

FRUIT NO. 8: GENTLENESS

(John 8:2-11)

3.17.19

INTRODUCTION

The “problem” with John 7:53-8:11.

BACKGROUND

The reality of Jesus is causing a great deal of tension in the nation at this time and, of course, this story is taking place right in the Pharisees’ backyard: Jerusalem. As we look at verses immediately before this story appears, we get a sense of the debate going on over exactly who Jesus was:

Many in the crowd believed in Him. They said, “When the Messiah comes, will He perform more signs than this man?” — John 7:31. The fact was, nobody in all their history had been performing more signs than this guy.

On hearing His words, some of the people said, “Surely this man is the Prophet” — John 7:40 (referencing the prophet promised by Moses, Deuteronomy 8:15).

However, there were some who were prepared to go even farther: *Others said, “He is the Messiah” — John 7:41a.* Now that one would have stung the leadership quite a bit. He was already noted for saying things like, “You have heard it said . . .,” always referring to some well-known Scripture from their own sacred scrolls, but then having the unmitigated gall to go on to say, “But I say to you,” sort of upgrading the Scriptures, but doing it in a way that seemed to put Him on a level plain with God. Never saying, “Such and such a rabbi said, which the rabbi before him said, which the rabbi before him said.” No traditions, no heritage. He declared His own authority, and He did it with such a sense of certainty. No wonder some of the simpler minds in the crowds that followed Him thought He might be the Messiah. But thank goodness, there was still some doubt: *Still others asked, “How can the Messiah come from Galilee?” — John 7:41b,* the point being that it was understood that the Messiah was to be born from the family line of David, born in his village of Bethlehem. As far as anybody knew, Jesus hailed from Nazareth of Galilee. So, the divisions and arguments continued. And in the meantime, the Pharisees’ concern over the influence of Jesus was continuing to grow, being maybe best stated during Christ’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem five days before His death, when in frustration they would declare: *“Look how the whole world has gone after Him!” — John 12:19b.*

TEXT

At dawn He (Jesus) appeared again in the temple courts (Jerusalem), where all the people gathered around Him, and He sat down to teach them — John 8:2

This would have been the normal posture for a rabbi (a teacher) to assume — sitting while his audience, still standing, gathered around him. This also would have been a normal setting for Jesus, wherever He was, to have a crowd of people around Him. Remember that the crowds weren’t just amazed at His works but also at His words: *When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at His teaching, because He taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law — Matthew 7:28-29.* Of course, that response was up in Galilee when Jesus was speaking His “sermon on the mount.” In our text today, He is in Jerusalem — on the “home field” of those teachers of the law. But even here, the story would be the same, reported by an unlikely source — temple guards, who had been sent by the chief priests

and Pharisees to arrest Him. When they returned to their “bosses” empty-handed, they were asked why. Their answer? **“No one ever spoke the way this Man does” — John 7:46.** But, the Jewish leadership was bound and determined to find some way of taking Jesus down, and they finally found what they thought would be the perfect way to trap Him.

The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing Him — John 8:3-6a.

The leadership is bringing a formal legal charge against this woman which suggests that she herself is either married or engaged. But let’s dig a bit to get underneath this accusation.

First, there absolutely was law to support the leadership’s position:

“You shall not commit adultery” — God speaking, the seventh commandment, Exodus 20:14.

“If a man commits adultery with another man’s wife — with the wife of his neighbor — both the adulterer and the adulteress are to be put to death” — God speaking, Leviticus 20:10.

Two reasons:

“You must purge the evil from Israel” — Moses, Deuteronomy 22:22b. God’s overriding goal with Israel was that they be a holy people, consecrated to Him, meaning that they were to be a reflection of His holiness — wherever they were. And adultery was so fundamentally evil because it was so completely contrary to the desired purity of marriage with which God had created it, thus threatening the relationships involved, the families involved, and society as a whole, and it was such a blasphemous “spit in the eye” to the God who had created marriage in the first place, subverting God-intended human attractions for their own momentary sinful purposes.

“Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, because this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled” — God speaking, Leviticus 18:24. God was making a statement in judging the nations that already were living in the Promised Land — that their lifestyles were an insult to His holiness and His ways. They were unrepentant sinners, and God did not want their sin to stain His people to make them appear to be no different than anybody else. The idea of God’s chosen people was that they were chosen to communicate and reflect God — the one and only true God — to the rest of the world; as God said through Isaiah: Israel was chosen, formed by God Himself, ***“that they may proclaim my praise” — God speaking, Isaiah 43:21b.*** They were created to be God’s ministers, God’s spokesmen, God’s ambassadors to a world separated from Him. And there were plenty of false gods to be found pretty much everywhere you looked. If the world saw no difference in how the Israelites lived in response to the true and living God, then what’s the point?

Second, there is a rather obvious case of selective enforcement here. Considering that adultery is defined as “consensual sexual relations in which at least one participant is married to someone else,” someone in addition to this woman, like, you know, maybe a guy, was involved — but only the woman is being brought forward as the “sinner” in this case.

Third, and maybe worst of all, there is absolutely no feeling for this woman from the leadership — no reflection of God’s love for her, no reflection from them that ***[t]he Lord is***

compassionate and gracious — *David, Psalm 103:8a*, no sense from their behavior towards her that the Lord *does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities* — *David, Psalm 103:10*. She was not somebody to minister to but rather to judge. She was guilty — case closed! And I have an idea that their actions with her were as rough and unforgiving as their attitudes: I suspect they were dragging her to where Jesus was, she is fighting them with all her strength, fighting for her very life. And then they humiliate her by publicly presenting her to Christ and the crowd, pushing her toward Jesus while making her stand in the middle of everybody. They have totally dehumanized her; for them, she is nothing but a pawn in their game with this Galilean preacher. And, in so doing, these zealous defenders of the Law have overlooked the second greatest commandment found in that Law: “[L]ove your neighbor as yourself” — *God speaking, Leviticus 19:18b*.

But so what? The leadership is convinced that they have put Jesus in a no-win box. Now the reality was that law or no law, adultery was very common in Christ’s day, to the point that the law was mostly ignored. Besides, the Roman authorities who now occupied Palestine allowed no executions outside their approval. And there’s the trap: If He sides with the Mosaic law to have the woman stoned, He is violating Roman law. If He shows mercy and compassion — two pillars of His reputation — He is violating Mosaic law. It seems they might actually have found the perfect storm in their fight against this Nazarene. And so they wait for Him to answer their question: “Now what do you say?”

But Jesus makes them wait. It appears that, as the leadership was interrupting His teaching with this situation, roughly pushing the woman to where He was teaching, Jesus had gotten to His feet. Then, as the text says: *Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with His finger* — *John 8:6b*. All those people — likely the disciples, the crowds, the leadership, certainly the woman — all waiting to hear the words from the one guy who isn’t talking. The silence must have been deafening.

But the leadership was itching for His answer, and they couldn’t wait: *When they kept on questioning Him, He straightened up and said to them, “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” Again, he stooped down and wrote on the ground* — *John 8:7-8*. Jesus stands back up to where he can now look them right in the eyes. He speaks — and what an amazing answer He gives — in several ways:

First, it totally affirms the Mosaic law’s stipulations. Can’t get Him on that.

Second, now if there is a stoning, it’s totally the responsibility of the teachers of the law and the Pharisees — the guys who brought the accusation. In that sense, can’t get Him on violating Roman law, either. He ain’t going to be the one throwing the stones.

But something more was affirmed. Look what happens as Christ’s words sink in:

At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there — *John 8:9*. Now a few things come into play here:

First, the Mosaic law those leadership guys were so eagerly applying contained some important stipulations:

For one thing: *“On the testimony of two or three witnesses a person is to be put to death, but no one is to be put to death on the testimony of only one witness”* — *Moses, Deuteronomy 17:6*. Now regardless of how prevalent adultery was in Jesus’ day, it is still a safe

assumption to make that the two people involved likely would not have been committing their sin in broad daylight at the intersection of First Avenue and Main Street in downtown Jerusalem. There are some sins that are pretty much always done in secret, and sinful sex would certainly be one of those. So, assuming this woman was caught, as they said, “in the act,” at least two witnesses needed to see the sin actually being committed, and they needed to come forward to verify their witness.

Secondly: ***“The hands of the witnesses must be the first in putting that person to death, and then the hands of all the people” — Moses, Deuteronomy 17:7a.*** In other words, you see it, you call it, you apply it.

And lastly: There was a really important addendum to this whole witness thing if it could be shown that a witness had malicious intent: ***“[I]f the witness proves to be a liar, giving false testimony against a fellow Israelite, then do to the false witness as that witness intended to do to the other party. You must purge the evil from among you” — Moses, Deuteronomy 19:18b-19.***

Essentially, Jesus is asking them: Who among you are the witnesses? There needs to be at least two. And is your witness true? ‘Cause if it isn’t, are you still in the mood to grab a stone?

But something else has happened: Jewish scriptures would have been full of the acknowledgement that everybody sins. King Solomon had said as much in Ecclesiastes: ***Indeed, there is no one on earth who is righteous, no one who does what is right and never sins — Ecclesiastes 7:20,*** essentially repeating what He had said at the dedication of the temple in which they now stood. Jesus just put everyone on a level playing field. If everybody sins, then all those guys getting ready to warm up their pitching arms are as guilty of sinning before God as this woman is. And if Jesus is simply focusing on this particular sin, then His famous words from the Sermon on the Mount come into play: ***“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 5:27-28 (quoting Exodus 20:14).*** By their own consciences, the accusers have now become the accused. The brilliance of Christ’s statement completely disarms them. Quietly, I’m sure quite in contrast to the uproar they had created when they arrived, one by one they drop their stones and turn away, leaving Christ alone with the woman. But that’s not the end of the story.

Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” — John 8:10. Wasn’t there a mob of people here just a second ago? Now — nobody.

“No one, sir,” she said. “Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin” — John 8:11. Jesus is not going soft on sin here, but simply remaining faithful to His mission to earth as He explained it to Nicodemus: ***“For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him” — Jesus Christ, John 3:16-17.*** Jesus offers here what the cross offers: not condemnation but forgiveness. He does acknowledge her sin (a sign that she very possibly was guilty of the charge of adultery) by telling her, essentially, to repent — to leave her life of sin. Repentance in the Greek basically means a “U-turn.” The direction of your life changes — from pleasing yourself to pleasing God. That begins with confession of sin being sin, and the desperate plea to have Christ enter your life through the deposit of His Holy Spirit. That life then lives a completely different way — a new direction, always pointing to God.

APPLICATION

Gentleness is a humble nonthreatening demeanor that derives from a position of strength and authority. It is not weak or passive. Rather it is an attitude that is patiently submissive in every offense, while having no desire for revenge or retribution. Gentleness shows up in three ways in the NT: submission to the will of God, teachability, and consideration of others. And it is an incredibly important and necessary part of our Christian testimony:

First, gentleness reflects the heart of God. While anger or hostility or frustration create fear and uncertainty, gentleness creates welcome and safety. As ambassadors of God through Jesus Christ, we want our faith to be a loving, welcoming one, reflecting the love and welcome of our Master. As Paul told the Philippians: ***Let your gentleness be evident to all — Paul, Philippians 4:5a.*** Our gentleness should be an obvious trait for anybody to see and experience. Gentleness is one of many things in which God’s people should be clothed, literally wrapped up in, according to Paul’s words to the Colossian church: ***[C]lothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience — Paul, Colossians 3:12b.***

Second, gentleness reflects the example of Christ. He described Himself like this: ***“I am gentle and humble in heart” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 11:29b.*** That was far more than just words. Remember how we’ve said that our faith is supposed to look like something? Well, certainly the whole idea of the “fruit of the Spirit” is that our faith looks like something that the world can see and experience for themselves. In other words, the fruit of the Spirit leaves evidence that, behind the attitudes and actions, a Savior and Master dwells. Well, this story is what gentleness looks like. Look at how Jesus showed gentleness to the woman in this story. More specifically, look at how Jesus showed gentleness to the sin in the woman in this story. This woman was a sinner; nobody knew that better than Jesus. And before she had sinned against anybody else, she had sinned against God. That would make Jesus the injured party here. And yet this perfect sinless man nevertheless showed unconditional, gracious love to the sinner, pouring a gentle sympathy toward somebody trapped in sin and its consequences. He hated the sin, absolutely — always has, always will — but He loved the sinner. His example begs the question: How often do we show Christ’s kind of gentleness to those that we perceive have sinned against us? How often do we show Christ’s kind of gentleness to the sinners in our culture, to those who seem opposed to biblical teachings of right and wrong, to all those who advocate for lifestyles that, as Isaiah warned, ***call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter — Isaiah 5:20?*** Gentleness sees the sinner as more important than the sin. Gentleness sees the sinner as more important than us.

And two more areas where gentleness should rule:

First, gentleness disarms. We live in an angry, frustrated world — so much hate, so much divisiveness. We give opportunity to cooling things down — either in actions or attitudes — when we can respond with gentleness. As Solomon observed: ***A gentle answers turns away wrath — Proverbs 15:1a.*** Gentleness can often slow down a difficult situation, allowing for speakers to become listeners. And responding to tension with gentleness becomes noteworthy simply because it is so different to how the world operates. Gentleness reflects somebody operating with a different strength. And to be honest, a lot of anger that we might catch from people is simply hiding frustration, emptiness, the fatigue that comes from trying to deal with life in our own strength, where often home is tough, work and career is tough, finances are tough, relationships are tough . . . and the future looks awfully bleak. What comes off as anger is often

masking hurts that run to incredible depths in a person's soul. Gentleness tells somebody there's maybe another way to live. And, instead of seeing only adversaries, maybe gentleness lets us be seen as someone who is willing to listen, just listen, to the pain that somebody is carrying.

And second, it is gentleness with which we are advised to share our testimony. Peter wrote this: *Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect — I Peter 3:15.* Our testimonies should not be based on how somebody should respond but rather on the joy we have found in our life in Christ. It is the Lord who saves; the outcome is not ours to determine. Our words should be based on the love of Christ and the passion He has for the lost. We should approach everybody as Christ approached this woman — not condemnation but compassion.

And one other thing regarding reaching out to the world around us: spiritual warfare. People wrestling with coming to saving faith in God through Christ Jesus are experiencing frontline, call-to-arms spiritual warfare. And those battles can be ugly. The fruit of gentleness with which we present ourselves as ambassadors of Jesus Christ can often be critical to somebody's winning that war because God won the war.

CONCLUSION — “THE LITTLE LAMB”

We heard the words just before the message, that the Lord *does not treat us as our sins deserve — David, Psalm 103:10a.* He has treated me not with condemnation but with compassion, not with rejection but with reconciliation and restoration. He has treated me with love, with grace, and with gentleness. And here's a story about the gentleness with which He has treated me that I share as we close.

The gentleness with which He has treated us should be the gentleness with which we treat one another. Let's pray!