

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN - COMMENTARY

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Lesson 8 - John 8:1-59

A Compassionate Pillar of Fire Jesus Saves an Adulteress (John 8:1-11)

More will be heard from Christ's experience at Tabernacles, but only after the story of his merciful treatment of the woman taken in adultery.

Prodded by the religious leaders, a self-righteous job brought a woman "caught in the act of adultery" to Jesus. They asked him to render a judgment about her.

It was a trap. If he recommended stoning, he officially broke Roman law which reserved to itself the right of capital punishment. He would also lose his reputation as a friend of sinners and a teacher of compassion.

If he rejected stoning, he would break Mosaic law which called for capital punishment of an adulteress.

Jesus responded to their attitudes about the woman, not to their conspiracy to entrap him. His reaction was a two-step procedure.

First by silence. Jesus bent down and started tracing on the ground with his finger. Christian imagination has long speculated about that body talk. Did he write out the sins of her accusers? Was he just doodling? Or was he simply letting silence take its toll? This latter position seems the best interpretation. Jesus used the power of silence to let everyone feel the contrast of their noise, so full of self-righteousness, so keyed up for a potential kill, so committed to the pleasure of discrediting him.

Jesus used the therapy of silence to initiate a reflective mood. He did not respond defensively, accusing them of being unfair to him. He did not scorn them as hypocrites. He did not use a brilliant debater's point to get them off his back. He introduced silence. Their heavy and obscene breathing sounded awkward. His technique was like the sound of one hand clapping. He gave them no hand to clap against.

Only when the dust was literally settled and that little army of moralistic combatants found no way to start a war did Jesus speak to their moral attitudes. Jesus said nothing about the woman's adultery. Still bent down, not looking into their faces, he said words that let them judge themselves. "Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her" (verse 7). The Greek word *anamatetos* "without sin" can also mean "without a sinful attitude."

What attitudes was he talking about?

(a). Their attitude of using authority only to punish and condemn. Authority should primarily be a positive and creative attitude. Those who possess it should be about the business of "authoring" life and love and justice, to heal and rehabilitate.

(b). Their impersonal attitude toward people. They saw her as a category, not a person. An adulteress, not a human being. She is simply a nameless woman guilty of a moral and civil crime. How different God is. "I have called you by name....Because you are precious in my eyes and glorious, and because I love you" (Isaiah 43:1,4). God is fond of names because God is fond of people. God will not treat a human being as a category. Neither will Jesus.

(c). Their possible lustful attitude. He did not accuse them of this, but asked them to check their hearts. How pure were they? Had they transcended lust and arrived at a life of chaste love? Why were they exerting so much moral passion about the sexual sin of this woman? Did they have something to hide?

The beauty of this whole scene was that Jesus did not engage those "little murderers" on their own terms, but on his. He deftly changed the focus from the woman to themselves. Who were they? What kind of moral attitudes did they espouse?

One by one they dropped their stones and crept silently away. He was left along with the woman. St. Augustine visualized the scene with these words, "There remained a great Miseria (misery) and a great Misericordia (mercy)." A miserable woman. A merciful savior. Jesus stood up and looked around. Possibly with a smile he could have said, "Oh! Where did they all disappear to? Look at the rocks. Didn't anyone condemn you?" "No one, sir." "Nor do I condemn you. You may go now. But from now on, avoid this sin" (see verses 10-11).

The duty of a doctor is sometimes to heal, often to give relief and always to console. Jesus treated her with compassion. The duty of an honest person is to tell the truth with love. Jesus told her he knew she had sinned. She realized he had released her from her present problem and its consequences. He had given her a second chance. Jesus challenged her not to sin again. He did not give her easy forgiveness. No cheap grace. He appealed to her capacity for conversion and moral change. He made her feel it was possible. Yes, a sinner can become a saint.

It cannot be proved from Scripture, but popular tradition says that the woman was Mary Magdalene. Scripture says she was one of the four friends of Jesus who were brave enough to stand at the foot of the cross.

Maybe it was this same woman.

Jesus, the New Pillar of Fire (John 8:12-20)

In a world without electricity, most people went to bed at sundown. Most people could not afford the oil or wax to keep candles and torches going at night. But at the feast of Tabernacles the night sky was ablaze with feral torches in the Court of the Women on Temple Mount. Four golden candlesticks, each tall enough that ladders were used to reach the tops, were capped with golden bowls of oil, with lighted wicks floating in them.

This extravagance of night fire on the eight evenings of Tabernacles was one of the mystic delights of the feast. It probably had the same effect on those people that fireworks have for moderns, despite the less dramatic form of torchlight. Appointed men danced before the Lord while choirs sang psalms of praise to God, the pillar of fire who had walked with their ancestors in the desert.

Onto this splendid stage walked Jesus. In a pause between the singing and the dancing, Jesus said, "I AM the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (verse 12). Another "I AM" statement so typical in John's gospel. Jesus told them that the old pillar of fire has become a person living among them. Using the powerful visual aid of the ceremony of fire at Tabernacles, Jesus gave it the meaning it was destined to have.

The early Christians often called baptism the "Illumination." They would naturally have connected this Tabernacles' scene and Christ's self identification as light with baptism. In Chapter 9 of John, the story of the cure of the man born blind will be a natural extension of this scene. Jesus is light. Just as light opposes the darkness of the night, so the light of Jesus dispels the darkness of sin. All religious literature links evil deeds with darkness and graced behavior with light. Christ's guiding light is not simply a candle to find one's way home at night. It is a light that banishes evil from the heart so one can find one's way home to God.

The Pharisees told Jesus that his self-equation with light could not be accepted because there were no witnesses to back him. They could not agree with him on his word alone. Jesus replied that he could very well witness on his own behalf. He knew himself and who he was and where he came from.

At the same time he pointed out that he did indeed have a witness, his heavenly Father. A divine presence and glory permeated his teachings, deeds and impact upon others. The wisdom with which he spoke reflected the presence of God. His acts were windows through which could be seen the divine power.

His tremendous ability to change people's lives, especially hardened sinners, was vivid evidence of God's witness to him. His capacity to touch hearts as no other person was a dramatic instance of the Father's loving witness to his Son.

The World (John 8:21-30)

Jesus told his opponents, "You belong to this world, but I do not belong to this world....If you do not believe that I AM, you will die in your sins" (verses 23-24).

The expression "world" often appears in John's gospel. In his usage, the term has a complex meaning.

1. This world is not heaven. The world is a passing and transient place. Heaven is a permanent reality. The world symbolizes what is opposed to God.
2. But God loves this world. Genesis describes how much love God put into creating it. God loves the world so much that he sent his Son here to save it from evil and sin. Heaven and the world may be different, yet there is a magnificent link between them because of God's affection for people.
3. Still something has gone wrong with the world. It does not recognize Jesus; indeed, it engages in open hostility to him. The world is not what it was meant to be in the original design for creation. The world represents sin, evil and all that breaks people away from a relationship with God.

Jesus has come to solve this impasse. Jesus brought love and forgiveness and reconciliation. God is in Christ reconciling the world to himself.

In recent times there has been an unfounded optimism about the world. And this despite the horrors of Hiroshima, the holocaust, the worst wars in history, widespread poverty, hunger, and injustice. Political systems arose that enslaved half the earth's population, systems that believed a paradise can be created on earth, governments that taught people had no need of God. Jesus would say to this "world" that without God there is no hope of happiness, peace, justice, harmony, a decent way of life, and an environment that supports human dignity.

The only solution to the world as representing evil is the passion and resurrection of Jesus. "When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I AM" (verse 28).

The expression “lift up” refers both to the lifting up of Jesus on the cross and his lifting up to glory in his resurrection from the dead. The only way to regenerate the notion and reality of the “world” is to believe in a supernatural solution. All human effort without God will fail. That was the lesson of the story of the Tower of Babel. It is the lesson Jesus persistently teaches. Divine redemption is the answer for an evil world.

Cry Freedom! Jesus Presents the Real Abraham (John 8:31-59)

Christ’s discussion with his opponents moved to the subject of freedom. He told them he spoke the truth, and this truth would make them free. They replied that they had never been enslaved, so why would he even raise the subject of slavery? There are three kinds of freedom: political, psychological, spiritual. They were thinking only of political and psychological freedom. Even when they were slaves in Babylon, they felt interior freedom. Their present bondage to Rome did not crush their proud inner freedom. Political oppression had never suppressed their sense of psychological freedom.

But Jesus was referring to spiritual freedom. Anyone who committed a sin was a slave to evil, not spiritually and morally free. Only the moral person is really free. The sinner claims to be free because he does what he likes with his life. That is an illusion. The sinner does what sin wants him to do. Pride, lust, envy, anger, gluttony, and avarice are tough slave masters. They are the worst tyrants a soul will ever encounter. Those evil slave drivers cause a human being to self destruct.

A political monster dominates the body and environment of people and causes unspeakable suffering. An interior moral monster does worse. The only one who can conduct an uprising against such a devil is Jesus, the real liberator of the human person. Christ’s truth is the best medicine for a sick soul. His truth causes inner freedom from the moral slavery to sin. Jesus reminded them that their intention to murder him was a sign of their spiritual bankruptcy, their enslavement to evil. Cry Freedom! Cry for spiritual freedom!

Because of their slavery to sin, they are not real children of Abraham. They argued that biological descent from Abraham was the source of their national pride, their religious dignity, their very identity as persons. Jesus rejected their claim. The only way to really be a child of Abraham was to act like the great patriarch. Pointing to the rocks, Jesus told them that God could raise descendants of Abraham up from these very stones (see Matthew 3:9)! Abraham had welcomed messengers from God. Jesus was the greatest messenger God ever sent to his people. They wanted to kill him. Is that how a descendant of Abraham acts? Abraham listened with an open heart to the truth from God. They refused to listen to God’s messenger, Jesus.

Fighting back, they loudly proclaimed that God was their Father. Jesus replied that if they really meant that, they would accept him. “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and am here” (verse 42).

They would listen to his Gospel if they really believed in God as their father. Repeatedly, Jesus made it clear that how one reacted to him was the real test of a person's faith. Jesus is central to the world's history and to the life story of every woman and man. People have found all kinds of methods to eliminate Jesus from his key role. They have used murder, rational arguments, ridicule, cynical indifference, financial oppression and other means. But Jesus cannot be ignored. He is the Tremendous Lover who confronts each person with his offer of salvation.

Jesus charged his opponents with being children of the devil. The devil is the author of death and killing. They wanted to kill him. The devil is the father of lies. They cannot accept the truth. They lived by lies. Dramatically he challenged them to find any sin in him. "Can any of you charge me with sin?" (verse 46). They were reduced to frustrated silence. If they can find no evil in him, why were they unable to hear the truth he spoke? Because they were in bondage to the father of lies.

Jesus went on to say that Abraham rejoiced to see his day. There was a tradition that Abraham had received a vision of the whole history of Israel and the coming of the messiah. Jesus claimed that he was the messiah and that Abraham had seen him coming. That was why he rejoiced to see his day. His adversaries argued that Jesus was not yet fifty. How could he have seen Abraham? Fifty years was the retirement age for Levites.

Jesus replied, "Before Abraham came to be, I AM" (verse 58). He did not say, "Before Abraham was, I was." No, "I AM." At this confession of his divinity he departed from the temple area just as the Jews picked up stones to throw at him. The process that would lead to his passion was now in full flood.