

JUDGING THE JUDGES

by Ray C. Stedman

In his book *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis says,

If anyone thinks that Christians regard unchastity (sexual sin) as the supreme vice, he is quite wrong. The sins of the flesh are bad, but they are the least bad of all sins. All the worst pleasures are purely spiritual. The pleasure of putting other people in the wrong, of bossing and patronizing and spoiling sport, and backbiting; the pleasures of power, of hatred. For there are two things inside me...they are the animal self and the diabolical self; and the diabolical self is the worst of the two. That is why a cold self-righteous prig who goes regularly to church may be far nearer to hell than a prostitute. But of course it is better to be neither!

In this story found in John 8, Jesus confronts a band of cold, self-righteous prigs and a woman who was guilty of open sexual sin, and handles both with such wisdom and grace that the story has become a favorite of many.

If you have an early edition of the Revised Standard Version you will find this account in a footnote. This is because most scholars feel that it has been inserted into the Gospel of John at this point. In many ancient manuscripts it is found in different places. Some place it at the end of the Gospel of John; some place it after the 21st chapter of Luke; and some omit it entirely. Thus it is quite evident that there is some question as to whether this account really occurred at the time we find it in John's gospel. Most of the scholars agree, however, that this event did actually occur, and that it was part of our Lord's ministry. I think it is placed here in this section in John because it illustrates so well the statement of Jesus in Chapter 7, "Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment," {John 7:24 RSV}.

The story actually begins with the fifty-third verse of the seventh chapter.

They went each to his own house, but Jesus went to the Mount Of Olives.

Early in the morning he came again to the temple; all the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst they said to him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such. What do you say about her?" This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her." And once more he bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. But when they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the eldest, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus looked 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 do not sin again." {John 7:53-8:11 RSV}

Three remarkable contrasts in this story make it a striking event.

The first contrast is that of the great popular Teacher who yet has no home but is living in the open evidently on the sides of the Mount of Olives. Following the dialogue which we saw in the last chapter everybody "went to their own homes but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives." This passage and others confirm that he spent many a night alone on the mountainside. Even his disciples had homes they could stay in, but Jesus was often left entirely alone on the Mount of Olives.

If this event is properly placed in John, it occurred in early October. I have been in Jerusalem at that time of the year, and have found the nights to be very chilly at that altitude. Remember the account of the young man who told Jesus he would follow him wherever he went, and Jesus said, "Foxes have holes, birds of the air have

nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head," {Matt 8:20, Luke 9:58}. It is moving to think of the Savior of the world huddled in his robe under an olive tree, sleeping alone at night on the Mount of Olives!

The second contrast is that of the judges, who found themselves guilty.

The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst they said to him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such. What do you say about her?" {John 8:3-5 RSV}

It is clear they feel they have Jesus trapped by this; they have an airtight case, this "get-Jesus" committee!

You cannot read this, however, without asking yourself, "Where is the man in this adulterous union?" They had been caught "in the very act," and yet only the woman is brought before Jesus. Some of the commentators suggest that perhaps they knew the man -- he may have been one of their very own -- and they let him go. We do not know. But this indicates that a double standard was very much in effect in those times just as it is today.

These scribes and Pharisees referred to the law in the book of Leviticus in which God, speaking through Moses, had said that adultery was to be punished by stoning. They knew that Jesus was "The Friend of Sinners," that he was always on the side of the unfortunate and that he spent his time, not with the righteous, the wealthy or the respected, but with publicans and sinners. They obviously expected him to turn this woman loose. If he said that, he would be contradicting the Law of Moses and they would have him. They thought surely they had him trapped.

Not one of them could have remotely anticipated how Jesus would solve this. What he did was to stoop down and begin to write with his finger on the ground.

How much would you give to know what he wrote? This has intrigued scholars and students through the ages. How we wish we knew what he wrote! Many have guessed at it.

Once, reading in the prophet Jeremiah, I ran across a verse in the 17th chapter that struck me as possibly suggesting what Jesus wrote:

**O Lord, the hope of Israel,
all who forsake thee shall be put to shame;
those who torn away from thee
shall be written in the earth,
for they have forsaken the Lord,
the fountain of living water. {Jer 17:13 RSV}**

That suggests that Jesus wrote their names on the ground on that occasion. Whatever he wrote, the scribes and Pharisees apparently misunderstood him. They thought he was stalling for time, and they kept pressing him, asking him again and again to answer them and tell them what he would do. So, standing up, Jesus looked them right in the eye and uttered these famous words, "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone." Actually the word he uses is "sinless," "let him who is sinless..." This is the only time Jesus ever employed this word in the New Testament: "Let him who is sinless cast the first stone."

The result is almost humorous. They are stunned. Speechless! He has taken the wind right out of their sails. They were sure he was going to let this woman go, but instead he completely upholds the Law of Moses. He says, in effect, "Yes, she must be stoned. But I am going to appoint the executioners." They are dumbfounded at his words.

It is very important to notice that Jesus does uphold the Law. Many people take his later words to the woman to mean that adultery is but a minor peccadillo.

I read an account of a marriage quarrel recently where the man said to his wife, "All I did was have an affair.

What's the big deal?" Today we have come to regard adultery as nothing.

But Jesus does not say that. He upholds the Law. Adultery is sin. It violates marriage. It destroys society when it spreads and becomes commonplace. It wrecks homes; it injures innocent children; it attacks everything that God holds dear!

We who are counseling here at the church have frequent reason to see how terribly destructive adultery is, how it destroys marriages, wrecks relationships, and injures far and wide. What a terribly hurtful, fragmenting, shattering sin it is!

In the eyes of strict justice it is deserving of death, and Jesus upholds that fact, much to the surprise of the scribes and Pharisees.

But that is not all Jesus does. He also sees the hearts of these men. What he says, in effect, is, "You are no better off than she is. Your hearts are filled with murder and hatred." Malice gleamed in their eyes as they sought to exploit this woman's unfortunate situation in order to get at Jesus. But he read their hearts, and what he saw was worse even than her sin.

Someone has well said, "If the inner thoughts of a man were written on his forehead, he would never take his hat off!" I wonder if that is true of women also? I won't ask you to testify. But it is certainly true that God, who reads hearts, knows what is going on inside both men and women.

While these scribes and Pharisees were standing there, stunned, Jesus stooped down and began to write. Again, we are not told what he wrote. When you realize that this is the only time recorded in the Scriptures that Jesus ever wrote anything, you cannot help but wish that someone had preserved what he wrote.

My guess is that he wrote the four words, written once before by the finger of God, in the history of Israel. In the book of Daniel there is the story of King Belshazzar who put on a great feast and drunken revels and debauchery of every type was going on. Finally, the king resorted to the ultimate blasphemy of using in the revelry the sacred vessels that had been taken from the temple in Jerusalem. Suddenly a great hand appeared and wrote four words on the wall. The king turned ashen, and all the lords and courtiers were stunned and silent. They did not know the meaning of the Persian words, "MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN," which appeared, so they called in the prophet Daniel to interpret them. His interpretation was, "You are weighed in the balance and found wanting," {Dan 5:25-29}.

If that is what Jesus wrote, we can understand the actions of these men. Verse 9 says, "But when they heard it..." They could see what he wrote and the words rang in their heads as though they had been spoken. "When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the eldest." What a tremendous disappearing act takes place here! The oldest one (the one with the longest record of sin) suddenly remembered that he had a previous appointment. The next one thought he heard his wife calling. Another had a sudden fit of coughing and had to leave. Another felt it was time for lunch. They disappeared one by one until no one was left but Jesus and the woman alone.

That brings before us the third contrast in this story: The guilty woman who found herself forgiven. "Jesus looked 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 do not sin again.'" What a beautiful picture! Notice how Jesus calls her attention to the fact that she has no human accusers. He has dismissed the jury; their malice has disqualified them to serve.

Even today if you are arrested for a crime, and nobody appears in court to accuse you, the judge will dismiss the case. So Jesus dismissed these men.

But then come these amazing words: "Neither do I condemn you." He alone had the right to condemn this woman. He was the Sinless One, the only One who fulfilled the qualifications to stone. But he did not do so. When you ask why, it is clear that it was because he forgave her sin. Without forgiveness, justice must be satisfied. God never waves his hand and dismisses sin as though it is of no account. His own truth, his law,

his holy character, demand that any deviation from righteousness be punished. Justice must be satisfied -- unless sin is forgiven. So it is clear that the basis on which our Lord said these words is that he had found a way to forgive this woman her sin.

A legalist may protest at this point, "How could he do this? There was no basis for it. In fact, she doesn't even confess her sin, or repent of it, or even say she's sorry. Didn't Jesus himself go about preaching, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand'? What do you say to that? The answer has to be, "Yes, there must be repentance." God is not a loving, grandfatherly type who says, "That's all right. Forget it. I won't hold it against you." You never find that anywhere in Scripture. That idea of God is a figment of someone's imagination which has been imposed upon a God of truth and justice. It is totally out of character. No, God never does that.

What he requires, of course, is an acknowledgment of evil. There must be repentance. Even God cannot forgive sin which is not acknowledged. When you say, "Yes, I did it. It's wrong. I agree with you," that is repentance. Then forgiveness can come. "But where does this woman do that?" someone says. The answer, of course, is, "Within her heart!" Remember we are dealing with One who knows the hearts of men. He knows what is going on in the inner life, the inner thoughts. He knew her heart. Somewhere in the course of this incident she had repented.

I do not know if we can accurately picture what was going on when she was brought before Jesus. I can see her being dragged in, red faced, her hair in disarray. She is angry, upset, rebellious, and bitter, perhaps striking out against her accusers. But when she sees how Jesus handles this crowd of hypocritical judges, and feels that his sympathies are with her, somewhere the mercy and love that was in his face and voice began to touch her. She realized how wrong she was, that she had sinned, and she repented. When she did, Jesus forgave her, obviously anticipating his death upon the cross for her.

The cross is always an eternal event in the mind of God. The sins of the people who lived in Old Testament days were also forgiven on the basis of the death of Jesus on the cross. There is no other way that God can forgive sin. In anticipation of that cross, Jesus forgave her sin. The proof of it is in the words he next said, "Go, and do not sin again."

That is the word I would like to leave ringing in our ears this morning. If we have acknowledged our guilt, and heard God's words of forgiveness, he is saying to us, "Go, and do not sin again." He could never say that to this woman unless something had happened within her; the power of sin had been broken. We do not sin because we are temporarily overwhelmed by a strong passion of the moment. We sin because we have a nature of sin, of self-centeredness; we hunger after things that are wrong and we easily yield to sin. We cannot help ourselves at times.

"Man is born unto sin," the Scriptures say {cf, Job 5:7}. We all are born to share that fallen nature. Unless that power of sin is broken within us, unless God does something to free us and give us the possibility of a new life he never will say to us, "Go, and sin no more."

But when Jesus says these words to this woman it is clear that she has the possibility of fulfilling it. He never tells anyone to do something that he does not enable him or her to do. Thus, he does not forgive us in order that we might go back and continue in our sins. The Apostle Paul wrote these wonderful words to his son in the faith, Titus, "He gave himself for us, to redeem us from all iniquity, and to purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds," {Tit 2:14 RSV}.

This beautiful story brings us to that place this morning. We understand that when our sins are forgiven it is to free us that we might begin to live a different lifestyle; never to go back to the things that we have left behind. Sometimes we may. Sometimes we are weak, and need again the forgiving grace of God. But forgiveness is always designed to set us free. That is why it is given. When our Lord forgave this woman that is what he did: He set her free to be a different kind of person than she ever was before.

There is a chorus written by Bill Gaither which I have come to love, that describes the change forgiveness makes:

Something beautiful, something good,
All my confusion he understood.

All I had to offer him was brokenness and strife,
But he made something beautiful of my life.

That is what this story is about, and that is why it is here in the gospel account.

Perhaps no individual in history has illustrated this as well as John Newton. Newton was once a wild and sinful man, a slave trader who ran slaves from Africa to England. But God saved him. He was converted in the midst of a storm in the Atlantic when he thought he was doomed. He became a great preacher, and a great hymn writer in England. One hymn which he wrote which I have long enjoyed (but never heard sung) is a description of his own experience. He puts it this way,

In evil, long I took delight,
Unawed by shame or fear,
'Til a new object met my sight,
And stopped my wild career.

I saw One hanging on a tree,
In agony and blood,
Who fixed His languid eyes on me,
As near His cross I stood.

Sure, never to my latest breath
Shall I forget that look.
It seemed to charge me with His death,
Though not a word He spoke.

A second look He gave, which said,
"I freely all forgive,
My blood was for thy ransom paid,
I died that thou mayest live.

And live he did! Never the same man, totally changed from his wild and sinful past. Perhaps the best-known of John Newton's hymns is probably the most popular hymn of all:

Amazing grace! how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

Those are probably the sentiments that this woman kept in her heart throughout the rest of her life. So, if you have found forgiveness from the Lord, remember you have been forgiven that you, too, might "Go, and sin no more!"

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