



# The Gospel of John

## Session 17: The Woman Caught in Adultery

### THE LESSON AT A GLANCE

In this week's lesson, we'll examine relatively well-known passage: the woman caught in adultery. As you prepare, be aware of the stories that might be running under the surface in your class—those who have committed adultery or those who have been the victims of it, and also those who have experienced sexual violence or exploitation. Scripture is clear that God loves people and hates sin. He stands with those who have been victimized and promises to bring all wickedness to justice in eternity. A sensitivity to this topic will help you teach from a place of truth and grace.

Two interesting German words come up in our lesson today: *schadenfreude* (SHAH-den-froy-duh), rejoicing in someone else's suffering, and *freudenfreude* (FROY-din-froy-da), finding joy in someone else's joy. As you prepare this week, be on the lookout for how these two complex emotions show up in your own life.

### TODAY'S SCRIPTURES

*John 8:1-11*

### THE MAIN IDEA

Jesus reveals what the law exposes—sin and brokenness—yet He responds not with condemnation or indulgence, but with mercy that restores dignity and invites transformation.

### QUESTION TO EXPLORE

*In what areas life am I tempted to rejoice in someone else's suffering? How can I, as a follower of Christ, experience joy when others find grace?*

### SCRIPTURE IN CONTEXT

**John 8:1-6** Dragged from bed before dawn and forced to stand before a group of men in the temple courts with the threat of capital punishment hanging over your head is a nightmare few can imagine. Worse still, the act against the woman in today's story wasn't performed by a vigilante militia, but by the religious leaders of the day. They saw sin and sought the ultimate punishment—not because they cared about justice, but as a scheme to bring Jesus's growing ministry to a stop.

**John 8:7-9** The Pharisees, based on their carefully selected interpretation of Old Testament law, demanded the ultimate punishment for this woman—death by stoning. Jesus, however, saw through their ruse and responded with an Old Testament requirement of His own—let the one who is without sin be the first to throw a stone.

**John 8:10-11** As the Pharisees one-by-one dropped their stones and walked away, Jesus addressed the woman. Without the cruel jury, there was no one left to condemn her. Jesus did not punish the woman, but He called her to a higher standard: *“Go, and from now on do not sin anymore.”*



## START HERE

*“There is no one righteous, not even one”* (Romans 3:10). While most Christians would say they believe these verses, we are all prone at times to view ourselves as the exception to the rule. We do this, even indirectly, by comparing ourselves to others and judging our own sin against theirs— *“At least I’m not that bad,”* we smugly think (see Luke 18:9-14). It’s human nature, and a product of our sinful flesh, to rejoice in someone else’s suffering, especially if we think it makes us look better by comparison. In today’s lesson, we’ll examine the story of the woman caught in adultery. As you read, look at how the different characters treat the woman’s sin, and ask how you might become a person who rejoices with sinners who are set free.

## DISCUSS

*Have you ever caught yourself laughing at something embarrassing someone else has done—tripping getting out of the car, dropping something heavy, or walking out of the restroom with toilet paper stuck to their shoe? Why are we prone to take some satisfaction in the plight of others?*

## REVIEW AND DISCUSS THE TEXT

### 1. Dragged Into the Light—What the Law Exposes But Cannot Heal

John 8:1-6: *But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.*

*At dawn he went to the temple again, and all the people were coming to him. He sat down and began to teach them.*

*Then the scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery, making her stand in the center. “Teacher,” they said to him, “this woman was caught in the act of committing adultery. In the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?” They asked this to trap him, in order that they might have evidence to accuse him.*

*Unpacking John 8:1-6*

From an early age, we learn to resist humiliation. Tripping in the hallway, dropping a lunch tray, missing a free throw in a close basketball game, or saying something foolish while everyone listens is an unfortunate part of childhood. In John 8, we meet a woman whose most humiliating moment was not only public—it is preserved in Scripture. Yet, her exposure and Christ’s tenderness invite us to examine closely how God meets us in our moments of deepest shame.

Last week we studied a contentious showdown between the Pharisees and the temple guards. The religious leaders dispatched the guards to arrest Jesus after His teaching during the Festival of Shelters, where He boldly declared, *“If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. The one who believes in me, as the Scripture has said, will have streams of living water flow from deep within him”* (John 7:37-38). However, the temple guards returned to the



Pharisees, without Jesus, saying, *“No man ever spoke like this!”* (John 7:46). Chapter 7 ends with the Pharisees returning to their own homes, defeated, and chapter 8 opens with Jesus retreating to the Mount of Olives to pray, before returning to the temple courts to resume teaching.

Before diving into the text, it’s important to address the asterisk, in reference to John 7:53–8:11, that’s found in most Bibles. It is noteworthy that these verses do not appear in some of the earliest manuscripts we have of the Scriptures. They appear regularly in manuscripts dating in the sixth century and later, although the precise location of this story within the Gospel of John varies from time to time. However, this narrative has been broadly accepted as canonical (belonging to the Bible) since around 600 CE, and the message is consistent with the character and teachings of Christ. We can study and apply this passage with confidence that we are in line with the historical teaching of the church, even as we acknowledge the historical challenges of the specific dating and origins of this text.

John 8:2 says at dawn, Jesus returned to the temple and as was typical for teachers of the day, He sat down to instruct those who came to Him. After the events of John 7, it’s not hard to imagine why Jesus drew further interest. As the group of eager students sat down to hear Him, Jesus was interrupted, yet again, by the scribes and Pharisees. This time, they were not alone.

Verse 3 tells us that the scribes and Pharisees arrived, bringing with them a woman who was *“caught in adultery.”* They pushed their way through those seated to hear Jesus’s teaching and forced the woman to stand in the center of them. The shock and humiliation of the moment are not hard to imagine. How was this woman *“caught”*? It seems likely, based on what happened next, that she was the victim of a premeditated scheme to exploit her and discredit Jesus. After all, the man with whom she was caught, who was guilty of adultery, was nowhere to be found.

*“Teacher,” they said to him, “this woman was caught in the act of committing adultery. In the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?”* (v. 4). A few important things happen in this verse. First, note the title the Pharisees used for Jesus—teacher. In Greek, there are two forms of *“teacher.”* The first, meaning *“Rabbi,”* is commonly used throughout the Gospels. It means *“my great one, or honorable sir,”* and was used by Jews to address their teachers, or to refer to them in their absence. It signified spiritual authority. This title is given to Jesus in John 1:38, and is used by Nicodemus in John 3:2. The second word for teacher implies a duty of instruction, and one who has authority to teach others. This is the title for teacher Jesus most commonly chose for Himself. Used here by the Pharisees, however, it reeks of contempt. They did not address Him with a religious title, but an authoritarian one. It’s as if they were saying, *“Hey, Jesus, since you’re sitting here teaching others, here’s a tricky problem for you to figure out.”* Their intent wasn’t honor, but humiliation.

The second thing that must be addressed is the presence of a woman *“caught in the act”* of adultery. It’s hard to imagine how the Pharisees could possibly have stumbled upon this breach of the law accidentally. It was almost surely a set up. No care was given to her shame, and she was not invited to defend herself. The woman’s guilt, innocence, or punishment wasn’t really



what the leaders were after at all. If righteousness according to the Law had been the true goal, the man she was caught with would have stood trial as well. Instead, the woman was a means to an end—a tool used to try and trap Jesus.

Thirdly, the Pharisees pointed out that the law of Moses commanded “*such a woman*” be stoned. Here, the religious leaders cited the law accurately but applied it selectively. In Leviticus 20:10, it says “*If a man commits adultery with a married woman—if he commits adultery with his neighbor’s wife—both the adulterer and the adulteress must be put to death.*” The law called for both people to be put to death, and it didn’t specify stoning as the form of corporal punishment. Likewise, Deuteronomy 22:22 says, “*If a man is discovered having sexual relations with another man’s wife, both the man who had sex with the woman and the woman must die. You must purge the evil from Israel.*” No where does Scripture imply that in the case of adultery, only the woman should face justice. The religious leaders grossly, and likely purposefully, misapplied the law.

“*In the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?*” (v. 5). Going back to Deuteronomy 22, Moses gave this instruction—“*If there is a young woman who is a virgin engaged to a man, and another man encounters her in the city and sleeps with her, take the two of them out to the gate of that city and stone them to death*” (Deuteronomy 22:23-24). The Pharisees attempted to apply a form of capital punishment; however, the text does not imply that the woman in question met those qualifications. What is clear, however, is that both the woman and the man, according to Old Testament law, deserved the death penalty.

“*So what do you say?*” They asked this to trap him, in order that they might have evidence to accuse him (John 8:5b-6). Here, John offered commentary on the Pharisees real motivation—not justice, but justification for accusing Jesus. Here’s where their use of “*teacher*” exposed their intention. They placed Jesus in a seemingly unwinnable situation. In their minds, there were only a few options He could have chosen, all of which would have made Him vulnerable for punishment, or even death.

The first option would have been to say, “*Do not kill her.*” However, in doing so, Jesus would have contradicted the law of Moses—a clear violation of God’s law. If He said, “*stone her,*” He would have been condoning capital punishment—an act removed from the Pharisee’s authority during Roman occupation (John 18:31). To condone her killing would have made Him a vigilante in the eyes of the Roman government. Not to mention that condoning her death would have contradicted Jesus’s mercy-centered teaching. The Pharisees seemed to have created a perfect trifecta of complications, and it would appear Jesus had no easy way out.

In truth, we are all like the adulteress woman—sinners without hope, and without justification, standing before Jesus exposed and naked before God’s law—“*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*” (Romans 3:23). If we stand before God based on the law, not one of us stands a chance. Romans 3:20 says that “*For no one will be justified in his sight by the works of the law, because the knowledge of sin comes through the law.*” The Old Testament law reveals how desperately far from keeping the law we are. Galatians 3:24 says, “*The law, then, was our*



*guardian until Christ, so that we could be justified by faith.*” In Christ, we see the law fulfilled on our behalf so we can stand before God, not based on our own goodness, but on the basis on Christ’s sacrifice.

Corrie ten Boom, in her book, *The Hiding Place*, wrote, “There is no pit so deep that God’s love is not deeper still.” The adulterous woman stood among the crowd, on the edge of a pit perhaps of her own making. The same is true for you and me. However, like the woman, when we stand before Jesus, exposed and vulnerable, we meet not a punishing teacher, but a loving Savior.

## DISCUSS

- *What details in the text reveal how the Law is being used against the woman?*
- *Where do you see the temptation to expose others rather than examine yourself?*
- *How do you respond internally when someone else’s failure is publicly revealed?*

## 2. Stones Thrown—Fighting the Tension Between Punishment and Perspective

John 8:7-9: *Jesus stooped down and started writing on the ground with his finger. When they persisted in questioning him, he stood up and said to them, “The one without sin among you should be the first to throw a stone at her.” Then he stooped down again and continued writing on the ground. When they heard this, they left one by one, starting with the older men. Only he was left, with the woman in the center.*

### *Unpacking John 8:7-9*

There’s something unsettlingly human about watching someone else fall. The German people have a word for this phenomenon: *schadenfreude*—the pleasure derived from another’s misfortune. This can be disguised as righteousness, justice, or even moral superiority. When someone else’s sin is exposed, it often distracts us from our own. In this passage, the religious leaders gathered not to restore, but to accuse. Their satisfaction was subtle but dangerous, and Jesus refused to entertain it.

In what was surely a deafening silence, Jesus stooped down and began writing on the ground with His finger. Scholars and pastors have debated, and even preached whole messages, on what Jesus wrote. As careful students of Scripture, this unanswered question gives opportunity to review an important hermeneutical principle—don’t seek to read more or less into what the text is saying than is clear. In truth, we have no idea what Jesus wrote. At the least, this action gave the religious leaders a moment to rethink what they proposed and allowed Jesus a few seconds to reflect on His answer. However, rather than contemplate the consequences of their cruel intentions, *“they persisted in questioning Him”* (v. 7).



At this point Jesus stood up to face the woman—and her accusers. Then, He reframed the question from legality to moral authority. *“The one without sin among you should be the first to throw a stone at her.”* Jesus did not simply pull this idea out of thin air to highlight universal sin. Rather, He quoted from Moses in Deuteronomy 17:6-7 which says, *“The one condemned to die is to be executed on the testimony of two or three witnesses. No one is to be executed on the testimony of a single witness. The witnesses’ hands are to be the first in putting him to death. . .”* Moses gave this provision as a protective measure. Not only must a capital crime have more than one witness to earn the death penalty, but the witnesses must be convinced enough of what their eyes saw that they would be willing to throw the first stone. Schadenfreude might tempt one to throw verbal stones, but prudence and certainty were guard rails against literal stone throwing.

While the religious leaders tried to catch Jesus in a legal argument, He responded with a religious and ethical one. Notice Jesus did not say the woman wasn’t guilty of adultery. Jesus’s compassion does not overlook sin—it confronts and restores. In refusing to debate the religious leaders on the accuracy of their charge, He was able to move the conversation from legality to morality. *“The one without sin among you should be the first to throw a stone at her.”* Neither did He argue that the punishment for her crime was death. He simply pointed them toward the provision in Deuteronomy 17:6-7, replacing the word “witness” for “without sin.” In other words, were the religious leaders so convinced of their moral position and innocence that they would be willing to throw the first stone? It was one thing to think a person should be killed for their sin—it’s another to directly see it through.

It would be interesting to know which silence lasted longer—when Jesus wrote on the ground, not responding to their question, or the time before the Pharisees responded to His charge about their own sin. Verse 8 says, *“Then he stooped down again and continued writing on the ground.”* Jesus didn’t need to stare them down or force a reply—He allowed their own knowledge of the law to act their judge.

*“When they heard this, they left one by one, starting with the older men. Only he was left, with the woman in the center.”* The oldest men walked away first. Experience often sharpens conscience. Young people have a way of thinking in black in white, as they seek to add real-life experience to their intellectual knowledge. In Galatians 1:13-14, Paul described his early life this way: *“For you have heard about my former way of life in Judaism: I intensely persecuted God’s church and tried to destroy it. I advanced in Judaism beyond many contemporaries among my people, because I was extremely zealous for the traditions of my ancestors.”* Paul’s lack of experience and wisdom prevented him from seeing Jesus clearly and created in him a thirst for so-called righteousness that superseded his desire for mercy.

Jesus didn’t shame or humiliate the leaders. In fact, the angry crowd dispersed without Him raising His voice. Scripture teaches that believers are, in fact, to judge one another within the church. First Corinthians 5:12-13 says that believers are to judge sin within the church, for the purpose of accountability and reconciliation, and God will judge those outside of the faith. Still,



we should hold that responsibility with great reverence and restraint. In Matthew 7:1-5, Jesus instructed clearly on the proper way to think about judgment within the body of Christ: *“Do not judge, so that you won’t be judged. For you will be judged by the same standard with which you judge others, and you will be measured by the same measure you use. Why do you look at the splinter in your brother’s eye but don’t notice the beam of wood in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the splinter out of your eye,’ and look, there’s a beam of wood in your own eye? Hypocrite! First take the beam of wood out of your eye, and then you will see clearly to take the splinter out of your brother’s eye.”* The reality that we will be judged by the same standard we use should cause us to have great restraint, and the command that we deal first with our own sin should give us pause. To judge a brother or sister for their sin is no small thing, and the older wiser Pharisees were seemingly the first to respond to Jesus’s reminder of this truth.

## DISCUSS

- *How does a remembrance of our own sin before God give us hesitancy in accusing others?*
- *Where might schadenfreude subtly show up in spiritual or moral conversations?*
- *What practices help you resist the urge to feel superior when others fail?*

### 3. Neither Condemned Nor Dismissed—Grace that Restores

John 8:10-11: *When Jesus stood up, he said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”*

*“No one, Lord,” she answered.*

*“Neither do I condemn you,” said Jesus. “Go, and from now on do not sin anymore.”*

#### *Unpacking John 8:10-11*

Another word, *Freudenfreude*—the joy we feel when another person experiences good—stands in stark contrast to its cousin word, and acutely in contrast to the attitude of the Pharisees in today’s text. Scripture repeatedly tells us, however, that God delights not in punishment, but in repentance, mercy, and renewed life. Where humans may relish in another’s suffering, God finds great joy in sinners who return to Him. Jesus’s final words to the woman revealed not only mercy, but heaven’s posture toward those who turn toward grace.

In our flesh, it’s easier to find opportunities to express *schadenfreude* than *freudenfreude*. But believers have the greatest reason to rejoice with others—lost souls are saved and sinners are restored.



After the religious leaders one-by-one dropped their rocks and walked away, Jesus addressed the woman for the first time. Without the crowd leering and rooting for her death, Jesus turned toward her with compassion. “*Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?*” (John 8:10).

Notice Jesus didn’t say if she was guilty or not. We can assume that the nature of her presence before Him, or the crowd who accused, left little doubt in Jesus’s mind whether she had done what they said. Neither did He ask where the man was. The question of her guilt didn’t need to be addressed. The question of her consequence, however, did.

The woman only spoke three words recorded in Scripture. She didn’t make a plea for her innocence, blame the man, or rail against the cruelty of the Pharisees. “*No one, Lord,*” she answered” (v. 11).

Jesus’s heart embraces *freudenfreude*. First Corinthians 13:6 says, “*Love finds no joy in unrighteousness but rejoices in the truth.*” The truth wasn’t about what happened with the man, but what she believed about Jesus. Elizabeth Elliot, in her book *The Path of Loneliness*, wrote, “*The gospel is good news because it confronts us with the truth about ourselves and then offers us mercy.*” Jesus saw the woman, He saw her need, and He offered her compassion. He does the same for us.

There are two important things to notice about Jesus’s words to the woman. The first is He said she is not condemned; He did not say she wasn’t guilty. There are some today that teach a kind of Christianity that seeks to minimize sin, condone sin, or cover sin up. This kind of faith implies, “*you’re ok, I’m ok, and we just all get along ok.*” That is not the gospel. God doesn’t overlook sin. In fact, sin cost Jesus His life. Thankfully, Jesus came to address our sin head on and save us from condemnation and the eternal consequences of our sin.

Second, Jesus does not condemn her for her sin, but neither does He condone it. “*Go, and from now on do not sin anymore*” (v. 11b). We cannot sincerely come to Jesus for forgiveness and walk away unchanged. When we call Jesus, “*Lord,*” we give Him permission to speak into the reality of our lives. We are not the judge of what is right or wrong—He is. Jesus called the woman to a higher standard. She didn’t have to stand in the circle of shame anymore. She was free to go, but in going, she was to leave her sinful ways behind. Forgiveness isn’t overlooking sin. Forgiveness is applying the balance due for sin to Christ on the cross and then walking in freedom to live differently in the future as an expression of faith, gratitude, and relationship with the One who sets us free from sin.

Romans 3:17-18 says, “*For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Anyone who believes in him is not condemned, but anyone who does not believe is already condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the one and only Son of God.*” With only three recorded words from the woman, it is hard to determine the posture of her heart. In calling Jesus “*Lord,*” was she indicating faith in Christ? We don’t know. What’s clear, however, is the posture of Jesus’s heart. He saw the woman, her sin, and



the cross. Where the Pharisees saw punishment, Jesus saw grace. Where they saw hatred, He saw love. Where they saw death, He extended life: “Go now and leave your life of sin” (John 8:11, NIV).

## DISCUSS

- *What was the significance of Jesus’s question, “Where are they?”*
- *Which is harder for you to receive—freedom from condemnation or the call of Christ to change your ways?*
- *What does “Go, and from now on do not sin anymore” look like as an invitation to a grace-filled life rather than a threat?*
- *In what areas do you need to ask God to decrease your schadenfreude and increase your freudenfreude? What things (social media, friend groups, owning your own attitude) might be obstacles to embracing a more joy-filled life in Christ?*

## DEEPER FOCUS

### REFLECT ON THE TEXT

## DISCUSS

*While Jesus offers freedom, the religious leaders set traps. Jesus provides the solution to what the law reveals in us—sin and brokenness. Jesus neither condemned nor condoned the woman. Is there an area you desire to experience freedom that doesn’t feel as though you’re making any headway? How might this week’s lesson encourage you to receive God’s grace and deepen your trust in Jesus to restore His likeness in you?*

### RESPOND TO THE TEXT

How do you see *schadenfreude* alive and well in our culture today? Why should God’s children live differently? What would need to shift in you to become a more grace-focused person, especially when you encounter another’s sin?

## APPLY

How might Jesus’s words, “Go, and from now on do not sin anymore,” apply in one or more areas of your life right now? What would it take for you to leave specific sin behind and go forward with Christ? Reflect internally, journal, or perhaps share that conviction and commitment with a Christian friend or mentor this week.



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