

Woman Caught in Adultery

HN/SS 10/4/05 am

Reading: Deuteronomy 22, John 8:1-12

Study Text: John 8:1-11

Psalms: 46:1-6, 46:7-11, 25:1-5, 25:15-18

‘These eleven verses, together with the last verse of the preceding chapter, form perhaps the gravest critical difficulty in the New Testament’ (Ryle). The difficulty is that many early manuscripts of the New Testament do not have this passage. Moreover some include it later in John’s gospel and others in Luke. There is also a difficulty with the language in that it is not typical of John e.g. use of the word ‘scribe’.

Although it may not fit neatly into this section of John, it is clearly the record of an actual event, a piece of inspired text and therefore Scripture from which we can learn. ‘Ministers should not be afraid to base sermons on it’ writes Hendrickson – and ‘on the other hand all the facts concerning the textual evidence should be made known’. I have given only the briefest of these facts – you can study further as you desire.

Augustine gives a different slant on this difficulty. He stated that certain individuals had removed from their codices this section regarding the adulteress. They thought that women would find in this story an excuse for their infidelity. But clearly such an appeal would be based upon misinterpretation of the passage as we will see.

What then does this passage teach us? It is in the first instance not about adultery at all, but about religious leaders setting a trap for Jesus. We can learn from them what not to do! And we can learn positive things from Jesus’ response to them and to the woman herself.

Trap Set For Jesus

In the synoptic gospels we find that the Pharisees and the Sadducees tried again and again to trap Jesus in his words. Remember the time they asked him about paying taxes (Matthew 22). Which ever way he answered they thought they had him. But then came that profound statement – give to Caesar what is Caesars and to God what is Gods. The trap failed. They were left speechless. They marvelled and went away.

The episode before us is very similar. The scribes and Pharisees had worked out an intricate plan. Scribes were lawyers- some of them were Pharisees also. Under the Law of Moses, if a married woman or an engaged woman was found lying with a man not her husband then they were both to be put to death (Deuteronomy 22). In the case of an engaged woman, stoning was prescribed. Under the law two witnesses were required, and the evidence had to be solid not just circumstantial.

As Jesus was teaching in the temple the religious leaders came up and thrust this woman before him. They had *caught her adultery – in the very act* they said. There was no doubt she was guilty.

But where was the man? Where was the other party to this sinful act? Clearly these accusers were not concerned about justice. This woman was merely a tool, a piece of bait they were using on a hook to catch Jesus. We would not be at all surprised if they had conspired to set the woman up for this very purpose. How else to explain the absence of a guilty man!

Having shoved the woman in front of Jesus they demanded *but what do you say?* The Law of Moses stipulated that such should be stoned they told him, but what do you say? The death penalty was probably not enforced for adultery at this time. In fact the Romans did not permit the Jews to inflict capital punishment (John 18:31). Nevertheless, if Jesus was seen to soft on this sin they would be able to accuse him before the Sanhedrin of breaking the Law of Moses. If on the other hand he condemned the woman to death, and this was carried out, he would be in trouble with the Romans – and these religious lawyers would have been the first to tell the governor!

Jesus Escapes the Trap

In the temple with a crowd gathered around they thought they had Jesus in a corner. What would he say? Yes or no – either way they had him. When Jesus said nothing at first they would have been delighted, thinking he was at a loss as to how to answer. But was this true?

Jesus stooped down and wrote in the ground. He said nothing, but just wrote with his finger in the dust. Why did he respond in this way? Was he ignoring them, hoping they would go away? Scholars have suggested different words that he may have written and that he wrote this for the accusers to read. But we simply do not know what he wrote.

Jesus did not need time think about his answer but those gathered around needed time to consider the question put to Jesus. The woman's accusers needed time to consider the gravity of their action – of course they wanted to press on while they had the advantage. Jesus would not be hurried. He sat there, seemingly disinterested, waiting for the dust to settle as it were, and waiting for emotions to settle.

Silence is an important instrument with which to treat our soul at times. *Be still and know that I am God* (Psalm 46). Too often we think that we will be heard by our many words. Too often we see the playing on emotions in churches today. The whole scene of this passage is marked by the long periods of silence. Jesus slowed things down that men would consider what they were doing, and indeed examine their own hearts.

Eventually Jesus sat up straight and spoke to the Pharisees. His words pierced the silence and pierced their hearts also. What profound wisdom we find in his answer – *let him who is without sin throw the first stone at her.* Then silence returned as those words did their intended work. They would reveal the hypocrisy which filled the hearts of these accusers.

Jesus' answer was based on the law. For the death penalty to be given two witnesses were required and those witnesses must be the *first against him to put him to death* (Deuteronomy 17:7). Jesus added the qualification that the one to throw the first stone be without sin. Which of them would step forward to throw the first stone?

Jesus did not speak against the Law of Moses. He invited them to obey the law. This was not what they came for of course. They came to trap Jesus not to see the law carried out. With these words of Jesus they found themselves caught in their own trap. Which of them was without sin?

Some think that Jesus was referring to this particular sin of adultery, claiming that this sin was widespread in that male dominated society. How can anyone judge another, they say, if he meant any sin – for clearly no one is without sin? But such a conclusion is unfounded in the light of other Scripture. For when Jesus said *judge not that you be not judged* (Matthew 7:1) he did not rule out all judgment by men. He ruled out hypocrisy. He called upon those judging to remember that God will one day judge them.

He who speaks against his brother and judges his brother speaks evil of the law and judges the law...there is one Lawgiver (James 4:11). This is the message Jesus was conveying to these Pharisees. All judgment must be impartial; it must be just, and according to the will of God. It must be judgment in the name of God (Matthew 18:18-20).

Accusers Trapped

The accuser's hearts were pierced by the words of Jesus. No one stepped forward to throw a stone. Rather they began to slip away. 'Those who came to shame Jesus now leave in shame'. The oldest left first. One might have expected the oldest to take the lead in judging the sinner – then all the younger ones would follow. But deep in their heart, below the facade of piety and self-righteousness, the words of Jesus pricked their conscience. They felt guilty and left.

The Bait Lives

These Pharisees had no compassion for the woman or concern for justice. They simply wanted to trap Jesus. She was the bait they were using to catch him. What shameful men they were. They were using this woman for their own political and religious purposes.

We still see such shameful behaviour, even in the house of God. Children get caught up in long running disputes, new believers get caught up in age old wrangling in the church. Beware said Jesus of causing one of these little ones who believe in me to stumble (Mark 9:42).

Jesus had again stooped down and was writing on the ground as the accusers left. When he looked up he was surprised to see they had all gone away and left the woman behind. *Where are your accusers* he asked her? *Has no one condemned you?*

The watching crowd must have been struck with awe at what they had just seen and heard. The religious leaders had dragged this woman into their midst calling for her to be stoned. Now they had all gone and left the woman behind. All eyes were upon their teacher, especially the eyes of the woman, who was pleased to be still alive.

What would Jesus do with her? Would he just tell her to go home, ignoring her sin? That would amount to condoning her sin, a conclusion some in fact draw from this passage. But Jesus said to her two things:

Neither do I condemn you. Jesus was not going to stone her to death according to the law – he was not a witness. Besides he did not come to condemn the world – he came *that the world through him might live* (3:18).

Go and sin no more. It is the very essence of repentance to forsake sin. Merewords or feelings are not sufficient. Repentance must include turning away from sin. So Jesus in effect was calling upon her to repent. Repent, and the next step is to believe in Jesus as Lord.

We are not told if she believed or not. But that is not important for you to know – the important thing for you to know is that you have repented and believed in Jesus as Lord. *Go and sin no more.*

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