

The Woman Caught In Adultery

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Date: 26 March 2023

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[0 : 00] Well, today we come to a very famous and very fascinating section of John's Gospel, the passage that murder read for us, which records to us Jesus' interactions with a woman who was caught in adultery. Let me read again, verses 10 to 11. Jesus stood up and said to her woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you? She said, no one, Lord. And Jesus said, neither do I condemn you, go, and from now on sin no more. The section is known as the one recording the woman caught in adultery, so that's our title for today. And there's lots of fascinating things for us to learn from this passage, but we have to start by recognizing that if you are sitting here today and you have a modern translation of the Bible in front of you, whether that's the ESV or the NIV or another one like that, if you've got a modern version of the Bible in front of you, either on your phone or in your book

Bible in front of you, you will see, I'm sure, that this passage is in brackets. And I'll explain in a moment why this passage is in brackets. I wanted to mention quickly though, just for anyone who's unfamiliar, there are lots of different versions of the English Bible. So the Bible was written in Hebrew and Greek. We now have lots of different English versions. The common English version that was used for many, many years was the King James version or the authorized version that was translated, well, compiled, translated end of the 16th beginning of the 17th century. And for a long, long time that was the standard Bible that was used. But in the last 150 years or so, some more modern translations have been produced bringing the language into contemporary language, which is a very, very appropriate thing to do. And so now we have lots of brilliant translations. We use the ESV, the English Standard version in our services, but many other churches will use the NIV, the new international version.

And some of you in your own Bible readings might use something like the New Living Translation. They're all excellent, excellent translations. All of them are translated from Greek manuscripts. Now for five minutes, we've got to just be a bit nerdy and talk about manuscripts, history, all kinds of stuff, because we need to explain why this passage is in brackets. If you're looking at the ESV, if you're looking at the NIV, this section is in brackets.

Okay. English Bibles, as I said, are translated from Greek manuscripts. And there are literally thousands of these Greek manuscripts. And we have to remember that the Bible wasn't written like many books are written. So often when a book is written just now, one person will sit down and write the whole book. Or if you're compiling an encyclopedia, a committee will sit down and they'll bring all the articles and stuff together. The Bible was not written like that. The Bible instead is a collection of different documents written by different people at different times in different contexts. So you have Gospels written by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John recording Jesus' life. You've got letters from Paul. You've got prophecy and wisdom literature and historical literature in the Old Testament, all written by different people in different places. And these have all been recognized to be God's Word. And they're brought together in what we today have as the Bible.

[3 : 46] But in the early centuries of the church, you didn't have a complete Bible like this. You had various different manuscripts of the different books. So you'd have a manuscript of John, a manuscript of Luke. And thousands and thousands of these manuscripts have been found by archaeologists. And that's an incredibly helpful thing. In fact, it's a fascinating thing. The Bible is in a category of its own in terms of being a well-attested ancient document. And so sometimes you get people and they'll sort of say things like, you know, oh, how do we know that? Sorry, I shouldn't speak in that tone. But people will say, how do we know that Jesus existed and people will question things and stuff like that? And my kind of exasperated tone is because it just is nonsense. None of these people will question whether Julius sees it existed, even though there is hundreds and hundreds times more evidence for the gospel records and the manuscripts of scripture than there is

for any Roman emperor or classical document or whatever it may be. The Bible is in a category of its own in terms of the manuscripts that have been found. Now that multitude of manuscripts that we have for the scriptures results in two things. First, we have a huge amount of reliability in terms of a huge amount of evidence backing up the reliability of the gospels. And so that's just an incredibly helpful thing that you can trust what the Bible is saying because it's so well-attested in terms of the thousands of manuscripts that have been found. But the other thing that happens is that because there are so many, occasionally there are differences in some of these manuscripts. So to take an example of the Gospel of John, if you find 500 different manuscripts of the Gospel of John in various locations around the eastern end of the Mediterranean when it was copied out in the early church, there are occasionally tiny differences between these manuscripts. And we call those textual variations. So you have the text of the manuscript and you can see tiny variations in them. We saw an example of this about a month or so ago when we were looking at John chapter 5 verses 1 to 5. The

ESV you'll notice, see right there, verse 4 isn't there. Okay, you see that? So when you read the last part in these laya, multitude of invalids, blind, lame and paralysed, one man was the Arabian individual for 38 years. That's how the ESV records it. In the King James version, you have the same verse 3, verse 6 is the same, a great multitude of impotent folk, blind, halt, withered, waiting for the moving of the water. Then they have this bit in Italics. For an angel of the Lord went down a certain season into the pool and troubled the water and whatsoever then first, who is so ever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatsoever he had. Then verse 5 carries on the same, a certain man was there and he had infirmity for 38 years, same as what we have in verse 5. So there's a verse 4 here that's in the King James version, not in this version.

That's because the King James version is translating from a manuscript that has that verse and the ESV is translating from a manuscript that doesn't have that verse. What happens in that situation is that there's a huge amount of scholarship, so that's academics who study all these things. They look at all these manuscripts in order to work out which one they think is most likely to be accurate. There are lots of different ways in which they do that and it's all extremely helpful. If you ever want to chat about it more, please ask me. I don't want to use up too much time on this today, but decisions have to be made as to how to account for these differences. Usually in almost all the places in the Bible, in the New Testament where this happens, it's tiny differences, one word, one verse and they're usually easily explained. Two places where there are big differences. One of them is at the end of Mark's Gospel, the last half of chapter 16, and the other is here where we've read today John 7.53 to 8.11. This section doesn't appear in the earliest manuscripts of John's Gospel. You've got lots of different manuscripts. You can date them and the earlier ones don't include this section, but the later ones do. Now, what do we do with that? What do we do? Well, first of all, we recognize that this is the case. And when I say that, that should boost our confidence in the Bible, not undermine it. Because it's teaching us that we don't accept the Bible with a blind faith. Oh, it's the Bible. And therefore I believe it because it's just, you know, I'm just going to do that because my parents have told me to or because my minister has told me to or whatever. We don't accept Scripture because of that. We trust Scripture with an intellectually rigorous approach to manuscripts and to translation. So we make sure that our translation is accurate. And we make sure that we are careful about which manuscripts are used in terms of translation. All of that boosts our confidence in the Bible because it shows that it's actually been subjected to decades and decades and decades of intellectual scrutiny. And it comes out strong and healthy.

So that's a very, very important thing to recognize. But we do have to accept that this is the case. And so we have to ask ourselves the question, what do we do with this passage?

We're going through John's Gospel. What do we do about it? And I think there's three main options as to how to consider it. So we could say this was originally part of John's Gospel.

[10:15] And so we just assume that it was in John's Gospel. And, you know, we think, well, it must have been missed out of these early manuscripts by mistake. And the later ones corrected that mistake. Some people would argue that and that's totally okay. Other people would say it's not originally part of John's Gospel. So it was included later on, but not originally. So therefore, if you're going through John's Gospel, you should just miss it out, which is why the ESV puts it in brackets. So you can just go past it if you want to. And some people come to that conclusion. Third option is to say it's not originally part of John's Gospel, but it still records an event that happened in Jesus' life. And the argument from this position would say it was obviously known that this happened.

There was obviously a record of it amongst the early church. And it was placed in here because they wanted to make sure it wasn't forgotten. So that's just the options. You say that it's originally part of John's Gospel, so we should include it. It wasn't so we should leave it out. It wasn't part of the original Gospel, but still records something that happened in Jesus' life. I think those are the three options that you can take for interpreting it. Some of you may be number one, that's absolutely fine. Some of you may be number two, that's absolutely fine. I'm a number three. That's how I think we should approach this. I think there's strong evidence to suggest that it wasn't originally part of John's Gospel. And I can chat more about that with anybody who'd like to do so. But I do think that there is no evidence to suggest that this didn't happen. I think it absolutely did happen. And I think it records something very important in Jesus' life. And I think it's very helpful for us to look at it. And so that's what we're going to do today. But as we look at it, we're going to be looking at it in terms of some of the general lessons that it teaches us, rather than maybe digging in too closely to what it says in terms of details. And we want to focus on some of the important general lessons that this passage teaches us. And in particular, I want us to recognize that this passage is teaching us some crucial lessons about how we approach people who have made big mistakes in their lives. And that's a reality that we will face in the Christian church. As a church, we will be seeking to help and to welcome people who've made big mistakes in their lives. But it's not just people outside the church. We inside the church, we will make big mistakes as well. And we make bad choices in our lives, sometimes catastrophically bad. And we need to learn from Scripture how to approach those kind of situations. And I think we have to recognize that this is an area where we can very easily get things wrong. We can get it wrong in both directions. Sometimes people will make big mistakes in their lives and our response is just to be like, oh, it's fine. It's absolutely fine. It's fine. It's fine. It's fine. And we try to kind of gloss over things. Or we can go right to the other extreme where people make big mistakes in their lives and we're like, we keep them away. And we judge them and we think, no, you're not suitable to be part of us. We can go in either direction. Neither are wise and neither reflects what Jesus did. And what this passage reveals to us is that there's three crucial things that we need to keep in our minds when we face this kind of situation where we make big mistakes or where somebody else makes a big mistake. And we're going to look at these three things together.

And I'm going to put them just now. We diagram. And what I want us to learn is that we need to remember all three. So if you are a Christian or if you become a Christian, as we seek to follow Jesus, there's three lessons in this passage and we need to remember all three of them. And they are.

As Christians, we are to examine our own hearts before we judge others. So I put self-examination on our diagram. We examine our own hearts before we judge others. Self-examination. Second one, as Christians, we must have compassion for people who make big mistakes. So we've got show compassion on our diagram. We must show compassion when people make bad choices and when things go wrong in people's lives. And as Christians, we must listen to Jesus as he calls us away from sin. So I've put stop sinning in that corner, just as Jesus himself said it to this woman. Now, let me unpack each of these a little bit for a few moments. First of all, then self-examination. This is emphasized to us in verses 2 to 7 that are there on the screen. The Pharisees brought a woman to Jesus who had been caught in adultery. Their conclusion is that that was an offense worthy of death and they wanted to test Jesus by saying, well, we've caught her. What are you going to do about it? What are you going to say? And as Jesus always does, he responds to their challenge with so much wisdom. We are told that they said this to test him and then his immediate response was to bend down and write on the ground with his finger. Now, I have to say, I don't really know why he wrote on the ground.

[16:30] The various theories as to what he was doing, maybe he was just trying to diffuse the situation, maybe he was trying to draw attention away from the woman, maybe he was writing something from the Old Testament or something from the law, maybe he was writing something that the woman can read.

We just don't know and I don't know. So I don't know why he wrote on the ground. But one thing that that did serve to do was to, in many ways, pause the situation so that as they've come up to him and they're saying, what are you going to do about this? He actually slows things down, bends on the ground and when he gets back up, he actually points everything back to them and he gets them to examine their own hearts before they start throwing stones at her.

Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her. In other words, Jesus is getting them to examine themselves first and foremost. And that echoes wider teaching that we have in the New Testament. Matthew 7, 1-5, Jesus said, judge not that you be not judged, for with the judgment you pronounce, you will be judged and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck that's in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, let me take the speck out of your eye when there is the log in your own eye, you hypocrite.

First take the log out of your own eye and then you'll see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye. Later in the New Testament the same kind of emphasis is repeated. Therefore, let anyone who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall. 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. And all these passages are just bringing us back to a crucial emphasis in the Gospel that we need to resist the temptation that we all face of judging others when we see something wrong in their lives. And it's so incredibly easy to do.

I've done it so many times in my own life and so often it reflects a great hypocrisy where you look at the sin in someone else's life and you'll be like, oh have you heard about this and oh have you seen that and you'll highlight this and you'll be angry about that. And then in your own life there's tons of things going on but all of that's fine. And that inconsistency, that hypocrisy is something that Jesus repeatedly calls out. And we are being reminded again that if we want to dig into someone's life to see what's wrong and if we want to highlight errors and if we want to see where someone is mucking up in their lives then there's only one place to look, your own heart. We examine ourselves before we judge others. And when the Pharisees are confronted with their own hearts what do they do? They walk away. And again it's amazing how

[20 : 16] Jesus does this. He doesn't tell them to do anything other than just examine their own heart. He doesn't tell them to go away, he doesn't say leave her alone or anything like that. He says, look at your own hearts and from that point they all turn and walk away. And an important point to recognize here is that what Jesus is getting us to do is not to compare our lives with other people. If you're just comparing yourself with other people it's dead easy to find somebody who's mucked up more than you. That's easy. And if you're trying to draw the comparisons to think, well I'm comparing faults then it's not hard to find somebody who's got faults that you don't have. And it's not hard to find somebody who probably looks and is worse in inverted commas than us in terms of lots of ways. That's an easy comparison to me but that's not the comparison that Jesus is asking. When Jesus asks us to examine our own hearts and when Jesus starts speaking about sin we are not comparing ourselves to other people, we're comparing ourselves to God. We're measuring ourselves against his standard. And that's when we realize that none of us can pick up a stone and throw it at anybody else. So self-examination is crucial. Second thing we see is the command to show compassion. We see this beautifully,

Jesus stood up, said to her, women where are they? Has no one condemned you? She said, no one Lord. And then he says these wonderful words, neither do I condemn you. And again this echoes so much of what we see in terms of how Jesus behaved towards other people. In Luke's Gospel in chapter 7 a woman who was known to the whole community as a prostitute came in to Jesus and anointed his feet and began wiping his feet with her hair. We have to work to recognize how shocking and scandalous that was in the public's eye. And people start to criticize her, Jesus says, leave her alone. Luke 19, Jesus stops to speak to Zacchaeus, the tax collector, the biggest crook in the town. I often think this is not a perfect comparison but I think it is still a legitimate comparison. When you hear tax collector, our modern day equivalent is a drug dealer. And I say that because a tax collector was trying to rip off everyone around them in order to get rich.

A drug dealer didn't exactly the same thing. And Jesus comes to Zacchaeus and says I'm going to come and have dinner in your house today. And then in Luke 23 you have a thief on a cross beside Jesus who's being executed because he's an absolutely horrendous criminal. And he asks Jesus to remember him and Jesus says today you'll be with me in paradise. People whose lives are a mess. People who deserved to be condemned by Jesus and who were condemned by everybody else. Jesus shows them compassion. And in all these situations we see that Jesus can recognize that behind the guilt and the sin and the shame of people who've made big mistakes lies precious people who need to be saved. In John 8 1 to 11 all the Pharisees could see was a slut. Jesus could see past her guilt and shame. He could see the complexity of her life. He could see that anyone

who's caught up in sin is a sinner and a sufferer at the same time. And that's true for us today that no matter what mess people's lives are in, yes they've made bad choices but they've also been victims of all sorts of other difficulties and sorrows and hardships in their lives. Jesus recognizes all that, he recognizes all of that in this woman and he shows her compassion. But he also tells her to stop sinning. And these last few words in verse 11 are so crucial. Jesus's compassion didn't mean ignoring sin. It's not like oh just carry on it's fine I'm not going to say anything. No he's saying turn away from the life that's getting you into this mess. And so he shows her compassion but he points her away from sin. So she's been saved from condemnation but that's not an excuse just to go back and return to habits that are sinful. It's an opportunity for her to turn away from that kind of thing for good. To follow him and to leave her past behind her. And again this is exactly what the rest of the New Testament teaches. In John 14 Jesus says if you love me you'll keep my commandments. And in the letters that Paul writes later in the Gospels you have these descriptions of various sins that people have fallen into. And Paul says and such were some of you but you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified. And so the great emphasis is that yes you have people who come to Jesus as sinners and they're healed and they're forgiven but now as believers they turn away from sin and they follow him. Let me read you a great example from 1 Corinthians chapter 6. Paul says do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do you not be deceived neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers just like this woman nor men who practice homosexuality nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor revilers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God and such were some of you. That's what that's the people who made up this church in Corinth but you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of God. So Jesus shows us compassion but he also calls us to follow his ethical framework and he has the right to do that because he is our Creator. And that's all part of the logic of the gospel. God is our Creator. We have turned away from him. We're wandering off on our own direction and Jesus calls us to turn around, to repent. Jesus calls us to trust in him. Jesus calls us to a life where we follow his word and his Holy Spirit is renewing us and restoring us to make us more and more back into what our Creator made us to be. It all makes logical sense and the whole reason he does that is because he loves us.

[27 : 52] Why did Jesus say those words? Is it because he wants to boss the woman around? Is it because he wants to just impose his religious legislation upon her? No. It's because he loves her.

And we see this in our own lives all the time. So just to use a very personal example, I had a very, very busy two or three weeks and I was away last weekend and I had various speaking engagements, lots of travelling, all stuff that I'd been asked to do that I agreed to do. Nothing that was forced on me, it was all stuff that I'd agreed to do and I enjoyed to do but it was very, very busy. Then came home Saturday night, then Peach and Sunday then Monday. I had loads of meetings Tuesday, loads of meetings. I was out both evenings. There's loads of stuff going on. It's a very busy time of year for the church. There's just lots of things denominational going on just now ahead of our general assembly in May. So it's busy, busy, busy, busy, busy and by Thursday this week I was absolutely shattered. And Yuna, my wife, very kindly and very gently says, you go and take a rest. And so I went and I rested for an hour and that made me feel a lot better.

And so she very gently told me to rest and she also quite firmly told me to stop taking on too much work. And so there's a gentle, you know, look, rest and affirm Thomas, stop being so stupid. And I needed both. And why did she give me both? Because she loves me. And that's exactly what Jesus is doing here. He shows her compassion but he also says, stop doing this, turn away from it. [29 : 49] Now when he says stop sinning, he's not saying be sinless. None of us are sinless until we're taken to heaven. We constantly face this battle between our sin and what Jesus is calling us to. But what we are recognizing here is that Jesus is calling us away from everything that damages us and it damages our relationship with God. So these three lessons are crucial. The need to examine our own hearts before we judge others. The need to show compassion. The need to turn away from sin.

What I want to just highlight as we conclude is that we've got to remember all three. And the reason I'm saying that is because I think very often as individuals and as Christian churches, just nationally, we're prone to focusing on two instead of on three. So we might just focus on these two. Examine your heart and stop sinning. What does that result in? That results in a mindset where you're like, yes, I'm failing. I know that I'm getting this wrong. And so we're frustrated with ourselves. And we

see in others, we think, yes, and these people are doing things wrong. They need to stop sinning. They need to stop making these mistakes. And there's a very, very negative emphasis in it all. And it can result in a faith that is quite distant where we're like, well, I'm not doing particularly well, but neither are they. They need to stop sinning. There's this sense of burden. I'm not doing what I should be. Neither are they. And there's a kind of harshness because there's just this focus on how this is wrong. This is wrong. People are bad and bad. And there's this kind of coldness and a harshness there. And that kind of predominant negativity means that if people make mistakes, we keep our distance. And that we can easily fall into that trap. The opposite can happen on this side, where, you know, yes, we examine ourselves, we see that we struggle, but we want to show compassion to people. And we think, well, yeah, we don't want to be harsh. We don't want to be discouraged. We don't want to ever tell anybody that they're doing something wrong. And the result is that we can actually kind of gloss over things that are sinful.

And we want to affirm every kind of behavior. And we want to make sure that everybody feels accepted and that nobody is kind of challenged. Everybody is just comforted. So we don't want any boundaries in terms of moral behavior. And we don't want to offend people, even if they've departed from the Bible. And in many ways, that's the kind of opposite to the first problem where you're just this, there's almost an overly kind of an overly open approach to things that are actually unscriptural and unhelpful. And then there's the third possibility here where, you know, we want to show compassion to people. We think, you know, we want to help people. And we want people to turn away from sin. We want people to follow Jesus. But we don't really examine ourselves.

And that can lead us to a mindset that kind of sees ourselves as better than others. So, yeah, we might be really nice. We're compassionate. And we might be saying, yes, this is the right way to go. But there's a kind of superiority in it where we don't recognize that we are as broken as everybody else. Now, all of these are over generalizations. You know, so I know that that any diagram, any summary that that is generalizing things. But I think the points are valid, that we can lean towards to, we can forget one, and it can send us into all sorts of pitfalls in terms of how we approach people who've fallen into mistakes. You know, and a great example, a great example is what we have in Matthew 8, where somebody has fallen into a sexual sin. We might respond to that by being like, we're kind of distant, harsh. We might be the opposite. It's actually fine. It's actually okay. We don't think that that's a bad thing. Or we might be like, oh, well, we'll help you.

But I'm glad I'm not actually like that myself. None of these are helpful. None of these are right. None of these are the gospel. We've got to remember all three of these. And the question we have to ask is how do you do that? And the answer is by focusing on Jesus. You keep looking to Jesus. [34 : 49] Because Jesus helps us avoid all these distortions. Because Jesus reminds us that we can't stand at a distance. We've got to show compassion to people. Jesus reminds us that we can't just accept anything.

We've got to turn back to what God or Creator has called us to be. And Jesus reminds us that we can't see ourselves as better than others because we are just as broken. It's just more private. And so Jesus helps us avoid all of these mistakes. He exposes our own hearts. And that drives us to Jesus for forgiveness. He inspires the deepest compassion. And that makes us long to reach out with the good news that he has. And he shows us a better way to live our lives.

And that makes us want to turn away from sin. To listen to his word. To keep his commandments. And it's all just a great reminder of the fullness of the gospel. And so I want, as we conclude, to just ask you which side of the diagonal do you fall onto? Do you fall over here? Do you fall over here? Do you fall over here? We all fall. And it's just a great reminder for us all to just think that through. Also, if you're not really sure about the gospel, not really sure about what you think of Jesus, and surely you want this in your life? Surely we want a life where we are ready to examine our own hearts before we judge others. Surely we want to show compassion. And surely we want to turn away from sin. Amen. Let's pray.