ground. By the way, if this incident were made up, this is the kind of detail that would be missing, or else it would have explained exactly what He wrote. But the fact that it simply tells us that Jesus wrote without telling us what He wrote has all the marks of a genuine eye-witness account, with no fictional elaboration, no symbolic embellishments.

One of the reasons for stooping down, is that He is not going to grant any credibility to this trap. By jumping to their tune, He'd be giving this kangaroo court a kind of respect. But His actions are similar to when He is falsely accused in the court of the Sanhedrin – silence. Why play into the hands of people who don't care what you say and don't believe you anyway?

Of course the speculation as to what Jesus wrote on the ground has been legion. Some say that by writing with His finger, He reminded them of the Ten Commandments written by the finger of God, showing He Himself was the Lawgiver. Others suggested He wrote Exodus 23:1: “Do not help a wicked man by being a malicious witness.” Some say He wrote “Those who depart from Me Shall be written in the earth, Because they have forsaken the LORD, The fountain of living waters.” (Jeremiah 17:13). One suggestion is that He wrote the names of the mistresses that some of the accusers had had. Another has suggested that He wrote what He was about to say, which was the practice of Roman magistrates: to write down the judgement and then pronounce what they had written.

But in reality, if we needed to know what He wrote, the Bible would have told us. We don't know. The important thing is not what He wrote, it is that He wrote. While they were busy clamouring for Jesus to answer their trick question, the Word was calmly stooped down, writing, showing that true words don't jump to the tune of false words. They are harassing and clamouring for justice, Jesus will take His time, and show that true justice is never hustled into an answer, never shoved into making a judgement. He is showing His authority: He does not have to answer them. He is showing His patience, His calmness.

But I imagine them also crouching down and calling for a reply. Finally, we see Jesus straitening up, perhaps dusting off his hands and looking at all the accusers with a simple reply. It's not a yes, it's not a no. Instead, it's a question of procedure. The one to start the execution of this woman should himself be without sin. He says it, let's that statement drop, and then hunches down to writing again, showing again that He is not being drawn into their game.

Now let's eliminate what Jesus does not mean. He does not mean, “Whoever among you is completely sinless, you are authorised to execute justice.” In that case, no one could ever have been put to death in Israel. He does not mean, “It is wrong to judge anyone, or punish anyone. Only the sinless can punish others.” That would not make sense – the Law of Moses was full of punishments, meant to be exacted by other fallible, fallen humans.

Some people today have made Matthew 7:1 their life verse: “Judge not, lest you be judged.” They think no one can ever judge anything. But the Bible tells us to make judgements all the time, about what is good, what is evil, what is true, what is false. What the Bible forbids is this kind of judgement: a trumped-up, malicious slandering of others for ulterior motives. Condemning others to make yourself look good, or to win an argument, or something like that is a proud, haughty kind of false judgement. Judging another when you are guilty of the same thing and are acting like you are innocent is just pride and dishonesty.

He means, *whoever is qualified in respect of this particular execution, go ahead.*

But there were at least two problems. These men had already claimed to have caught this woman in the very act. Deuteronomy gave the procedure for the witnesses: The hands of the witnesses shall be the first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hands of all the people. So you shall put away the evil from among you. (Deuteronomy 17:7)

If so, then did they warn her, as was necessary, before catching her? Did they do their utmost to catch the man? They were already guilty of being incompetent and biased witnesses. They were not sinless in the very way they had gone about this, and could be implicated as false witnesses.

Beyond that, I think Jesus's statement is convicting as to the sexual purity of these men. It was clearly an unequal society, where women were subjected to scrutiny as to purity, virginity, faithfulness, but men were not. Perhaps the words of Jesus penetrated deep into some of these men: they had been adulterers in their hearts, if not in their deeds. They were using her very obvious and blatant guilt to cover and distract from their much darker and hidden guilt. Whomever among you has been blameless in the area you are accusing her, you begin the execution.

Now here is the result not of proud condemnation, but of pure conviction:

⁹ Then those who heard *it*, being convicted by *their* conscience, went out one by one, beginning with the oldest *even* to the last. And Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst.

This word for convicted means to be strongly convinced, to be warned, admonished, and exposed. As self-righteous as these men were, they knew they had not followed the letter of the Law in this case. They knew they could likely be implicated in similar cases. To actually begin the execution, throwing brick-sized rocks at this woman's head they needed to be blameless in how they prosecuted her, and personally blameless in this area.

But quietly, the sentence fell on each of their own hearts: guilty. Guilty. Disqualified. They had begun by deciding that Jesus was guilty of being a lawbreaker, and tried to prove that with a woman was was guilty, but now the tables turn, and they realise they are guilty. One by one, starting with those most responsible – the eldest, to the youngest, they walk away. The trap has not only failed, it has ensnared them.

When you make God's standard your standard, you can no longer excuse, accuse others, blameshift, or run away. You must just face yourself under God's scrutiny.

III. Messiah's Comforting Truth

And Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst. ¹⁰ When Jesus had raised Himself up and saw no one but the woman, He said to her, "Woman, where are those accusers of yours? Has no one condemned you?" ¹¹ She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said to her, "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more.

All along, Jesus has just been hunched down, perhaps almost sitting, not making eye-contact with each of the guilty accusers. He no doubt hears the silence, maybe the sound of some rocks being dropped at their feet, the sound of quiet men skulking away. It is now just Jesus, the woman, and all those people who had been there before to hear His teaching.

He stands up. Interestingly, she has not run away. She could have, once she saw her accusers depart. She has been humiliated, and those who have been shamed would prefer to get away from the spotlight. But for some reason she stays, as if she feels only Jesus has the moral authority to tell her what to do next.

There she is, on her own. She is guilty, but her malicious accusers have gone. Jesus asks her a simple question, “Woman” - which in our parlance would be “Madam”, “where are your accusers? Has no one condemned you? Has no one laid a charge and found you guilty?” In other words, Jesus is not asking her if she is guilty. He is asking her if the false court case is still going on.

She says, “No one, sir.” Jesus's response is beautiful. “Neither do I condemn you.” Now again, Jesus does not mean no one should be condemned, or that no one ever will be condemned. He does not mean guilt is baseless. Jesus is not saying “I am not judgemental. All judging is wrong.” Just a while before, He said very clearly ²⁷ and has given Him authority to execute judgment also, because He is the Son of Man. (John 5:27)

³⁰ I can of Myself do nothing. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is righteous, because I do not seek My own will but the will of the Father who sent Me. (John 5:30)

²⁴ Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment.” (John 7:24)

Jesus doesn't mean, You are innocent. No, we know He knows she is not innocent by what He says to her at last.

What He means is, I am not pressing charges against you either. I am not calling you guilty and demanding justice on you. Why? Because Jesus was not there to see her sin. Jesus was not a witness. He is not going to be a false witness and do what they were doing. He is a Judge who follows the Law.

But He is also not naïve. Nor is He weak and sentimental. He knows where there is smoke, there is fire, and even though she was entrapped, she made her own immoral choices. She is guilty.

What Jesus says are the words of the true Judge. “Go and sin no more.” This kangaroo court was unjust. But it is a warning to her soul. If she continues in this kind of life, it will catch up with her, and next time it may not be a mistrial. God has been gracious to her in allowing her to be a victim of injustice, even while committing her own sin. Now she is released with kindness, and a warning. Repent, don't do this anymore. You have a second chance from God.

Here is the most comforting truth. God knows what you have done, all of it. But grace is willing to free you and warn you. Grace is willing to set you free from your sin so that you are free to sin no more.

God created a world of people to have fellowship with Him. But when man fell, sin entered. That produced both real guilt and false guilt, both the actual judgement of God, and the flawed judgement of Satan and men, which is either too lenient, or too harsh. Jesus came to be both the Saviour and the Judge, the one who can pardon you. He is the only one who really knows the severity of your guilt. He knows when your accusers have got it right and He knows when they have got it wrong, because He actually bore the guilt of your sin.

To trust in Him is to be forgiven, to be set free to sin less, and eventually to be sinless. In the future, the kingdom of Jesus is for those who don't want to sin at all.

Maybe one of the most comforting verses in all of Scripture is also written by John. ²⁰ For if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things. ²¹ Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God. (1 John 3:20–21)

You might struggle with too much guilt, or too little guilt. But God is greater than our self-knowledge: He knows everything. Go to the just judge. Draw near to be forgiven, go forth to sin no more.