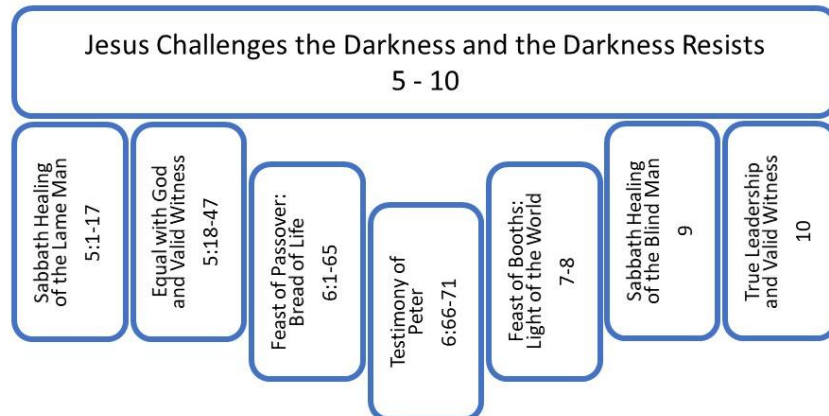


Lesson 15: John 8:1-11 Text Criticism and A Passage in Search of a Home

Introduction



I am going to talk to you today about something that may be very new to you, maybe shocking. It is probably noted in your Bible, but you may have never paid attention to it and it is possible nobody has ever brought it up in church. It is not a secret. It is just not talked about.

If you have a Bible version that gives you any notes at all then your Bible probably sets off John 7:53 through 8:11 with an asterisk or with brackets or some mark with a footnote informing you that this passage is not included in the earliest manuscript copies of the Gospel of John. The Bibles I use all note this. I also checked to see if it is noted in an approved Roman Catholic version. The standard Bible version recognized by the Roman Catholic Church in Croatia does not provide any textual notes at all. So, you do not see it there. But the New Jerusalem Bible, which is an approved Roman Catholic version, does include a note agreeing that these verses do not appear in the oldest manuscripts of John.

This is a very well-known issue in biblical studies. Since the 4th century, the time of Augustine, there has been discussion about whether this passage is original to John. Prior to Augustine there is no discussion, but then, the text does not appear in manuscripts much before Augustine.

Even though the discussion has been known and ongoing for centuries, most readers of the Bible skip over the note without thinking about it. And preachers who believe the text is authentic or at least inspired by the Holy Spirit, preach from it without comment on its origin. And preachers who do not believe the text is inspired or authentic mostly just skip over it without any preaching or comment. So, most Christians are left uninformed.

I admit that for this series I did think about both of these options. The option of either just teaching the text without really addressing the problem. Or just skipping over it. I do not want to stir up questions and problems that we do not have time to adequately address. But then again, the goal of this series is the interpretation of the biblical text of John, so to skip over such a significant question would not be faithful to the aim of our study.

I believe that the Bible is the verbally inspired Word of God. And that, as such, the text of every book is without error on all the matters it addresses in the original text. There do still exist some questions about the original text. We are not always certain that we have the original words written down by the authors. To determine the original is the task of the field of textual criticism. But to talk about text criticism, we need to go even further back and ask questions about how we got our Bible. This whole topic is much too big for this podcast. I am just going to overview the issues. If you want further study, you need to find a good book on the subject. I recommend, *The Origin of the Bible*, which is a collection of essays by many experts in different fields edited by Philip Comfort.

I will do this lesson in two parts. First, I will address the question about the origin of this text. Then I will consider the passage and how we should interpret it.

I. The Origin of John 7:53-8:11

We start first with the question, “What is the origin of John 7:53-8:11?”

Let’s break that question down into five sub-questions.

- 1) How do we know anything?
- 2) How do we know what books belong in the Bible?
- 3) How do we know the original text of the books we accept as Bible?
- 4) What do we know about the origin of John 7:53-8:11?
- 5) What do we conclude about John 7:53-8:11?

1. How do we know anything?

This is the question of epistemology or the study of knowledge. It is a question that took up a bit of my thought life in college. My undergraduate degree is a Bachelor of Science in the Philosophy of Science. I studied at North Carolina State University, an engineering and textiles school. My focus was Computer Science. So, for example, in the philosophy department we did not talk about how to create a computer with artificial intelligence. We talked about what is artificial intelligence? How do you know when you have got it? How do you define intelligence? How do you define artificial intelligence? Those are philosophy questions. We were thinking about the nature and definition of science. What is good science? And the nature of knowledge is integral to those kinds of questions.

I learned through my course of study that I am a presuppositionalist. I believe that all human beings depend on presuppositions as foundational to their world view, whatever it is. You have to start somewhere. And your starting point is ultimately not provable. You start with a presupposition you have accepted by faith but cannot prove.

For example, a person might argue that true knowledge comes from mathematics and the hard sciences, such as physics and chemistry. The problem with this statement is that it is not itself provable by math or the hard sciences. Using only math and physics, I cannot get to the statement “true knowledge only comes from math and physics.” So, either this statement is unknowable, because I can’t get there from math or physics. Or the person who believes it accepts it as a presupposition to start from. They have to admit that they cannot know that knowledge only comes from math and science. But they can admit to taking that statement based on faith. By faith, I am starting with the presupposition that only math and science can provide true knowledge.

We can then argue about whether that proposition is true or false, whether there are other sources outside of math and science that can provide knowledge, but at least we know the person’s starting point.

I have a starting point I cannot prove. I start with two basic presuppositions. God is real. And the Bible is his word. I take both of those statements to be true, and I build my world view from that starting point.

Saying that I cannot prove these two points, does not mean at all that I am not able to argue for the existence of God. I can. There are great rational arguments for the existence of God. And it does not mean I have no reasons for believing the Bible is truly from God. I do. I can make a strong case that if there is any text, any word from God, the Bible is it.

But I can’t prove absolutely that God exists, and the Bible is his Word. Though I believe absolutely those two truths. But can I believe prove absolutely that God exists and the Bible is his Word? Though I believe absolutely in those two truths, I do not believe that I can prove absolutely those two truths. I take them by faith, a reasonable, rational faith, but still faith. God is real, and he has communicated to us by the written word of Scripture. This is my starting point.

I do not believe that God’s existence depends on me to prove. I do not believe that people define God. I believe that God defines people. I also do not believe that people define what is the Bible. God

is sovereign over his Word. God has defined the Bible. God inspired the Bible. God had it written down. He had it made known to his people. He has guarded it through the centuries. God superintends the production and transmission of his word.

My question was this, "How do we know anything?" My answer is that since God is real and he has communicated to us through his word the Bible, my two presuppositions, since these are true, we can know all kinds of things. This is my starting point. From this, I would affirm that God has made the universe. And God has made people in his image. He has created us in such a way that we can come to know truth. And though the fall of mankind into sin has messed with our ability to know spiritual and moral truth, we are still quite good at discovering truths about the material universe. He has made the universe knowable, and he made us in a way to know it.

Now, moving from my starting point of God and the Bible, we could ask another question.

2. How do we know what books belong in the Bible?

This is the study of canonicity. I believe in the Bible. What is the Bible?

Now, it is misleading as some imply that the church had a number of books under consideration and decided which books belong in the Bible and which books do not belong in the Bible. Considering just the New Testament, the writings of the apostles began to be read in the early church for the teaching and encouragement of believers. The texts read were from an apostle or had a connection to an Apostle, such as Mark's connection to Peter and Luke's connection to Paul. The quality and content of these early writings commended them to the early church. They were received broadly through the whole early church. In later centuries, church councils affirmed these writings which had already been received and were used in the church. There were some questions about whether to keep in a few books like Hebrews or 2 Peter. Should they be retained? We are not sure who wrote Hebrews. Do we keep it? Is it really Bible? But there were no other options of books to add in. It was only discussing whether or not to exclude. There were no other books really under consideration to be added. There candidates of early books written with a connection to an apostle and widely received and used by the early churches.

Writings from later generations, like the so-called Gospel of Peter, were not included as canon, not because the church councils decided to leave those books out, but because such books were never even considered. Writings coming after the first century could not be shown to faithfully bear an apostolic witness. And were not available in the time of the early church to have been received and used by the early church. There are only a couple of rare anomalies like the Shepherd of Hermas from the late second century, which are positive as early Christian writings and have value, but also do not meet the standard of having an apostolic witness or near universal acceptance in the early church.

So, later believers did not establish the Canon or standard of Scripture. They gave witness to the text of Scripture already received by the church. I return to my presuppositions that God is real, and the Bible is his word. Ultimately, I have to trust that God produced and protected his Word. Again, we can and should make a study of how the Bible has come down to us. Though in the end, it is a matter of faith that God superintends the transmission of his Word. It is a rational faith. It is not a blind faith. But it still is faith.

Accepting that the books we have in the Bible are the books God intended for us to have, we can then ask another question.

3. How do we know we have the original text of the books we accept as Bible?

You can guess what my bottom-line answer is going to be. The bottom-line is that we have to trust that God protects his Word and delivers it to us. God is sovereign over the transmission of his Word.

But just because God is sovereign, that does not mean that he does not involve people, and it does not mean that he makes things easy for us. God delights in giving us challenges which require reason, hard work, and faith.

We no longer possess the original manuscripts of any biblical book. What we possess are copies and recopies of the text through time. What we have are over 24,000 manuscripts which are copies of the whole New Testament or more often a book of the New Testament or frequently a section of a book. And the study of lower text criticism considers the various manuscripts of any one book or passage to identify or come as close as possible to the original autograph of the text, the words written down by the biblical author.

Some people are very skeptical about our ability to come very close to the original. I am very positive about our ability to come extremely close to the original. Copying trends from the early centuries have been identified. For example, what is known as the Western type of text, includes copies that were more frequently adjusted to smooth out difficult Greek or to clarify ambiguities. The scribes following this trend did not hold as strongly to word for word copying. So, they created for us a number of our differences that we have to figure out.

The Alexandrian type of text, however, followed an earlier copying philosophy that prioritized holding to the original. The consistency of the Alexandrian type as well as the existence of very early papyrus texts are two of the factors that help text critics identify changes that took place by copyists over time who may have sought to clarify the text or who simply made mistakes, copying from line to line.

Usually, the changes do not affect the meaning of the text because the changes were inserted to make the Greek clearer. So, even though, for example, the Greek of John 6 contains 15 variations in different manuscripts, we have high probability concerning the original text. The variations are almost all just one or two words. And even when we do not know for sure which variation is original the differences have very little effect on our confidence in the meaning of the text, especially since meaning is always dependent on the surrounding context, and we have very high confidence that surrounding context is original.

So, even though a multitude of texts with a multitude of variations does challenge our ability to state with absolute precision what the original text of a biblical book was, what the multitude of texts does do for us is to show us that we really are working from an original autograph that has been faithfully copied. And it has resulted in some minor scribal error and scribal adjustment over time, but the consistency of all these texts as a whole indicates to us there was an original. What we do not find are widely different versions of the same book. We do not have three significantly different versions of the Gospel of John or wildly different versions of Matthew with different stories and different arrangements and different theology. Those don't exist.

In fact, the case of John 7:53-8:11, where an entire story seems to have been added to later copies, is extremely rare in the text tradition. In fact, there are only two cases in the New Testament where the question is about more than the text of one sentence. We are considering one of those two cases here in John 8. The other is at the end of the Gospel of Mark, chapter 16 verses 9-20. And if your Bible has notations it will show you that those are also set off. In both cases the text shows up in later manuscripts, not earlier ones. Neither case actually creates a problem for scholars concerning the original text. It is agreed that neither text belongs to the original.

So even though we must admit that there is a challenge to establishing exactly what the original text was word by word, we have confidence in the vast majority of the words. And we have confidence that there was an original autograph and that we have a way of working towards that. We can understand why most of the changes were made. The many copies have preserved for us the original. And where we are unsure, the meaning is not significantly hindered by questions about the text. The problem of interpretation is not much about, "Do we have the right text?" It is much more about understanding the Greek of the original. Our translation and understanding of the text is not really a textual issue. It is more about grammar and syntax and context and the flow of the argument. It is about translating what we do have.

John 7:53-8:11 is one of two examples of very unique, very unusual cases where a whole passage does not seem to be original to the text.

So, on to our fourth question.

4. *What do we know about the origin of John 7:53-8:11?*

The commentaries I have looked at regarding this passage are all agreed that it does not belong where we find it and, in fact, is not original to John. This is the conclusion of Carson in the *Pillar New Testament Commentary*, Beasley-Murray in the *Word Biblical Commentary*, Borchert in the *New American Commentary*, Kostenberger in *Encountering John*, Metzger in the *Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*. Beasley-Murray states, "It is universally agreed by textual critics of the Greek NT that this passage was not part of the Fourth Gospel in its original form."¹

The three main reasons for concluding that the text does not belong where it is found in John are these:

(1) The external textual evidence shows this passage was not included in the early manuscripts of John. And that is most important.

(2) The internal evidence does not seem to fit with John. For example, the reference to scribes and Pharisees is not found elsewhere in John, but it is found in the other gospels. The Mount of Olives is not referred to elsewhere in John, but it is found in the other gospels. And no one else in John refers to Jesus using this word for teacher but that is in other gospels. The internal evidence suggests this story fits with the oral tradition from which the other three gospels draw but does not suggest this story fits well into the Gospel of John.

(3) The story interrupts the flow of the narrative as 8:12 continues the debate in the temple that we left off in 7:52 about who Jesus is, and the rest of chapter 8 fits very well into the context of the last day of the Feast of Booths that we were at when we end chapter 7. The structure of chapter 8 also chiastically parallel the structure of chapter 7, but this story interrupts that pattern.

These second two points about style and structure are not conclusive in my mind. Sometimes a passage does not seem to fit well. And I do not want to presume that I know what the original author was doing. But these questions about style and structure fit with the much bigger problem that this story is not found in the early manuscripts.

Addressing that problem, Beasley-Murray states the case of the external textual evidence with these five points.

(1) No Greek commentator on the Gospel of John commented on this passage, referred to this passage, before Euthymius in the 12th century, 11 hundred years after Jesus. And at that point Euthymius questioned the passage.

(2) No Eastern commentator commented on the passage before the 10th century.

(3) The earliest western fathers, such as, Irenaus, Tertullian, and Cyprian, do not refer to this passage at all in their writings.

(4) It is found in the writing of Ambrose and Augustine, who are Western church fathers of the late 4th and early 5th centuries.

(5) Jerome acknowledged its presence in many Greek and Latin sources. But concerning these sources, Metzger points out that the passage does not occur in 27 of the early Greek manuscripts, including the earliest manuscripts. And when the passage is included in manuscripts, it is not always found in the same place. Most do include it in the place we have it in our Bibles right after John 7:52. But it is also found inserted after John 7:36, and after John 7:44, and even at the end of the John after 21:25. And it is found inserted at the end of the Gospel of Luke after 21:38.

5. *What do we conclude about John 7:53-8:11?*

I personally have to conclude that this passage is not original to John's Gospel. And I base that on the text evidence. It simply was not there originally in the early manuscripts.

¹ Beasley-Murray, G. R. (1999). *John* (Vol. 36, p. 143). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

So, is John 7:53-8:11 not Holy Scripture? Is it not inspired by God?

That is actually a more difficult question. Some scholars say, “No.” Some say, “Yes.”

Beasley-Murray writes this, “There is no reason to doubt its substantial truth. The saying that it preserves is completely in character with what we know of our Lord, and quite out of character with the stern discipline that came to be established in the developing Church.”²

Noticing how many different places copyists inserted the story, indicates that a number of believers felt this story should be included. They just did not know where to put it.

We can not tell how early the story begins to circulate. It seems to have the ring of truth. We can see in other incidents from his life Jesus escaping a trap set for him by opposing teachers and Jesus showing compassion to sinful people. This story could have been among the early oral and written tradition that the Gospel writers used and yet, simply did not make it into any of the four Gospels.

Being a cherished as a story about Jesus, particularly among believers in the West, but not belonging to any Gospel, it seems to have been a story without a home. Apparently, some early scribes decided to give it one.

Still, we do not know for sure if the story was created by later Christians, and then it became popular. Or if it came from an apostle. But even if it came from an apostle and it did not make it into the Bible, is it inspired by the Holy Spirit or was it not?

So, whether this passage should be considered biblical, “Is this real Bible”, I am going to leave to you to consider and reflect on?

Regardless, it is a text that needs to be handled with a little more thought than is typically put into it. So, let’s now consider the passage.

II. The Interpretation of John 7:53-8:11

Here is the text. John 7:53–8:11,

⁵³ Everyone went to his home. ¹ But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. ² Early in the morning He came again into the temple, and all the people were coming to Him; and He sat down and *began* to teach them. ³ The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery, and having set her in the center *of the court*, ⁴ they said to Him, “Teacher, this woman has been caught in adultery, in the very act. ⁵ Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women; what then do You say?” ⁶ They were saying this, testing Him, so that they might have grounds for accusing Him. But Jesus stooped down and with His finger wrote on the ground. ⁷ But when they persisted in asking Him, He straightened up, and said to them, “He who is without sin among you, let him *be the* first to throw a stone at her.” ⁸ Again He stooped down and wrote on the ground. ⁹ When they heard it, they *began* to go out one by one, beginning with the older ones, and He was left alone, and the woman, where she was, in the center *of the court*. ¹⁰ Straightening up, Jesus said to her, “Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you?” ¹¹ She said, “No one, Lord.” And Jesus said, “I do not condemn you, either. Go. From now on sin no more.”

The story is one of the accounts about Jewish teachers attempting to trap Jesus. They pose a question that has no good answer. At the very least, they hope to shame Jesus by luring him into an unpopular answer in front of a public crowd, even better they might trick Jesus into giving them grounds for bringing him to court.

But in this instance, the scribes and Pharisees do not stick to a hypothetical. They bring a real case before Jesus. They claim to bring before a woman caught in the act of adultery, and then they point out that the Law of Moses commands to stone such a woman.

² Beasley-Murray, G. R. (1999). *John* (Vol. 36, p. 143). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

The death penalty was integral to the God-inspired legal code provided through Moses. The specific method of stoning applies to only specific instances, most often to cases of occult or idolatrous practice. There are only two cases of sexual infidelity where the penalty is execution by stoning, both recorded in Deuteronomy 22:13-30. The first case commanding stoning is when a woman, claiming to be a virgin, is married and then found afterward not to be a virgin. The woman brought before Jesus is said to have been caught in the act, so it is hard to see how this case could apply. The second case commanding stoning is when a betrothed woman who is a virgin has sex with a man who is not her future husband. Betrothal is similar to what we would call engagement except it is legally binding. This is the only case that fits precisely with the words of the teachers who brought the woman to Jesus. This case could be considered adultery. The woman and the man could have been caught in the act. And it demands stoning.

Verse 6 in our passage tells us plainly that the goal here is not justice. And it is not the desire for purity in Israel. Rather, "They were saying this, testing Him, so that they might have grounds for accusing Him." The goal is to trap Jesus.

So, they want him to respond. At first, Jesus says nothing. He just stoops down to write on the ground. And when have we seen Jesus do that before? Write, stoop on the ground and write? In what other passage? That's right, none. We have never seen Jesus do this before. This is a first. And it has filled pages of commentary and time in many a sermon, wondering, "What was he writing?" And we don't know? We can only imagine. My favorite possibility would be that Jesus wrote from Deuteronomy 22:24, "then you shall bring them both out to the gate of that city and you shall stone them to death;" Jesus knows the law. Earlier in chapter 7 the crowds are astonished by his wisdom being a man not educated in the established structure. We also know from the other Gospels that Jesus quoted Deuteronomy three times to rebuke Satan in the wilderness. Jesus knows Deuteronomy. And if he were to write out Deuteronomy 22:24, he would score two points against the scribes and pharisees. First, Jesus would be asking, "Where's the man?" The law does not say, "Take the woman and stone her." The law says, "Take the man and the woman." If you caught them in the act, why did you let the man go? Why bring the woman here alone? If your concern is justice and holiness and the law of Moses, where is the man?

The second point would be the clarification that if she is to be stoned, the accusers should participate in the stoning. The convicted is not handed over to an executioner. If you bring the charge as a community, then you must take responsibility as a community to carry out the penalty. You must take her before the gates of the city, and you must stone her yourself. Are you prepared to do this?

We do not know what Jesus wrote. The story does not tell us. I think the most likely implication is that he is writing from the Law. And I think we are invited to reflect on what that might have been. And though I have no idea whether he wrote Deuteronomy 22:24 or not, I have no idea, I think the two points from Deuteronomy still stand implicitly. Where was the man? And if you go through with this, you all are going to have to stone her.

When Jesus does speak, he says these famous words, "He who is without sin among you, let him *be the* first to throw a stone at her." The words are not far from Matthew 7:5 "You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye." After speaking, Jesus bends down to write again, and one by one the accuser's leave.

Why do they leave? Are we to assume that each one was convicted by the words of Jesus of their own hypocrisy? That is a powerful lesson for all of us who read the story. And we may be convicted reading it. But is that the most likely assumption here. It is possible. I do not think it is likely. That is not how these accounts have ended throughout the Gospels. The people who test Jesus are not convicted or repentant when they lose. They are hardened to the message of Jesus. They are frustrated. They are probably angry. They have been shamed. So, they go off, and they plan some other way to catch Jesus.

We need to go back and think for a moment how is this case was supposed to trap him. They bring the woman and they say, "Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women; what then do You say?" For the trap to be a good one, Jesus needs to be in trouble whether he says, "No, she should not be stoned." or "Yes, she should be stoned." The trap is designed that either response will turn out bad for Jesus. So, we ask why? Why would it be bad for Jesus to say, "No, she should not be stoned." What do you think? What is the problem with saying, "Don't stone her?" If Jesus says, she should not be stoned, he is going against Mosaic law.

On the other hand, what is the problem with Jesus agreeing with Mosaic law and saying, "Stone her." What do you think? From our vantage point, we could certainly say that the problem is a lack of justice, since the woman is singled out apart from the man. But I do not think that was a significant problem for the Pharisees. I do not think that is what they were going at. There is another problem. The Jews are not allowed by their Roman overlords to carry out execution without permission. That is why the leaders have to humble themselves before Pilate when they want to execute Jesus. They need permission. If Jesus says to stone her then he is asserting the right of Jews to carry out the Law of Moses on all points, including the right the death penalty. And that would put him at odds with the Romans. That would give them means for accusing Jesus, not before the Jewish leaders but before the Roman governors. This is a political trap.

Jesus refuses to be caught in a false either/or solution. He sees through that. He goes a different route, and he escapes the trap. Though with Jesus, when he does go a different route, he never merely escapes the trap, he also impressively turns the trap around on his opponents, making some deeper point that they never expected. Jesus traps the trappers while also teaching spiritual truth to the public audience.

By saying, "He who is without sin among you, let him *be the* first to throw a stone at her." Jesus does three things at once. (1) First, he affirms the just penalty of the law of Moses. Yes, the Law says she should be stoned. (2) Second, also drawing from Moses, Jesus puts the responsibility to stone the woman back on the community. He puts these men in danger of acting without permission from their Roman rulers. I think this is Jesus calling their bluff. They had no plan to stone the woman. They are not permitted to do so by Roman law. They did not expect Jesus to agree to that. And if he did, they expected it to be theoretical and out of their hands. They never expected Jesus to say, "If you believe what you say, then you follow the law of Moses which commands that you stone her."

And that is why I believe the accusers dropped the stones and left. I do not believe the older men were first convicted of their own hypocrisy and so, they went away heavy with guilt. I believe they were the first to admit defeat. Even if the young men had not realized it yet, the older ones knew they were beaten. And they would rather bear the shame of defeat than for honor sake act rashly and stone her in opposition to Rome. They took the only way out, which was to leave the field of play.

The third thing Jesus did was to teach those around. He turned the trap into a an opportunity to call out the hypocrisy of the accusers who are abusing the concept of biblical justice to shame Jesus. They didn't care about the woman. Do you really want justice? Are you really concerned with holiness in Israel? Where is the man? Why just bring this woman? You, yourselves, are unrighteous in this very act of theoretical justice.

"They *began* to go out one by one, beginning with the older ones, and He was left alone, and the woman, where she was, in the center of *the court*." In my mind, I do not imagine that the disciples left or the members of the members of the public in the temple left. Jesus and the woman are alone as the participants in the mock trial. All the other participants, all the accusers, had left. Jesus and the woman are alone but still in the public court of the temple. What Jesus says next is both for the woman and for us, the public. Verses 10-11,

¹⁰ Straightening up, Jesus said to her, "Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you?" ¹¹ She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "I do not condemn you, either. Go. From now on sin no more."

What is Jesus teaching us? That's actually a tough question to answer. Is he teaching us that there should be no penalty, legal or spiritual, for adultery? Is he teaching us that sexual behavior is really a personal matter between consenting adults, and it is not so important to God?

Those ideas are sometime implied in the way this story is communicated but would certainly not fit with the gospels account of who Jesus is and what he stands for. Jesus teaches a high standard of sexual purity. In the sermon on the mount, Mathew 5:27-29 we read,

²⁷ You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery'; ²⁸ but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.

That is Jesus. Jesus said that. That is his teaching. Recognizing Jesus' abhorrence of sexual sin increases the impact of what he tells the woman. Jesus has the right to condemn her. In chapter 5 we read that the Father has given the Son authority to judge. Not only does he have the right, he has the responsibility. He ceases to be a righteous judge if he randomly chooses when and when not to apply the law. Her accusers did act hypocritically, and the man caught with her also ought to be judged, and both of these considerations might be enough to throw the case out of court on legal grounds. But on spiritual grounds, the woman is still responsible for her own sin. Jesus cannot let her off simply because he feels sorry for her. He can be compassionate and gentle and treat her with respect of one who is made in the image of God, but he cannot ignore the sentence for her sin.

So, how does Jesus get away with saying, "I do not condemn you?"

Jesus can say it. Jesus can say, "I do not condemn you" because Jesus is the one who chooses to take the condemnation on himself. Justice is not ignored. Speaking to this woman, Jesus is choosing to go to the cross on her behalf for this sin of adultery.

When you receive that beautiful truth that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Jesus Christ, you are receiving Jesus' words, "I do not condemn you, because these things you have done, your sin from your mind, from your words, from your actions, the pain you have caused other people, the things you deserve to pay back, the death penalty, the wages of your sin is death, and for all that you have done, I do not condemn you. I am going to take that on myself on the cross, and I am going to die for you because of your sin. That is how I can say, 'I do not condemn you.'"

Jesus offers this woman a second chance not by ignoring her transgression, but by taking full responsibility onto himself. We do not know what he sees in her heart. Does she believe? Does she not believe? We do not know. Jesus offers forgiveness to everyone who will receive it, both to those who will and to those who never will. He still makes the offer. The true state of this woman's heart is not a matter for us. That is a matter between her and Jesus.

As we have already seen in other passages in John, not the same but similar, Jesus connects forgiveness with the moral imperative of "go and sin no more." That too, we have to interpret with the rest of the gospel. The woman's ability to not sin is not the requirement for her forgiveness. Belief in Jesus is the requirement for forgiveness. To go and not sin is the right response of faith. If you have truly seen Jesus and truly received his gift of grace and believe in his Word, then you understand the command as a way to show gratitude and the way to live out the abundant life he has promised. It is not a way to earn a right standing before his court. That is a false hope that no one can achieve. We can never successfully go and sin no more.

This is a beautiful story of the wisdom and justice and compassion of Jesus. I wish there was not any doubt about its origin. I would love to be able to teach this story without question. Unfortunately, there are questions about its origin. And if I am to love God and his Word with my mind, I can't ignore just those questions.

I do recommend reading along with this story the indisputable account of Luke 7:36-50. It is not the same story. But it does include pharisees and a sinful woman and the compassion of Jesus. It is one of my favorite Gospel stories. It affirms the key themes of this story.

Jesus rejects the hypocrisy of the religiously self-assured.

And Jesus welcomes in those who know their sin, their brokenness, and need.

Jesus offers second chances.

And the moral life, the response of this woman is a response of worship and gratitude to the love that Jesus has shown her. Let's end with the end of that story. This is Luke 7:48-50,

⁴⁸ Then He said to her, "Your sins have been forgiven." ⁴⁹ Those who were reclining *at the table* with Him began to say to themselves, "Who is this *man* who even forgives sins?" ⁵⁰ And He said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Reflection questions

1. In light of the text criticism study suggesting John 7:53-8:11 is not original to the Gospel of John, what two or three major questions remain unanswered for you? Is there something you find troubling or something that you would like to follow-up on?
2. What two or three ideas were most helpful to you?
3. Reading John 7:53-8:11 as early Gospel tradition, what stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What are some questions that come to mind?
4. How would you describe the trap the Pharisees tried to draw Jesus into? How did they expect him to lose either way he answered?
5. How does Jesus' response both escape the trap and turn it back on the Pharisees?
6. What does the woman learn from Jesus?
7. How does this story speak to you personally? What main idea speaks most to you, whether to your head or to your heart?