

Main Idea: In John 8:1-11 we find the story of a woman who was caught in adultery and brought to Jesus by men with stones in hand. How Jesus responded to the situation teaches us so much about Him and about us, too. We see two things clearly in the story.

- I. We see the ugliness of sin (1-6).
 - A. We meet a bad sinner (3-4).
 1. The woman was caught in adultery.
 2. The woman was a guilty law-breaker.
 - B. We meet some good sinners (5-6).
 1. They stand for the Bible.
 2. They stand against sin.
 3. They stand guilty and don't even know it.
- II. We see the grace of the Savior (7-11).
 - A. Jesus helps the good sinner (7-9).
 1. He used silence to get his attention.
 2. He used action to change his focus
 3. He used one sentence to expose the problem we all tend to ignore.
 - B. Jesus helps the bad sinner (10-11).
 1. He takes away the sinner's condemnation.
 2. He takes the sinner's condemnation upon Himself.
 3. He tells the sinner to stop sinning.

Make It Personal: What do we learn from this?

1. We learn about balancing grace and truth.
2. We learn about how to deal with sin.
3. We learn why the world desperately needs Jesus.

What do you do if you've been caught red-handed in a sin? I mean, *red-handed*, with no way out. Guilty. Deserving of the punishment of the crime. Without any possible defense.

Ever been there? I have. I was guilty of breaking the law in ways that hurt the person who most loves me in this world. And I didn't have a leg to stand on as I stood before him, guilty, deserving the full weight of the punishment that goes with law-breaking.

And yet wonder of all wonders, He did something I'll never be able to explain and for which I am eternally in His debt. He forgave me. He, the Living God Himself, forgave me and took away my guilt and condemnation.

Oh, what a God! What a Savior! I now belong to the forever family of the person against whom I have committed unthinkable, hell-deserving crimes. I am His child, and He is my loving Father.

Friends, if you're like me, you must confess that it's so easy to lose the wonder of it all. That's why we need stories like the one we're about to consider today, to take us back to where we were, to remind us of what we deserve, and to thrill us with the truth of what He did for us.

It's a familiar story, and you'll find it in John 8. It's a story about a woman who knew what God said about adultery, but then went right ahead and cheated on her husband, and got caught in the very act. But it's also a story about some people who were ready to cast stones at her, and brought her to Jesus to see what He had to say about what to do with her.

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And of course, you know His response. Even the most casual church goer knows what Jesus said and likely uses His words to deflect the guilt feelings his own actions produce from time to time. What did Jesus say? *If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone.*

Do you know what proof-texting is? That's when you have a point you want to make, then go to the Bible in search of a verse that "proves" your point, and then cite the verse as supporting your point regardless of whether your point is consistent with the point the author intended to make. That's proof-texting, and it happens all the time. You can use the Bible to justify just about anything, including your own sin. All you have to do is take a verse out of context and in essence impose your own meaning into and on that verse.

Here's an example. "The Bible says in Matthew 7:1, 'Do not judge, or you too will be judged.' That means it's none of your business what somebody else is doing. It's their life and you have no right to suggest their actions are inappropriate. That's judging." But, of course, that's only part of the text, isn't it? In the very next set of verses Jesus says to get the plank out of your eye first, and then you can see clearly to get the speck out of your brother's eye. In other words, deal with your own sin issues first, and then it's appropriate and even loving to get involved in helping your brother deal with his.

Here's another common proof-text. "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in their midst (Matt. 18:20)." That's a verse used to support the value of small group praying, and that may be a valid secondary application. But what's the context of that statement by Jesus? It's His teaching on church discipline.

Then there's this proof-text, one that comes from today's text. "If anyone is without sin, let him cast the first stone." The point? Nobody's perfect, so nobody has a right to insist on consequences for the faulty behavior of another. Parents should be non-directive and tolerant. So should teachers, and church leaders, and friends. You have no business confronting sin in another person's life since you yourself are a sinner too.

But is that really Jesus' point? What did Jesus really have to say about casting stones, and how will it affect the way we view ourselves and others? Let's find out.

The story again is quite straightforward. In John 8:1-11 we meet a woman who was caught in adultery and brought to Jesus by men with stones in hand. How Jesus responded to the situation teaches us so much about Him and about us, too. In short, we're going to see two things clearly illustrated in this story; one, the *ugliness of sin* (1-6), and two, the *grace of the Savior* (7-11).

But first, there is a question we must address, and that's whether John actually included this story in his original gospel. If you have the NIV, you'll note that the account is bracketed with this statement, "The earliest manuscripts and many other ancient witnesses do not have John 7:53-8:11." Why don't they? I don't want to devote a lot of time to this question, other than to point out a couple of possible explanations.

One is so say that John originally included the story, but some later zealous Bible scribes left out the story because it was too lenient on adultery. That was Augustine's speculation, though it's highly suspect and not widespread. A more likely explanation for the absence of this story from the oldest manuscripts is simply that it wasn't a part of John's original gospel. It was added later, and the reason it was added is because the story is indeed true, historical, and instructive.

That's my conclusion. There's no reason to doubt that Jesus actually had this conversation with the woman and her accusers in John 8, even if John isn't the one who initially recorded it.

John MacArthur's assessment is helpful. "This passage, then, was most likely not part of the original text of John's gospel. Yet it 'is beyond doubt an authentic fragment of apostolic tradition' (Westcott, *John*, 125) that describes an actual historical event from Christ's life."¹

Leon Morris concludes, "If we cannot feel that this is part of John's Gospel we can feel that the story is true to the character of Jesus. Throughout the history of the church it has been held that, whoever wrote it, this little story is authentic. It rings true. It speaks to our condition."²

And as it speaks, what does it help us see? First...

I. We see the ugliness of sin (1-6).

We're given the setting in verses 1-2, "But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. ²At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them."

The Feast of Tabernacles ended at the close of chapter seven. Jesus went to that Feast at the midpoint, faced opposition, especially on the final day, then left. Verse 1 says He went to the Mount of Olives. The next morning He returned to the temple area and began teaching the people. It's six months until the cross, and even now Jesus' presence has become a real thorn in the side to the religious establishment. They're willing to do anything to get rid of Him, hence, the outlandish course of action we're about to see.

All sin is ugly for it's a perversion of how the Creator intended His creation to function. In scene one we see sin's ugliness demonstrated by two kinds of sinners. I'll call them *a bad sinner* and *some good sinners*.

A. We meet a bad sinner (3-4). Notice verses 3-5, "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group ⁴and said to Jesus, 'Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. ⁵In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?'"

We don't even know her name, but we do know her crime. Before Jesus stands a woman who is guilty of adultery. In fact...

1. The woman was caught in adultery. "In the very act," say her accusers. And she can't deny it. The perfect tense verb has the sense "taken with shame upon her," and points to her continuing character as an adulteress.³ Hence, I call her "a bad sinner."

The "bad" sinner is the reckless sinner, the one who blatantly transgresses God's law for all to see. We talk about "big sins" and "little sins." The bad sinner's life is filled with what decent, God-fearing people call "big sins," like adultery.

By the way, we're living in a different age, aren't we? In the first century a woman engages in sex outside of marriage and they're ready to stone her. In our day, she's on the front page of the fashion magazine, and they're making movies about her and calling it entertainment. That's not the perspective of the Scriptures, as this woman's accusers emphasize.

¹ MacArthur, p. 323.

² Leon Morris, p. 883.

³ Leon Morris, p. 885.

2. *The woman was a guilty law-breaker.* “In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women,” say the prosecutors. And she has no defense, for she knows she is guilty. She indeed is a sinner, a bad sinner.

But she’s not the only sinner in the story, is she? Look again and you’ll see another kind of sinner.

B. We meet some good sinners (5-6). I don’t mean that the sin is good. I mean that the person committing the sin is considered to be good. He is a good person, and quite frankly, his “goodness” clouds the issue and sort of covers up the true condition of his heart and life. He doesn’t see himself as a sinner, but as a good person.

The good sinners in this story are, of course, “the teachers of the law” and “the Pharisees.” The teachers of the law, also known as “the scribes” (and sometimes called ‘lawyers’) were the experts in interpreting the law. Often, but not always, these scribes were also Pharisees, and there were about 6,000 Pharisees in Israel at the time of Herod the Great, according to Josephus.⁴ As Barclay summarizes, the scribes worked out all the rules and regulations, and the Pharisees devoted their lives to keeping them.⁵

What’s true of the good sinners in this story? Three things.

1. *They stand for the Bible.* Hear them again in verse 5, “In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” These men know their Bibles. They can quote it and teach it and they insist that people keep it. They know that the key to the successful future of their nation is this Book, and that God is offended by those who violate it.

But they don’t just stand for the Bible. They do what anybody who takes the Bible seriously must do, namely...

2. *They stand against sin.* And they stand against it because the Bible commands them to do so. They know God’s Law...

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

Deuteronomy 22:22, 24 “If a man is found sleeping with another man’s wife, both the man who slept with her and the woman must die. You must purge the evil from Israel... You shall take both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death... You must purge the evil from among you.”

You see, the Bible is clear. God hates sin because it mars both His glory and His good intent for His people. So in the Law He gave to Moses He commanded the Jews to deal with sin, and these men are doing that. They’re standing against sin, *someone else’s* sin. The problem is...

3. *They stand guilty and don’t even know it.* Verse 6 begins, “They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.”

This isn’t about justice. This is a trap. This whole thing is a ploy by the religious leaders to ensnare Jesus. They’re not interested in righteousness. They’re after blood.

If this were about justice, these self-promoting God-fearers would have left the woman in private custody and come without her to seek Jesus’ counsel. But they don’t want His counsel. They want Him to incriminate Himself, and this woman is the bait they’re using to go for the kill.

⁴ MacArthur, p. 325.

⁵ Barclay, *The Mind of Jesus*, quote taken from Leon Morris, p. 884.

The trap is this. If Jesus says, “Yes, stone her,” He would be in violation of Roman law which did not allow for the death penalty for such action. But if He said, “No, don’t stone her,” then He would be open to the charge of undermining God’s law which clearly said that the person guilty of adultery deserves death. It’s a loaded question.⁶

And, of course, there’s something fishy going on here, isn’t there? Someone’s missing. If this woman was caught in the act of adultery, there should be two guilty parties present. Where’s the man? He’s guilty too. Why have they brought a law-breaking woman to Jesus and left the man at home? Why are there not two sinners standing before Jesus?

Friends, here we see the ugliness of the good sinner. He hates sin alright, *other* people’s sin, and yet he’s oblivious to it in his own life, or worse, he knows it’s there yet hides behind a godly façade.

It’s so ugly. Just look at these men. They are the spiritual leaders, the shepherds of Israel. And yet, as William Barclay observes, “They were not looking on this woman as a person at all; they were looking on her only as a thing, an instrument whereby they could formulate a charge against Jesus. They were using her, as a man might use a tool, for their own purposes. To them she had no name, no personality, no feelings; she was simply a pawn in the game whereby they sought to destroy Jesus.”⁷

Sin is so deceptive. Here are men who just like this woman are guilty of great crimes, but unlike her, they don’t even know it. They are oblivious to the sinfulness of their hearts and lives, and as they condemn this woman, they in essence are condemning themselves.

And they’re not alone. I can identify, can’t you? I too am so prone to get concerned about sin when I see it in someone else, and miss it, or worse, *justify* it in my own life. It’s a serious problem, one that Paul confronted head on when he wrote to the church in Rome...

Romans 2:1 “You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things.”

Romans 2:22-23 “You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? ²³ You who brag about the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law?”

So ends the first scene. In scene one we see the ugliness of sin as exhibited by a bad sinner and some very good sinners. I’m thankful for scene two.

II. We see the grace of the Savior (7-11).

I want you to think about the following statement. *The law knows nothing about forgiveness.*⁸ It’s true. Take a trip to the Scioto County court and listen to legal proceedings for a day, and you will not hear a judge talk about forgiveness. That’s not his concern. His concern is justice. The law is all about justice. The law identifies unacceptable behavior and what must happen to one who commits that behavior.

God’s law works the same way. Romans 3:20 says, “Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become

⁶ See Leon Morris, p. 887.

⁷ William Barclay, p. 5.

⁸ Observation by MacArthur, p. 327.

conscious of sin.” Romans 2:12 says, “All who sin under the law will be judged by the law.” No exceptions. “The soul who sins will die (Ezek. 18:4).” “The law brings wrath (Rom. 4:15).”

There is no flex in the Law. What the Law demands must occur. So how then can God who is righteous and just ever forgive a sinner who has violated His Law? There’s only one way, as we’ll see in a moment, and that’s through Jesus Christ and the substitutionary death He died.

Keep that in mind as we watch Jesus’ response in scene two. There are two types of sinners standing in His presence and He demonstrated grace towards both. First...

A. Jesus helps the good sinner (7-9). How do you help a good sinner? How do you really help a person who doesn’t think he needs help and is convinced it’s the bad sinner who needs help? Jesus did three things.

1. He used silence to get his attention. Notice that Jesus did not immediately respond to the question posed by the good sinners. Rather, verse 6 says He “bent down and started to write on the ground.” We’ll ponder what He did in a moment, but first note what He did not do. Jesus did not immediately respond to their question. And so verse 7 begins, “When they kept on questioning him.” That indicates He ignored them, and it irritated them.

Why didn’t He answer them? Didn’t He know what to say? Jesus always knew what to say. If there’s silence, you can be sure it’s intentional. So what’s His intent? I’m not sure, but it seems that He used the initial silence to get the attention of these good sinners, and in so doing He forced them to stop thinking about the woman and put their eyes on Him.

That’s what grace does. Grace always seeks the good of the other person, even if they don’t deserve it.

2. He used action to change his focus. What action? The end of verse 6 says, “But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger.” Why did He bend down? Again, He changed their focus, didn’t He? These men who came looking down at this woman are now forced to look down on Jesus.

And the text in verse 6 specifically says He *started* to write. That’s interesting. Apparently He didn’t finish before they interrupted Him in verse 7, and then He continued writing in verse 8. Interesting, isn’t it? They want to talk about what’s written on a stone tablet, but He gets down low and writes on the ground, as if to say, “You’re thinking on the surface. You need to go deeper.”

Can you think of other times in the Bible when we see the fingers of God at work? I think of the garden, when God scooped a handful of dirt and made the first man, and then later took a rib and formed the first woman out of the man. And perhaps, more significantly, Sinai comes to mind, when God’s finger put ten commandments on two tablets of stone (Ex. 31:18).

What did He write? The text doesn’t say, and the verb can even mean “to draw” or “to trace.” One Bible scholar said He stooped down and wrote “to hide the burning confusion of His face” and to “relieve His agitation by tracing patterns in the dust.”⁹ I’m not sure I buy that. I don’t think the picture of Jesus nervously doodling in the dirt fits the rest of the biblical record. Jesus never reacted to situations. He always acted and was in complete control.

⁹ Footnote in Leon Morris, p. 888.

One viable suggestion is that He wrote down what He later said. That was the practice in Roman criminal law, for a judge would first write his sentence and then read it for all to hear. “You want me to be the judge,” says Jesus. “Okay, read this. And then listen.”¹⁰

Perhaps. Another suggestion is that He wrote in the dirt the sins of the woman’s accusers. There’s actually a footnote in the NRSV after verse 8 that reads, “Other ancient authorities add *the sins of each of them.*” Again, maybe.

Others have said that He wrote down a verse such as Exodus 23:1 to help these critics see their own crime, “Do not spread false reports. Do not help a wicked man by being a malicious witness.”

The bottom line is this. We’re not told what Jesus wrote because it doesn’t really matter. What He did got their attention, but it’s what He said that exposed the hidden truth about the condition of their souls. It’s true...

3. *He used one sentence to expose the problem we all tend to ignore.* Here’s the sentence in verse 7, “When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, ‘*If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.*’”

What powerful and penetrating words! Jesus doesn’t condone the woman’s sin, nor does He deny that stones should be thrown. He just puts an important qualifier in place in terms of who should do the throwing.

That’s all He said. And then, as verse 8 indicates, “Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.” And the silence was deafening. With that one sentence Jesus forced these good sinners to face a reality they’d been ignoring for a long time. They were just like this woman. They too were sinners and therefore, they too were guilty before a holy and just God.

I’m intrigued by what happened in verse 9. “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.”

They *left*. The verb “left” is a strong term, and it communicates the sense of “abandoned.” In Luke 5:28 it’s used to Levi abandoning his position as a tax collector. After what these “good” sinners saw Jesus do and heard Jesus say, they forgot all about the guilty woman and *left* her, preoccupied now with the fact of their own guilt.

Furthermore, the text says they “began to go away one at a time.” The present tense of the verb gives the sense of a procession. They kept going out.¹¹ One man, then another, then another. I wonder what happened to the stones. MacArthur writes, “Ironically, those who came to put Jesus to shame left ashamed; those who came to condemn the woman went away condemned.”¹²

And don’t miss this. Who left first? The older men did. Friends, the longer you live, the more sin there is to see if you have eyes to see it. And see it you must, if you’re going to see yourself as God sees you.

So what happened to these good sinners that day? Did they respond rightly to the Savior’s grace and repent and get right with God? Sadly, though they left with apparent conviction over their own guilt, I see no indication that they truly repented. It’s a tragic scenario that I’ve seen repeated countless times as a pastor. I’ve seen convicted sinners

¹⁰ Leon Morris, p. 888.

¹¹ Observation by Morris, p. 890.

¹² MacArthur, p. 329.

cry and even agonize over their sin, but conviction doesn't always lead to repentance, and until it does the sinner remains in his sin.

So that's how Jesus helps the good sinner. In His grace He does things and says things to force the sinner to face the uncomfortable truth about his own sinfulness.

B. Jesus helps the bad sinner (10-11). Let's watch how He did it in verses 10-11, "Jesus straightened up and asked her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' ¹¹'No one, sir,' she said. 'Then neither do I condemn you,' Jesus declared. 'Go now and leave your life of sin.'"

I love this scene. It's so hope-giving for a sinner like me. How does Jesus help the bad sinner? He does three things.

1. *He takes away the sinner's condemnation.* How? First of all, He asks this adulteress two questions. One, where are they? That is, where are the men in the jury who were calling for your execution? And two, has no one condemned you? He's not asking those questions for information sake., for the Sovereign Lord knows the answers to the questions He asks. These questions are for *her* sake. He's teaching her something, about herself, and about Him.

It's true. She is a great sinner and deserving of condemnation. But she's standing in the presence of One who is a great Savior who offers hope to sinners, no matter how wicked their sinful lives have been.

"Neither do I condemn you," said Jesus. He could have. He is sinless. He could cast a stone. Remember what He said, "If anyone is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone." He is without sin. He thus could be the first to throw a stone. Why then didn't He?

You say, "Because He loves her." True, but love doesn't remove culpability for sin. In order to maintain His justice, a holy God can't just overlook sin, nor does His Son. There must be just grounds for letting a condemned criminal go free. So on what basis does Jesus let this guilty sinner go free? Or better yet, on what basis does He let us go free? Here's how.

2. *He takes the sinner's condemnation upon Himself.* Let Jesus' words in verse 11 sink in, "Then neither do I condemn you." How could He say that? How could He *not* condemn her? How could the perfect and spotless and sin-hating Son of God *not* condemn a woman who in fact had committed deliberate and defiant sin against Him, her Creator, and therefore was indeed guilty? How could He *not* condemn her when the law that He Himself had established clearly said that the transgressor must die?

The answer is that He Himself had come to take her condemnation in her place. In six months He's going to die on the cross, not as a martyr, but as a voluntary substitute. He is going to take upon Himself the sin and the deserving condemnation of every sinner who would ever believe on Him. That's why He said back in John 3:17, "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him." That's also why He said in John 8:15, "You judge by human standards; I pass judgment on no one." It's not that Jesus won't ever judge. He will, when He comes to earth the second time. But at His first coming, He didn't come to judge, but to save by being judged.

You say, "But was it enough? Was what Jesus endured on the cross enough to satisfy the demands of a holy God for a sinner's condemnation?" God Himself answered that question in two very visible ways. First, the moment Jesus died, God tore the temple veil

in two, making it clear that a change had occurred. Sinners could now come right into His holy presence through His Son. And secondly, three days later God Almighty raised His Son up from the dead and offered to the world a living Savior who ever lives to make intercession (see Heb. 10:19-23).

My friend, this is the good news, the glorious gospel message! Because of Christ, there is a place in God's kingdom even for adulterers and adulteresses and for every other kind of sinner, too.

But there's something else that Jesus does to help the bad sinner. It's so practical.

3. *He tells the sinner to stop sinning.* Notice His final words to this woman, "Go now and leave your life of sin." Although He didn't condemn her, neither did He condone her sin. In fact, He told her plainly to stop it. He commands her with two present tense commands. *Go*, and *leave your life of sin*. In other words, you are not to go back to your old life and the shameful sin that has characterized it. It's time to put off your old ways. It's time to change.

And did she? Did this woman change? Did she break off her adulteress relationship and start living a God-fearing life? The answer is, we're not told.

Leon Morris points out, "It should not be overlooked that He [Jesus] says nothing about forgiveness. The guilty woman has given no sign of repentance or of faith."¹³

It's sort of like what Jesus told the invalid that He healed in John 5:14. Remember the instruction? "See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you." You mean there's something worse than living in a body that doesn't work for 38 years? Yes. And it's worse than having rocks destroy that body, too. It's getting a new body, or a second chance at life with your current body, and refusing to leave your sin and follow the Savior.

So why aren't we told this woman's response, or for that matter, the scribes and Pharisees' response? Because they're dead and gone. The real issue isn't what these sinners did. It's what another group of sinners is going to do.

Make It Personal: What do we learn from this?

I see three lessons in this for us.

1. *We learn about balancing grace and truth.* That's a key theme in John's gospel. "Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (1:17)." In dealing with sinners Jesus was always full of grace *and* full of truth. Are you?

I tend to miss the balance. At times I'm harsh with sinners, and so I give them the truth, but lack grace. And then I put on some grace, but get soft on the truth side. Sinners need both grace and truth.

2. *We learn about how to deal with sin.* Who do you identify with in this story, the teachers and Pharisees or the woman, the good sinner or the bad sinner? We just learned from Jesus how to deal with our sin. We must face it. And we can face it because He faced it for us. Which brings us to a third lesson. When we ponder this story...

3. *We learn why the world desperately needs Jesus.* Good sinners, bad sinners, it's all sin to a holy God. But sin can be removed...because of Jesus.

¹³ Leon Morris, p. 891.