

### **John 8:1-11**

*But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.*

*But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.*

*At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"*

*"No one, sir," she said.*

*"Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."*

In the movie Mission Impossible, Tom Cruise's character, Ethan Hunt, is being set up. The CIA believes he is a mole, and they're trying to catch him. There is a scene where he goes to meet a CIA agent for dinner, and learns their theory over the course of the meal. And he realizes that the entire restaurant is filled with undercover agents who are waiting to grab him if he tries to run. There is no way out.

Except he has a piece of explosive chewing gum. He throws it against a large fish tank in the restaurant and it explodes, flooding the restaurant. In the middle of the chaos that follows, he's able to get out. It was a totally unexpected move that caught the CIA off guard.

Jesus pulls an Ethan Hunt move here. The Pharisees are trying to trap him. They've backed him into a corner where either answer he gives to them will get him in trouble. If he says he disagrees, he's against Moses. If he says he agrees the woman should be executed, that puts him in opposition to the Romans, who haven't given the Jews power to carry out the death penalty. So they could use that against him to get him in trouble. One way he's too soft on sin and the other way he's too harsh.

There's no way out. But Jesus does something unexpected that catches them off guard and completely undermines their plan. It's an explosive move that sets up a whole new way of looking at sin.

Sin isn't something you hear much about anywhere, except at church. And most of the time, we only talk about it in very broad, general terms. We talk about God forgiving our sin, or how we're all sinners. While true, those are relatively abstract statements. In this

story, we're brought face to face with a specific instance of sin. There's no getting around what actually happened. The facts are all out on the table. And so overall comments about sin are put to the test. When we as a church or individuals meet someone who is obviously committing a particular sin, or we confront it in ourselves, how do we respond? What is the Christ-like thing to do?

Churches throughout history have struggled with this and have often slid into one of two positions. Either they take a very firm stand against sin and become somewhat judgmental and harsh, or they become so accepting that sin isn't taken seriously anymore.

**The trap is this: Choosing between judging or fudging.** Do we pound home the fact that sin is wrong, or do we let it slide and fudge on the rules? It's the same trap that Jesus faced as the Pharisees asked him the question.

It's pretty clear that the Pharisees had taken the more judgmental stance. They were angry and ready to carry out the sentence.

In the news this week you might have seen that Congress successfully blocked three judicial nominees that President Bush had put forward. I didn't follow all the details, but Democrats did not feel they were the best qualified judges for the job. So they filibustered for 40 hours and prevented them from being approved.

Someone should have put the Pharisees in a Congressional hearing. Because they were not good judges. They were not the best qualified. And as we look at them more closely, I think we'll see that we're not all that qualified either to judge other people or ourselves.

Here are a few strikes the Pharisees had against them, and why we make lousy judges.

1. Haphazard justice

One of the key qualities any judge needs is an ability to be somewhat objective and impartial and consistent. If you ever see statues of Justice, she is always blindfolded, indicating she treats everyone the same. But that's not what the Pharisees do.

As you might have figured out by now, it takes two people to commit adultery, and yet they only brought the woman to Jesus. Not only that, the law the Pharisees were quoting to Jesus specifically stated that both parties were subject to the same punishment – not just the woman. The Pharisees were selectively applying the law where they wanted to.

When most of us become upset by a particular sin, we tend to zero in on certain individuals or certain sins to the exclusion of others. We can overlook a whole range of equally bad behavior in our attempts to administer justice. Just look at the way many churches in America completely ignored the evil of slavery while at the same time being incredibly strict about other moral issues.

We do that all the time, knowingly or not. We single out people that we feel are undeserving of God's leniency. We decide almost at random what sins bother us the

most, and those are the ones that make us say, “Hey isn’t there a rule somewhere that says this isn’t okay?” When it comes to our own sins, we can focus on a few and find ways to justify others and let them slide.

If we’re honest with ourselves, we’ll have to admit we aren’t too good at being consistent in our judgment calls. That’s partly due to the next point:

## 2. Personal guilt.

When asked for his opinion, Jesus merely points out a fact: All the people bringing the charge are sinners too. Dig deep enough, and you’d find something on each of them that would be worth punishing.

It’s impossible for us to be consistent in punishing sin because to do so means we’d have to apply it equally to ourselves. Nobody is clean, even though sometimes we don’t see it.

Karin and I have slightly different approaches to laundry. Mine is visual. I can wear a shirt one day, take it off, look for spots. If I see one, it goes in the wash. If I don’t see any, I won’t throw it in the dirty clothes pile. I consider it clean. A few days later I’ll look around and won’t be able to find that shirt anywhere. So I’ll ask Karin about it. She’ll say, “I threw it in the wash.” I’ll say, “Why? It wasn’t dirty.” She’ll say, “Hon – it totally reeked.” Even if it smells slightly less than perfectly fresh, her nose can detect it and she knows it needs to be washed. She’s using a different way of judging.

With sin, we all tend to be more like me. We look for the obvious. But Jesus has a nose for sin. He can smell it a mile away, and he’ll tell us what we think is clean is really dirty. We all share the guilt and need to be thrown in the laundry.

### **1 Sam 16:7**

*The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.*

## 3. Sliding scales

But we might not think we’re that dirty. And that’s another problem the Pharisees demonstrated. They used a sliding scale. This was a sin worthy of death, and Jesus was asking them if they had ever committed any sin. He didn’t put any qualifier on it.

We like the qualifiers. We prefer to compare ourselves to other people and say, “Well I’m not so bad after all.” It’s easier to justify our own sins if we can point to people who are doing what we consider worse things.

And some things are worse in terms of the damage they cause. But even the smallest sins disqualify us from being competent to judge. I think I’ve mentioned before that when Q

Lube was a client of mine, I learned that just one quart of motor oil could render thousands and thousands of gallons of water undrinkable. More oil would certainly create more problems, but even a tiny bit would be enough.

#### **4. Questionable motives**

One final point to raise about the Pharisees, is that justice wasn't their only motive. It wasn't their zeal for the law that made them want to talk about this issue. They were using it as a tool to trap Jesus. They weren't so much interested in seeing the right thing done as they were in tripping him up with his own statements and trying to use them against him.

Quite often when we are playing the role of judge, it isn't always because we are just in love with the concept of justice. Sometimes we're really hoping for revenge, because we've been hurt by someone. Sometimes we're acting out of fear. Sometimes we see something of ourselves in someone else that we don't like and so we make an example of them. One guy I know strongly confronted a friend of his who had been unfaithful to his wife, and all the while, the guy doing the confronting was caught up in online pornography. Our judging others doesn't always have the purest of motives.

So it's pretty obvious we're not the best candidates to be judging people. We do it haphazardly, we forget that we're equally guilty, we use a sliding scale and we aren't all that interested in true justice anyway.

That leads many people to quote the Biblical saying, "Judge not lest ye be judged." Our pendulum swings the other way, and we say it's wrong to call anything wrong. We're all so full of sin that we just shouldn't comment on it anymore. After all, when Jesus is talking to the woman, he says, "Hasn't anybody condemned you? Then I'm not going to condemn you either."

Tolerance is a hugely American value these days. We are called upon to accept the behavior, the morals the lifestyles of others as all acceptable. We may make a few exceptions for such universal sins as murder, but for the most part, it is considered bad form to comment on actions you consider sin.

But that's not a whole lot better of an option than being judgmental, because it ignores what Scripture says. We can't claim that the Bible is very authoritative for us if it isn't our standard for right and wrong.

So it puts us in this trap of choosing between two bad options – judging or fudging. And we quite often get sucked into one or the other. But surprisingly, it's the Pharisees in this story who give us a better alternative.

What is it that they do? They bring the woman to Jesus and ask him what to do. Although they had their own reasons for doing so, it was exactly the right move. They

didn't throw the rocks themselves. They didn't tell her to go home. They let Jesus decide what was needed.

That's pretty freeing. Our job isn't to carry out God's justice. Our job isn't to make sure people understand how guilty they are. Our job is to bring people to Jesus. Once they connect with him, they will realize what they've done and how they need to change.

As we watch Jesus, we begin to see why he is such a better one to be the judge. It starts as soon as they bring the woman in.

*They made her stand before the group...*

*But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger.*

Put yourself in the courtyard. Here is this woman who has been shamed beyond belief, and they're forcing her to stand in front of all these men, half of whom are probably scowling at her and the other half of whom are probably imagining all sorts of things about her. It's totally a shaming situation.

What does Jesus do? He diverts the attention away from her. He creates a visual distraction. The eyes shift to the floor to see what he's writing, which may have been nothing.

What a show of pure grace to that woman. Even before giving her a pardon, Jesus at least gives her a break from the staring eyes. **Jesus makes a better judge than us because**, when Jesus is judging sin, it isn't about shaming the person. It's about dealing with the problem.

The first words that Jesus says to the Pharisees are these: *"If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her."*

As we said before, this pointed out, without saying it directly, that every one of those men was a sinner. And one by one, they left, because they knew it. But it also showed something else, and that was that the one without sin had the right to throw the first stone.

Jesus is a better judge because he has the right to judge. He in fact was without sin, giving him the clarity to pronounce a fair and unbiased verdict. And somehow, in declaring that right, it had so much truth to it that he brought conviction to the accusers. They were the ones who went home with a new awareness of their own sinfulness.

Once again, Jesus stooped to the floor, this time giving the men a chance to reflect and slip away quietly as they felt the weight of their own sin. He didn't care to shame them either. He wasn't looking for payback, even though they deserved it. I would have been saying "HA! You think you're so hot but you're not!"

When they are gone, Jesus is finally able to talk to the woman directly, on her own, and here's where he begins to open her eyes. She had heard his comment to the men and now

sees they're gone. Jesus asked her, *"Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"*

She says, "No one, sir." And she realizes that if they didn't follow through with their plan, it must be because they know they are sinners too. And that means she's no worse than them.

We're all sinners before God. We might be carrying a load of guilt over our past and feel like other people are way better than us. But it's a level playing field and we're all in need of grace.

But at this point there is still someone left – and that's Jesus. Having heard this whole conversation, having been exposed to such public humiliation, the woman has undoubtedly been sure she's going to die. The weight of her actions is hanging heavy over her head as she waits for Jesus to pronounce his verdict. Then come those beautiful words. "Neither do I condemn you." Here the one person who has the right to judge withholds the sentence. The relief would be overwhelming.

If that's all there was, then Jesus would be in the category of being soft on sin. It would trivialize the offense and make it less than a violation of God's law.

But there's more to it than is spoken. You have to read it in the context of Jesus' entire life. Because what he is really saying is this: "Neither do I condemn you. But it's not because it doesn't deserve to be punished. It does. But I'm going to take the punishment myself. The stones will crush me instead of you. I'll die in your place. I'll suffer the consequences of what you did on your behalf. I'll give up my life. Go and sin no more."

The point is this: Because of Jesus, God is no longer in the business of punishing people for their sins. We can't think about it in those terms anymore. Jesus paid the full price for every sin committed by every person who ever lived. God is not up in heaven waiting to zap you when you make a mistake.

Think of it as a huge umbrella, with God's punishment, his wrath being rain. The umbrella is big enough for everybody to stand under. In fact, it's so big you'd have to make an extra effort to get out from under it. Should you choose to move out from under the umbrella and face the rain on your own, you can, but the umbrella is there, and it's plenty big enough.

It is a done deal. Forgiveness and grace are already there and waiting.

You'll hear people talk as if God is punishing them for specific sins. But to say that is to say that what Jesus did wasn't enough. And it was. God is through punishing. There are still natural consequences to sin. That woman was still going to have to face her husband when she got home. There's just no shoe waiting to fall from God, so to speak, because it already fell on Jesus.

But he does expect us to change. Jesus told the woman, “Go and sin no more.” We’re not supposed to just keep on sinning since we don’t fear punishment. We’re to change in light of the incredible gift we’ve been given. Everything we do should spring up out of gratitude. Rather than try to obey out of fear, we want to do what is right because we’re thankful.

In the trap we talked about, we were reduced to picking judgment or tolerance. But the Christian life is about grace and transformation. If we are tolerant of sin, that means we don’t expect any real change to happen. Why should it? There’s nothing wrong.

But when we’ve been shown grace, it is always with the hope that there will be transformation, that we will be made new and different.

As I looked at this story this week, I could identify with different people in this story. Much of the time, I’m a Pharisee. I see the faults of other people and I often feel it’s my duty to point them out to others. My role should be instead to lead them back to Jesus, who will confront them in his own way and time.

I can also identify with the woman. Her sin of unfaithfulness represented all forms of unfaithfulness to God. We’ve all failed him and need to hear Jesus words of grace and his empowerment to change and be transformed people.

I think there’s another person to identify with, and that is the unmentioned man who got away with what he did wrong, who had unconfessed sin that nobody knew about. I can only hope that at some time he experienced the freedom and forgiveness that comes from letting Jesus be our judge and the one who took our punishment.

Are we judging or fudging? What sin has caught our attention, in our own lives or in the lives of other people? What or who do we need to bring to Jesus?

If you’re struggling with guilt this morning, I hope you can hear Jesus say “I’m not going to condemn you. I’m removing your shame. You are forgiven. Now move on as a different person.”

Grace and transformation. Let’s be the kind of church that knows those words by experience and extends them to people caught in the trap of sin, giving them a way out and a way forward.