

John 8:1-11 - Discussion Guide

TEXT - READ John 8:1–11 (ESV) but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. 2 Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them. 3 The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst 4 they said to him, “Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. 5 Now in the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?” 6 This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. 7 And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.” 8 And once more he bent down and wrote on the ground. 9 But when they heard it, they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. 10 Jesus stood up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” 11 She said, “No one, Lord.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.”

What is going on in this text (retell the story or summarize the main points)? How does this story fit within the whole of John’s Gospel?

THEOLOGY - What do we learn about God from this text?

- a. Jesus is the only person without sin (he alone is the judge) and yet he shows compassion toward human sin. Jesus meets sinners with grace in their lowest moments and yet he does not leave them in their sin. Jesus offers forgiveness to those who would trust him (rather than the condemnation we deserve) and calls us to live in a new way (we turn from sin to life in Jesus).

Anything else we might learn about God from the text?

LIFE

What are some of the ways you are prone to judge the sins of others? What have you experienced from religious people when your sin has been exposed?

We tend to either view sin (ours and others) with legalism (lacking compassion and grace) or license (lacking truth and repentance). How do you tend to respond (either license or legalism)? How does Jesus' treatment of the woman caught in adultery differ from how we tend to treat people caught in sin and how is God leading us to become more like him?

How does this text lead you to love God and others more?

How do you sense the Spirit leading you to respond in obedience? How does this text lead us to change?

PRAYER

Confess your sin to God in prayer and ask Him for strength to respond in obedience to his word.

What is one personal need you have that we can pray for you as a group?

Pray for one friend, family member, or coworker who you want to share the love of Jesus with.

Consulting the Scholars -Despite the best efforts of Zane Hodges to prove that this narrative was originally part of John's Gospel, the evidence is against him, and modern English versions are right to rule it off from the rest of the text (niv) or to relegate it to a footnote (rsv). These verses are present in most of the medieval Greek miniscule manuscripts, but they are absent from virtually all early Greek manuscripts that have come down to us, representing great diversity of textual traditions. The most notable exception is the Western uncial D, known for its independence in numerous other places. They are also missing from the earliest forms of the Syriac and Coptic Gospels, and from many Old Latin, Old Georgian and Armenian manuscripts. All the early church Fathers omit this narrative: in commenting on John, they pass immediately from 7:52 to 8:12. No Eastern Father cites the passage before the tenth century. Didymus the Blind (a fourth-century exegete from Alexandria) reports a variation on this narrative, not the narrative as we have it here. Moreover, a number of (later) manuscripts that include the narrative mark it off with asterisks or obeli, indicating hesitation as to its authenticity, while those that do include it display a rather high frequency of textual variants. Although most of the manuscripts that include the story place it here (*i.e.* at 7:53–8:11), some place it instead after Luke 21:38, and other witnesses variously place it after John 7:44, John 7:36 or John 21:25. The diversity of placement confirms the inauthenticity of the verses. Finally, even if someone should decide that the material is authentic, it would be very difficult to justify the view that the material is authentically *Johannine*: there are numerous expressions and constructions that are found nowhere in John, but which are characteristic of the Synoptic Gospels, Luke in particular (*cf.* notes, below).

On the other hand, there is little reason for doubting that the event here described occurred, even if in its written form it did not in the beginning belong to the canonical books. Similar stories are found in other sources. One of the best known, reported by Papias (and recorded by the historian Eusebius, *H.E.* III. xxxix. 16), is the account of a woman, accused in the Lord's presence of many sins (unlike the woman here who is accused of but one). The narrative before us also has a number of parallels (some of them noted below) with stories in the Synoptic Gospels. The reason for its insertion here may have been to illustrate 7:24 and 8:15 or, conceivably, the Jews' sinfulness over against Jesus' sinlessness (8:21, 24, 46).

7:53–8:1. The abrupt opening is reminiscent of Jesus' pattern during the week before his passion, the week in which Jesus spent the nights in Bethany, travelling to and from Jerusalem each day, with pauses along the way at the Mount of Olives (*cf.* Mk. 11:11–12, 19–20, and esp. Lk. 21:37). That is as plausible a setting for this incident as any other suggestion.

8:2. Several expressions in this verse are typical of Luke-Acts (or in one case of Matthew as well): *orthos* ('dawn') is found in the New Testament elsewhere only in Luke 24:1; Acts 5:21; *paraginomai* ('appear') and *laos* ('people') are common in Luke-Acts, rare in John; and for *he sat down to teach them* *cf.* Matthew 5:1–2; Luke 4:20; 5:3. The content of this verse is closely paralleled by Luke 21:38, again referring to the week of Jesus' passion: 'and all the people came early in the morning to hear him at the temple'. The outer court served as the venue for many scribes to gather their students around them and expound the law to them. Jesus used the same facilities, even if his content could not easily be compared with what the others taught.

8:3–4. Because the venue was so public, it was easy enough for officials and opponents to mingle with disciples and bring up hard cases. *The teachers of the law* (lit. 'scribes') and *the Pharisees* are often mentioned together in the Synoptics, but never in the genuine text of John. The scribes were the recognized students and expositors of the law of Moses, but so central was the law in the life and thought of first-century Palestinian Jews that the scribes came to assume something of the roles of lawyer, ethicist, theologian, catechist, and jurist. Most of them, but certainly not all, were Pharisees by conviction (*cf.* notes on 1:19ff.).

These religious authorities, then, approach Jesus with nominal respect: *Teacher* is doubtless the equivalent of 'Rabbi' (*cf.* notes on 1:38). The woman they bring with them *was caught in the act of adultery*. Adultery is not a sin one commits in splendid isolation: one wonders why the man was not brought with her. Either he was fleet of foot than she, and escaped, leaving her to face hostile accusers on her own; or the accusers themselves were sufficiently chauvinistic to focus exclusively on the woman. The inequity of the situation arouses our feelings of compassion, however guilty she herself was. In any case, the next verses suggest that the authorities in this case are less interested in ensuring that evenhanded justice be meted out than in hoisting Jesus onto the horns of a dilemma.

8:5–6a. The authorities' quotation of the law (*Moses commanded us to stone such women*) raises a widely disputed question: Was the woman married, or single and betrothed? Stoning is the biblically prescribed punishment for a betrothed virgin who is sexually unfaithful to her fiancé, a punishment to be meted out to both sexual partners (Dt. 22:23–24). Elsewhere (Lv. 20:10; Dt. 22:22) death is prescribed for all unfaithful wives and their lovers, but no mode (such as stoning) is laid down. In the Mishnah (*Sanhedrin* 7:4), however, the two cases are sharply differentiated: the offence in the first instance is punishable by stoning (it is viewed as the more serious of the two), and the second by strangling. That would mean the woman in this passage was betrothed, not married. It is rather doubtful, however, that the distinction existed in Jesus' day.

Although capital punishment by stoning is still meted out today in some Muslim countries for the offence of adultery, there is little evidence that it was carried out very often in first-century Palestine, especially in urban areas. John suggests as much: the authorities were not interested in the intrinsic merits of this case, still less in assuring that justice be done and be seen to be done, but *were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him*. There are several Synoptic parallels (Mk. 3:2;

10:2 par.; Lk. 6:7). If Jesus disavowed the law of Moses, his credibility would be instantly undermined: he could be dismissed as a lawless person and perhaps be charged in the courts with serious offences. If he upheld the law of Moses, he would not only be supporting a position that was largely unpopular but one that was probably not carried out in public life, and, worse, which would have been hard to square with his well-known compassion for the broken and disreputable, his quickness to forgive and restore, and his announcement of the life-transforming power bound up with the new birth. It is even possible, as Jeremias suggests, that formal agreement with the law of Moses could have been interpreted in such a way as to get him into serious difficulty with the Roman overlord. If in the name of Moses he pronounced the death sentence on this woman, and it was actually carried out, he would have been infringing the exclusive rights of the Roman prefect, who alone at this period had the authority to impose capital sentences (*cf.* notes on 18:31–32). If this is part of the dilemma the authorities planned for Jesus, this narrative takes on the flavour of the trap recorded in Mark 12:13–17 par.

8:6b–8. Why and what Jesus wrote on the ground cannot be ascertained. A longstanding interpretation in the church has been that he wrote part of Jeremiah 17:13: ‘Those who turn away from you will be written in the dust because they have forsaken the Lord, the spring of living water.’ T. W. Manson was the first to suggest that Jesus was imitating the practice of Roman magistrates who first wrote their sentence and then read it; but it is far from clear that Jesus wrote a sentence (at least, a sentence for the woman), and in any case this explanation is less than satisfactory for v. 8. Derrett (p. 187) suggests that the first time Jesus stooped down he wrote, ‘Do not help a wicked man by being a malicious witness’ (Ex. 23:1b), and the second time, ‘Have nothing to do with a false charge and do not put an innocent or honest person to death, for I will not acquit the guilty’ (Ex. 23:7). This seems to give the woman more than her due. (Derrett avoids this problem by hypothesizing that the accusers could have prevented the adultery, but failed to do so in a disgusting conspiracy that was aimed at embarrassing Jesus.) Some have suggested that what Jesus wrote is entirely incidental. The action of writing was itself parabolic, and what really counted—as if Jesus were saying, in effect, ‘You are the people of whom Scripture speaks!’ In the absence of parallels, however, it is hard to see how the opponents would have read so much into Jesus’ action. The truth is that we do not know.

At one level, his writing on the ground was a delaying action that failed to satisfy Jesus’ opponents, so *they kept on questioning him*. However ambiguous his writing may be to us today, the words with which he finally responded are clear enough: *If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her*. This is a direct reference to Deuteronomy 13:9; 17:7 (*cf.* Lv. 24:14)—the witnesses of the crime must be the first to throw the stones, and they must not be participants in the crime itself. Jesus’ saying does not mean that the authorities must be paragons of sinless perfection before the death sentence can properly be meted out, nor does it mean that one must be free even from lust before one can legitimately condemn adultery (even though lust and adultery belong to the same genus, Mt. 5:28). It means, rather, that they must not be guilty of this particular sin. As in many societies around the world, so here: when it comes to sexual sins, the woman was much more likely to be in legal and social jeopardy than her paramour. The man could lead a ‘respectable’ life while masking the same sexual sins with a knowing wink. Jesus’ simple condition, without calling into question the Mosaic code, cuts through the double standard and drives hard to reach the conscience.

8:9. Many manuscripts specifically say that the accusers were ‘convicted by their own conscience’ (av), but their stunned departure testifies as much. Those who had come to shame Jesus now leave in shame. When they have gone, the woman is still said to be ‘in the midst’ (av; Gk. *en mesō*). All John means is that the ring around her has melted away, and she was *still standing there* (niv).

8:10–11. Alone with the woman, Jesus addresses her for the first time. His form of address, *Woman* (*gynai*), is entirely respectful (*cf.* notes on 2:4; 4:21; 19:26; 20:13). He does not here ask if she is guilty, but if there are others who condemn her. That she is guilty is presupposed by the final words of v. 11: *Go now and leave your life of sin*. But she answers his question with a direct *No-one, sir* (Gk. *kyrie*, which means ‘sir’ as readily as ‘lord’ or ‘Lord’). Only now does Jesus come close to answering the question that was first set him. Regardless of the exigencies of the law of Moses, in this instance Jesus says *neither do I condemn you*. The confidence and personal absoluteness of Jesus’ words not only call to mind that Jesus came not to condemn but to save (3:17; 12:47), but prompt us to remember the Synoptic accounts that assign Jesus, like God himself, the right to forgive sin (Mt. 9:1–8 par.). The proper response to mercy received on account of past sins is purity in the future. niv’s *leave your life of sin* establishes the point directly, even if the expression almost paints the woman as an habitual whore (though the Greek bears no such overtones).

Carson, D. A. (1991). [*The Gospel according to John*](#) (pp. 333–337). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.