

## THE RADICAL RABBI: “A RADICAL INSERT” (John 7:53-8:11)

3.6.22

**Description:** *In a story, one not found in the earliest manuscripts, Jesus is confronted by the Jewish leaders bringing a woman caught in adultery to him, questioning, in light of the law, what should be done with her.*

### INTRODUCTION

This particular section of Scripture is rather radical in its own right. It’s an insert into John’s original gospel. Why do we think that? It’s not found in the earliest manuscripts of his gospel that have been discovered.

Here’s the deal: When the scholars wrote the translation that we know as the King James Version (completed around 1611), the manuscripts that were available to them only went back some 600 years. Those manuscripts included this story, which then was included in their finished product; why wouldn’t it be?

But over the 400+ years since, archaeology has developed to the point that we have found copies of manuscripts that date much earlier. In fact, the earliest complete Bibles we have today are two copies from the first half of the fourth century AD. We have discovered manuscript fragments that have dated to as early as the latter half of the second century AD — meaning less than 150 years after the earthly life of Christ and less than 75 years after the life of the apostle John.

So why is that a big deal? Well, the closer you can get to the dates of the original writings, the more accurate they are likely to be. And as these older manuscripts have been found, what has been discovered is that a couple of texts in that 1611 King James Version — such as ours today — don’t exist in those earlier versions. And, if you have a contemporary translation, you will probably note that, while these verses are included, they are printed in italics to set them apart from the rest of the gospel, usually with a note that says something to the effect of: *The earliest manuscripts and many other ancient witnesses do not have John 7:53-8:11*, then stating the different places that later-dated manuscripts have placed this story.

So what should we do with this? Should we even study it? Most evangelical commentators and scholars say, “Yes.” Biblical expert F.F. Bruce, a 20<sup>th</sup> century scholar whose particular passion was affirming the historical reliability of the New Testament, called this story “a fragment of authentic gospel material.” The vast majority of scholars agree that this was likely a very real event in the life of Christ, likely passed along through oral tradition until a later copyist decided to add it as legitimate canon. And, as we study this story, we see parallels of the truths Christ proclaims in this moment in other places in the gospel record. So, while this story’s appearance in John’s gospel may be a bit different, its teachings are not. So as we take a look at this story, **let’s begin that look with a moment of prayer.**

### TEXT

***Then they all went home, but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives — John 7:53-8:1.***

Things were finally settling down in Jerusalem. But what a week it had been — the celebration of the popular Festival of Tabernacles. Jerusalem had been packed with all kinds of people commemorating that event. And, halfway through that celebration, Jesus of Nazareth had shown up and begun teaching in the temple courts — which had really gotten things going.

Actually, what had really got going was a whole lot of “couldn’t’s.” Let’s see: People argued about who or what Jesus was, but couldn’t agree on him. The leadership hated him but couldn’t stop him. Some people tried to seize Christ but couldn’t grab him. The temple guards got ordered to make an arrest but couldn’t overcome him. And all the while Jesus, fueled by his love for the people and his obedience to his Father, continued to present the words of life, crying out above the crowd on the Festival’s final day: **“Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them” — Jesus Christ, John 7:37b-38.** But finally, as evening arrived, all the crowds gathered at the temple began heading for home while Jesus also left the temple area to spend the night at the Mount of Olives.

***At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them — John 8:2.***

So, just as day breaks, Jesus returns to the temple courts, as do the crowds. But then, the tone of the morning dramatically changed when the leadership showed up.

***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.***

You can say a lot about the scribes (the teachers and experts of the law) and the Pharisees, but one thing you can’t say about them is that they were quitters. Now every one of their tests or traps so far during his ministry had wound up being a win for Jesus and a flunk for them, but they kept on trying. Their shared hatred of Christ was so intense that every failure on their part to cause him trouble, of which there had been a bunch, just seemed to spark more attempts to destroy him — either physically or by damaging his reputation. But in the process of this particular attempt, they revealed some rather large holes in their thinking as well as the true nature of their character:

- 1) First off, now I am no expert on adultery, but one thing I do know: That is a game where you pretty much always need two players. Yes, this woman was caught in adultery, right in the act. OK, so that’s very clearly sin! But where’s her partner? Where’s the guy? I’m just not sure how this would work that she could be caught in the act but not him. Considering the outcome for which the leadership is hoping, it makes one wonder if the man was actually in on their plans and therefore a part of their trap.
- 2) Second, again no expert here, but such a thing as adultery is usually carried out in secret, in the dark, someplace where the players aren’t going to get caught, someplace where and when other people ain’t around and can’t see.
- 3) Third, the law of Moses to which they referred was much more inclusive than simply to stone such “women.” A verse from Deuteronomy affirms the punishment for this crime: ***If a man is found sleeping with another man’s wife, both the man who slept with her and the woman must die — Deuteronomy 22:22a.***

Now, what’s really sad about all this is that, even while the Pharisees and their allies present their challenge to Jesus, the woman they’ve so harshly brought into this moment doesn’t even matter to them. She could be a tree stump for all they care. Not only do the Pharisees interrupt Christ’s teaching session but they place her squarely in the middle of the crowd; they couldn’t have done much more to humiliate her. But all that matters to them is setting Jesus up for “the trap.” And this moment was just one more instance that revealed their hearts and their true intentions.

So, their trap is set, and they think they got a pretty good one. If Jesus would say, “Yes, this woman should be stoned,” then all the reputation and good will he had created by being a very public friend of the friendless, specifically tax collectors and others the religious leaders condemned, would very quickly go away. Some of his most consistent messages had been about mercy and forgiveness and love, but how could those things be true if he let this woman be killed? Very likely none of the common people would have listened to any of his words ever again. And, on top of that, killings due to the breaking of religious law had been outlawed by the Romans. So, to have her killed would have meant breaking Roman law.

On the other hand, if he said, “No, set her free,” then that would have meant a very open, obvious breaking of Mosaic law. Such a stance would have subjected Jesus to arrest himself.

So as the leaders waited to hear, I imagine that, at least a little bit, they may have had some pretty satisfied smirks on their faces. Finally, they must have thought with a sense of both triumph and relief, finally we got this guy. Let’s see him talk his way out of this one.

Except he wasn’t talking. Instead [according to John], ***Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger — John 8:6b.***

We have no way of knowing what Jesus actually wrote on the ground, but we do know that he was acting like he wasn’t even listening to all that was going on around him. Of course, the crowd wasn’t going anywhere, especially the leaders who seemed to have set this all up. “Come on, Jesus, we told you the situation. This woman is a sinner. What do you say we should do with her?” And I’m sure there might have even been somebody who, after a pause, said, “We’re waiting.”

***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.***

So, they keep on questioning him until, finally, he straightens up and gives them his answer. And wow; what an amazing response — on so many levels! First of all, he’s giving permission for this woman to be stoned — with just one caveat: “First stone belongs to the one without sin.” Now there was a law for executing somebody by stoning: ***The hands of the witnesses must be the first in putting that person to death, and then the hands of all the people — Deuteronomy 17:7a.*** In other words, those whose witness resulted in the condemnation are commanded to be the first to begin the process of execution. The guys who caught this woman were by all definitions the “witnesses.” Therefore, Jesus is very much upholding the law. He’s just adding a bit of clarity to the rush to judgment that the leadership was showing: “If there is no sin among any of you who brought this charge, start throwing!” And then the strangest thing started happening: All these guys so quick and eager to judge this woman are now being made to judge themselves.

***At this [that is, as a result of Christ’s words], 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.***

So, what happened that turned a vindictive mob into a convicted one? The truth of Christ, the truth of his words penetrating their consciences. Their consciences were literally making them plead guilty to their own faults — meaning that they realized that there was a standard — God’s standard, his perfect, faultless standard — which they themselves could not meet. All of a sudden they came face-to-face with Moses’ description of God: ***He is the Rock, his works are perfect,***

***and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he — Deuteronomy 32:4.***

And, in considering that description of God, they may have also been reminded of Solomon's challenging question in Proverbs: ***“Who can say, “I have kept my heart pure; I am clean and without sin”?*** — ***Proverbs 20:9***, or his equally convicting answer to that question 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*** — the point being that there was a great plenty already contained in their Scriptures that should have prevented them from going down this cruelly vindictive and judgmental road. And, if they themselves failed to live up to that standard, how in the world could they judge somebody else's failure? And one by one, the stones once held so eagerly now dropped back to the ground, as each one in that crowd very quietly walked away — and we go from having a crowd to having a couple — just Jesus and this woman.

***Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” “No one, sir,” she said. “Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin” — John 8:10-11.***

There can be no conviction made when there are no charges brought. Any prisoner held in such a circumstance would have to be set free — as was this woman.

Now this was by no means an instance of Jesus “going easy” on somebody or even, as the mob initially hoped, contradicting the Law. Her sin was real. But in a very few short months, Jesus would be taking her sins, along with the sins of that crowd, along with the sins of that judgmental mob, along with the sins of every last scribe, Pharisee and Sadducee and, in fact, the sins of the entire world, upon himself when he was nailed to a cross just a short distance from where those two were now standing. Jesus forgave her — a forgiveness free for her, but a forgiveness that would cost him everything. But we also can't forget: Along with that forgiveness was a divine expectation of her now living a life that rejected her sin.

## **APPLICATION**

First things first: If these verses accurately reflect gospel truth, then we should be able to find that truth in other places in the gospel record. That's actually one of the keys to confirming the truth of a particular scripture or story: Do we see parallels in Scripture that help validate what we're looking at? And as we look through the gospels, we do find complementary verses that corroborate this story:

The scribes and Pharisees were thoughtlessly, heartlessly judging this woman — without a thought to the soul beneath the sin. What did Jesus think about such a judging of others? He had this to say in the Sermon on the Mount: ***“Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 7:1-5.*** The scribes and Pharisees were experts on seeing the “specks” in other eyes while ignoring the “lumber yard” in their own eyes. And their judging certainly impacted how they saw the people to whom they were to minister.

By contrast, what was Christ's attitude? Well, once those intending to stone this woman were convicted into silence and retreat, his words to the woman that, as no one remained to condemn her, ***"then neither do I condemn you"*** — ***Jesus Christ, John 8:11a***, remind us of Christ's clarifying his mission to Nicodemus: ***"God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him"*** — ***Jesus Christ, John 3:17***. This story fits in with all that!

Now, all that said, what was the great lack of understanding on the part of the Jewish leadership? Simply this: They were all in on applying the law to others, but they never showed the same enthusiasm for applying the law — all its universal demands — to themselves.

Nor did they understand how the law worked. The law was intended to reveal sin. You see, we absolutely need the law's convicting power of sin in our lives in order to drive us to seek God's healing, forgiving grace. In other words, law and grace do not oppose each other; they complement each other. I love how pastor and Bible teacher Warren Wiersbe phrases it: ***"Nobody was ever saved by keeping the law, but nobody was ever saved by grace who was not first indicted by the law. There must be conviction before there can be conversion"*** (The Wiersbe Bible Commentary, New Testament, page 256). The scribes and Pharisees were stuck in judgment mode, in accusation, pointing fingers at every sin and sinner they saw. Unfortunately, they were never able to place those accusing fingers in front of a mirror.

Now we saw in this story a great picture of how NOT to come alongside sinners — which leaves the question: How do we come alongside sinners? Some ideas:

- 1) Always come alongside any situation with prayer. Prayer reminds us that we are helpless outside of the Father's enabling power. We possess neither the insight nor wisdom to do what the Father's perfect enabling power can do. We find no indication that the scribes and Pharisees ever prayed for this woman.
- 2) Always come alongside somebody struggling with sin exactly like Jesus did — without condemnation. We have all sinned. We have all struggled. The only thing special about us is the presence of Christ in our lives. While we live on this side of heaven, we are all inpatient in this spiritual hospital we call the "church." We find every indication that the scribes and Pharisees only saw somebody worthy of condemnation.
- 3) Always come alongside somebody knowing that we all struggle in different areas. Just because I may not have struggled in the same sin as my brother or sister should not make me conclude that I am somehow better or more spiritually mature than they are. I have very likely face-planted in a sin that never gave them a moment's notice. While the scribes and Pharisees had a very religiously pious public face, remember how Jesus described them? ***"You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness"*** — ***Jesus Christ, Matthew 23:27b-28*** — not to mention pride, which is as much sin and hypocrisy and wickedness as anything else — even adultery. They struggled too; they just would never confess it.

## CONCLUSION

And lastly, always come alongside somebody with love. ***God is love*** — ***1 John 4:8b***, and God is who we represent. We are his ambassadors, which means we serve him with his words and his attitudes. The scribes and Pharisees pursued their roles minus love for the people they were

called to shepherd and to serve — and we see how that worked out for them. But we have another example to look at: We see what God did through his Son. I love the words of David in Psalm 138: *For though the Lord is high, he regards the lowly — David, Psalm 138:6a* — and Christ’s becoming flesh and dwelling among us is what that looks like. That kind of love is what brought Christ to earth to die for our sins. That kind of love is what saved us. That kind of love is what brought Christ alongside us. We were the lowly the Lord had regard for. So how can we bring anything else but that kind of love and that kind of attitude into a sinner’s situation?

This is one reason we have the “prayer net” here — those names of families for whom we pray during the year. The idea behind that is not just praying but coming alongside in all kinds of circumstances — for fun and fellowship, to get to know other members of this church family and then, very possibly, building up the kind of relationship that would allow somebody to feel comfortable enough to share struggles and difficulties with us. Christianity is not an island; it was never meant to be. Instead, it was meant to be a family. That’s what Christ intended when he founded it, and that purpose has never changed.

Love is in drastically short supply in the world today. We have a chance by coming alongside each other to show the world something else — in the midst of the devastating impacts of sin, the far deeper impacts of love in Christ upon sin. Sin is real, but so is the need for repentance, reconciliation and restoration. We can be a part of all of that in somebody’s life if we let our lives be modeled not by scribes and Pharisees but by one radical rabbi — Jesus of Nazareth, our Savior, our Lord and our Master.

That’s what we’re called to do, because that’s what Jesus did. Let’s pray!