

The Gospel of John
Session Seventeen: From Exposure to Healing
Commentary

John 8:1-11

8:1–6a. The earliest and most reliable manuscripts do not include John 7:53–8:11. Nevertheless, the NIV includes the entire segment—a wise choice, in my opinion. Borchert calls it “a text looking for a context” and refuses to deal with it at the beginning of chapter 8 since, in his view, “it disrupts the logic of the Johannine Tabernacles’ argument” (Borchert, p. 369). Carson agrees that the narrative was probably not a part of John’s Gospel (though Zane Hodges has argued its authenticity) but claims “there is little reason for doubting that the event here described occurred” (Carson, D. A. *The Gospel According to John*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991, pp. 333–34). He suggests it belongs in the record of the last week but nevertheless deals with it here as I shall do.

The Pharisees posed a dilemma. If Jesus agreed to stone the woman, he would incur the distrust of the sinners he came to save as well as break Roman law. But a refusal to stone her would make him vulnerable to the accusation that he treated the Law of Moses lightly. It is a sad commentary on the culture of first-century Israel that they brought in the woman but no mention is made of the man. The sin of adultery and its handmaiden, divorce, represent almost the norm in modern America. But at least in our day we recognize mutuality of responsibility. John left no doubt regarding the Pharisees’ motivation: They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. So the chapter begins with public accusation, but it also goes on to talk about personal guilt. In one sense the Pharisees stood on solid ground with their appeal to the Law of Moses (Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22–24), but the law was not as clear as their accusation seems to imply. For example, her marital status would be a defining factor.

According to Carson,

Stoning is the biblically prescribed punishment for a betrothed virgin who was sexually unfaithful to her fiancé, a punishment to be meted out to both sexual partners (Dt. 22:23–24). Elsewhere (Lv. 20:10; Dt. 22:22) death is prescribed for all unfaithful wives and their lovers, but no mode (such as stoning) is laid down. In the Mishnah (Sanhedrin, 7:4), however, the two cases are sharply differentiated: the offense in the first instance is punishable by stoning (it is viewed as the more serious of the two), and the second by strangling. That would mean the woman in this passage was betrothed, not married. It is rather doubtful, however, that the distinction existed in Jesus’ day (Carson, p. 335).

Whatever the particulars, the case indicated the intent of the Pharisees to trap Jesus with these charges with complete disregard for the woman in question. The real issue was the political motives of the accusers. Boice suggests that the entire thing was a set-up, what we would call today entrapment. In the rabbinical law, two or three witnesses had to observe the act of adultery in order for the death penalty to be enforced. Boice claims, “Under such circumstances it is almost self-evident that the rulers must have arranged the liaison somewhat as a trap,

having stationed the witnesses in the room or at the keyhole. It was a situation quite similar to the use of private investigators and photographers in order to prove adultery today” (Boice, James M. *The Gospel of John* (5 vols.). Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1977).

8:6b–8. Interpreters seem fascinated by Jesus’ writing in the sand, certainly a reaction unexpected by the Pharisees. Why did Jesus do this? What did he write? One answer suffices for both questions: We do not know. It is useless to speculate, as some have done, that he wrote the names of other adulterers who were standing there among the group of accusers. We are bound to the text which tells us nothing more than that Jesus refused an immediate or reactionary response to the Pharisees’ accusation. The centerpiece of this scene is the Lord’s answer: If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.

The writing in the sand was followed by the wisdom of the Son. This rubric is certainly valuable for judgmental Christians in our times. The perfect reply preserved both Jewish and Roman law while exposing the wickedness of the accusers. As Jesus began writing on the ground a second time, they had time to think about their own lives and God began to speak to those who were open to hear his voice. Again the accusers were brought face to face with the law they themselves had quoted. According to Deuteronomy 17:2–7, the witnesses of a crime who had reported it to the authorities would be the first to cast the stones.

8:9. What followed was the withdrawal of the sinners, one at a time, the older ones first. Did the older ones leave first because they had more time to accumulate sins of their own? Was it their maturity and sense of impending judgment that made them fleet of foot to escape this embarrassing predicament? Did they recognize that perhaps their sin was greater than the woman’s and Jesus knew that full well? Again, the text does not tell us. But conscience must have played some role in this scene as the accusers left Jesus alone with the woman.

Imagine a stage play as you watch in silence—no dialogue, no music. The confident and critical Pharisees, moments ago pointing their fingers at the woman and at Jesus, now silently exit stage right or stage left without another word. Christians are not perfect—just forgiven. And because of the extent of God’s forgiveness to us, we ought to be the least judgmental people in the world.

8:10–11. The first two scenes of the story described the charges and their response. Now we come to the verdict. With the accusers gone, there remained no condemnation. The Son of God refused to press the issue. Her sin was not just set aside; soon Jesus would pay the penalty for both the woman and her accusers.

James Boice tells the story of a man who sat in his office aware of his deep sin but unable to do anything about it. Boice ministered to him by using the illustration of a man walking along a street and splashed by a car in the dark. As he continued he came into the light of a street lamp and became aware of the stains on his clothing. Finally, the man decided he could not go on, turned around, and went home to put on clean clothes. At that point the young man in Boice’s office responded by saying, “My problem is that I don’t have any clean clothes.”

Precisely. Chapter 8 tells about a woman who had no clean clothes—and about Pharisees who also had no clean clothes. She knew she did not; they thought they did. Jesus offered the clean clothes of forgiveness to all of them—and to us as well.

Jesus asked a rhetorical question and the woman answered it simply. Forgiveness rests upon the Lord's understanding. In this vignette we find recognition, repentance, regeneration, restitution, and reconciliation.

A second important lesson in these two verses is that forgiveness rests upon the Lord's grace. Remember the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15? The father showed unconditional forgiveness and restoration when the son returned. Salvation does not come from suffering; it comes from grace—from the suffering and death of Jesus on our behalf.

Finally, we see that the verdict rests upon the Lord's forgiveness. Forgiveness demands a clean break with sin. In Matthew 9:2 we read, "Some men brought to him a paralytic, lying on a mat. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Take heart, son, your sins are forgiven.'" In searching for a way to translate this, a missionary linguist working among the Guajira tribe in Colombia rendered the Lord's words, "I forgive you. Let's be friends again."

The same Jesus offers forgiveness today to sinners whose sins equal that of the woman or those of the Pharisees. And not only forgiveness for initial salvation but also for daily sins of anger, disobedience, envy, greed, and the judgmental character shown by the Pharisees which gave birth to this episode.¹

¹ Gangel, Kenneth O. *Holman New Testament Commentary: John*. Edited by Max E. Anders. (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2000).