

INTRO:¹

This week was reminded of an article by Joe Klein/writing for Newsweek Magazine, which I'm not sure is still in print/so might be dating myself here, but he wrote about how after years of people generally sneering at old values like self-control, chastity, honesty, generosity, self-denial, these kinds of things; that our entire society is now waking up with what he called a huge cultural hangover. Ya think about an entire society that's been out "partying all night," now waking up hungover. Cuz he says, ya know in the 60s and 70s we binged on sex and drugs and woke up to addiction, unplanned pregnancies, disease. In the 80s, we binged on materialism and found ourselves waking up to debt. I think you could add to that and say, in the 90's we binged on experiences and woke up distracted. In the early 2000s we binged on technology only to wake up feeling lonely and exposed. And of course more recently, we've binged on radical self-expression and woken up depressed, anxious, confused, angry. As Ashley Gorman, writing for Gospel Coalition says, *"America's cultural atmosphere is highly charged...every conversation... seems infused with kerosene, ready for the smallest spark to burn attempts at civility to the ground...(So that) instead of complex people enjoying constructive dialogue...we're increasingly more like Gaston (in Beauty and the Beast) wild-eyed, seething, pitchfork in one hand/torch in the other, awaiting to "kill the beast" on the other side."*²...All this to say, if you're here this morning, and for one reason or another, feeling confused, frustrated/anxious, even lost as to how to navigate these so-called culture wars and what increasingly feels like living in "crazy town;" you're not alone, and more importantly, you're here on a good morning. BECAUSE we've come to a very famous account in the Gospel of John, in which through an encounter with a woman caught in adultery, Jesus ONCE AGAIN shows us what God's really like AND how to navigate these cultural challenges with wisdom, hope, and love...So if you would, let's stand and read God's word together...

CONTEXT:

Obviously an incredibly powerful story. BUT because it may not be totally apparent if you're not looking AT this story in a print Bible or even Bible app, ya notice around the first and last verses there are brackets with a little footnote stating something to effect of: *"this story not being in some of the oldest manuscripts."* And that's BECAUSE scholars point out that the most reliable manuscripts we have don't include this particular story. That in-fact, it looks like someone wrote this particular story in the margins of some of those manuscripts after-the-fact. And of course, what that means is that this story might not have been in the original text OR it was, but someone forgot to write it down and then added it later perhaps because it was so well-known. And so maybe you're thinking, *"Um, how many other stories are there like this in the Bible?"* The answer is: only this one and the last verses of **Mark 16**, BOTH of which theologians have acknowledged for 1000 years. This wasn't something critics discovered in like the 90's...More

¹ Works consulted:

- "The Sexual Captive: John 4: 8" - J. D. Greear, J. D. Greear Sermon Archive (Durham, NC: The Summit Church, 2017).
 - "THE HUMILITY OF JESUS - The Fruit of the Spirit - The Character of Christ" - May 24, 1998 - John 8:1-11 + "THE GENTLENESS OF JESUS - Gospel of John, Part 1" - June 2, 1991 - John 8:1-11 + "THE SEARCH FOR VALUES - Modern Problems; Ancient Solutions" - October 17, 1993 - Psalm 19 - Tim Keller Sermon Archive
 - THE WOMAN CAUGHT IN ADULTERY - 2-11-2001 - Gospel of John John 7:53-8:11 - Mark Driscoll Sermon Archive
 - Max Lucado, "Finding Courage to Overcome the Past," <https://maxlucado.com/finding-courage-to-overcome-the-past/>.
 - Nicenes and Post-Nicene Fathers 1.7 - St. Augustine Homilies on the Gospel of John - TRACTATE XXXIII - Chapter 7:40-53; 8:1-11.

² <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/outrage-culture-share-good-news/>

importantly, here's why, despite that, I'm still MORE than comfortable preaching from it: Because what Jesus says here is so typical of His message and consistent with the Gospel, that if nothing else, it's a great illustration of what God's REALLY like.

TEXT:

Cuz what you have here is a woman standing in the center of a circle of men. Not just any men/religious leaders/Pharisees/the, as we've seen throughout John, self-appointed custodians of conduct. And as **v.3** shows, they've brought this woman in yet another attempt to setup and hopefully take down Jesus. So much so, you see in **v.2**, they're literally willing to march into the temple and interrupt Jesus WHILE He's seated and teaching... Which aside from the fact that I teach you seated like this every week because it makes me feel very "Jesus'y," what you have to see is that this is ABSOLUTELY an attempt to publicly discredit Jesus. Cuz as we've seen for 8 chapters now, the more Jesus appears to violate the Pharisees religious sensibilities, the more OUTRAGED they get. In their minds, Jesus is literally the beast and they're Gaston. SO they bring this woman, and pushing her out, it says, "*in their midst,*" they say, "*Teacher, this woman has been caught in the ACT of adultery.*" Not, "*we found out she committed adultery*" or even "*she told us,*" but literally, "*we caught/we SAW her in the act.*" Like doors thrown open, lights on, covers jerked back, "*You're coming with us. You're getting stoned!*"

Now to be sure, this might seem extreme to us. But that's because, SADLY, in our culture, adultery has almost become a kind of virtue of self-expression, EVEN THOUGH/and if you've ever experienced adultery in any kind of close proximity you know this: It ALWAYS destroys; destroys families, children, rips away at the fabric and foundation of the church/society. It's INCREDIBLY destructive, which is WHY the Bible considers it such a grievous sin. Cuz in the Bible, adultery is actually viewed as a kind of killing, since in a very literal sense, it DOES kill - kills marriages, families, communities, and more importantly robs God of glory, by killing the covenant vow made between spouses IN God's sight. So you really can't overstate how grievous of a sin adultery is... It's just that these religious leaders, who're supposed to be good at caring for people are INSTEAD using this woman's to entrap Jesus. They're literally willing to sacrifice her life to get to Jesus! She's bait. Cuz as **v.6** says, they brought this woman "*to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him.*" ...And that's where ya start to get a hint about the fact that though this woman's sin is ABSOLUTELY shameful, the leaders' actions are despicable. Cuz according to Jewish Law adultery was punishable by death, but ONLY if two people witnessed the act. There had to be 2 eyewitnesses. ***So let me ask you a question:*** How likely is it that 2 people witness an ACT of adultery? Like what are the chances of two people stumbling upon some early morning forbidden embrace? Unlikely right? Such that if you DO have those 2 eyewitnesses, chances are...it aint a coincidence. It's not a stretch to believe that these leaders were lying in wait/maybe even peering through the window before barging in. Perhaps because this particular woman was known to be promiscuous. Cuz also, ***where's the guy?***... This is CLEARLY a trap BOTH for the woman and more importantly for Jesus - to try and GET Jesus to EITHER uphold the law and condemn this woman, but then of course, risk diminishing His influence with those who love his message of grace, OR get Him to water down the law by letting this woman go, but then risk diminishing His reputation as a teacher OF the

Law. In other words, get Jesus to either show compassion, but then relativize morality, which would prove He's not from God OR uphold absolute morality, but then crush people with a lack of compassion, which would stamp out His following. Either way, it's a "lose-lose."

And not just for Jesus, but this woman too. Cuz to be sure, there's no need for her to assume she might find kindness. I mean she KNOWS she's been caught, and it's only a matter of time before the stones come her way...Until notice, Jesus makes a subtle but masterful move. In the face of all this outrage, He pauses...collects Himself...bends down...and as **v.6** says, "*writes on the ground.*" Think about that! Think about the bravery in that? A woman's life on the line. Jesus' messiahship is at stake, and He's doodling!...And we don't know what He doodled and honestly, shouldn't speculate. Cuz frankly it doesn't matter, EXCEPT to show you that whatever you might think the Gospels are, they're NOT legends/they're not made-up. ***Cuz what's the point of including this detail?*** It doesn't add ANYTHING to the story. In fact, we're told in **v.9** that after Jesus continued to write in the ground, it's not his writing that causes the crowd to disperse - as if they saw what He wrote and felt condemned - it was His words. It says, "*when they heard it,*" meaning heard what Jesus said/not saw what He wrote, they dispersed. So nothing comes of this scribbling. It adds nothing to the story/certainly not an ancient Hebrew story, which was not a style of writing known for including imagery to make scenes more believable. That's a completely modern way of writing. So the only explanation for WHY this detail is here...is because it actually happened. The author really saw it!

So Jesus is pressured for an answer. And He stands up and says, "*Let him who's without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.*" / "*Anyone here who's never sinned can throw first.*" And notice, He doesn't say a stone SHOULD'N'T be thrown. That is the Law after all. He simply says, "*if you're gonna be the one to 'uphold the law', ya better make sure you're qualified to do it.*" ...Cuz of course the reality was, they WEREN'T qualified, not only because this whole thing was a sham from the start, but because, the Leaders are, not only committing the sin of partiality by leaving the man out, but TOO because, you gotta understand, ACTUALLY stoning someone for adultery in this time, RARELY happened, BOTH because the eye-witness requirement was so high, BUT ALSO because adultery was so rampant, given how women were sadly viewed as a kind of property...And so Jesus ISN'T saying, as we often assume: "*Unless you're sinless you can't punish anyone.*" It'd be laughable if we couldn't call obviously bad things bad because we ourselves aren't perfect. What He's saying is, "*if you're gonna punish someone/especially if you're gonna kill em for adultery; you yourself can't be an adulterer.*" In other words, He's not putting forth some ridiculous standard of perfection. But nor is He denying the Law. Rather, He's denying that this crowd is qualified to be executioners OF the Law!...Which when you think about it, is an absolute master-class in wisdom. Cuz on the one hand, He doesn't contribute to the outrage, and on the other, He doesn't cave to relativism and affirm something bad as good.

And I love that little detail there in **v.9**, in which "*one by one, beginning with the older folks,*" everyone disperses. ***Cuz isn't that just SO true-to-life?*** Since, unless you're just a total narcissist, we all know that the process of getting older is in many respects the process of seeing more-and-more all the self-sabotaging junk you bring to everything in life. Cuz ya know, when

you're young you're full of all this idealism and the problem's never you; it's always "out there" and "over there." But with time and experience, so much of that gets beaten out of you. And cuz you've arrived, but because you've just slammed your head against the wall of your own inadequacy enough times to realize, "*oh, the biggest problem's actually...in here.*" ...Jesus just totally disturbs the comfortable...only to next, turn and comfort the disturbed. Cuz here He is all alone with this woman, who though seeing her "jury" depart is still before the judge and effectively awaiting sentencing. Cuz understand, just because this woman's accusers have left, doesn't mean she's off the hook. In some sense, she's more on the hook NOW than she's ever been. Because while she MIGHT'VE been able to move for, quote-unquote, "mistrial" on the basis of the Pharisees' hypocrisy, she's got NO chance of that before the perfect, sinless, creator of truth and therefore the ONE person who ACTUALLY has every right to put her to death.

And you see, at first, Jesus doesn't even speak to her. He's still bent down, almost as if surprised she's still there...But then says, "*Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you/no one judged you guilty?*" To which she answers, "*No one, Lord*" or "*No one Sir*"...And Jesus says, "*Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.*"...In a single moment/with a single utterance you have to believe that, not only, is this woman's immediate fear washed away - her fear of being killed - but her deepest fear is washed away too - that fear we ALL have, **right**, of being exposed and found out. Cuz let's be honest, you got countless people RIGHT NOW furiously scrubbing their social media for fear of something they posted back in high school...People who AREN'T here right now for fear of being considered a hypocrite, given what they did this week...Perhaps some of US who ARE here, but've put on a good face for fear of being seen as the not-really-put-together full-of-doubts-people we ACTUALLY are...All those fears completely washed away...If you've ever wondered what God's really like when you fail, frame Jesus's words there and hang em on your wall. Read em. Memorize em. Drink em in. And THEN take em with you into whatever canyon of shame occupies your life!...Because let's be sure: In NOT condemning this woman, Jesus has in NO way diminished His power and glory. In many respects, He's intensified it with His meekness here...Ya know the word meek, in the Greek, it comes from the word used for a powerful animal, that's receptive to a rider. Like a warhorse! In ancient times, for a horse to be considered ready for war, it had to be "meek," meaning it had to be incredibly powerful/glorious. Cuz of course, you don't wanna take a weak horse into battle. But it also had to be incredibly responsive. Cuz of course, you don't want a powerful but rebellious horse when your life's on the line. It had to be "meek," meaning never letting its power overrule its responsiveness. But also never letting its responsiveness diminish its power!...Friends, THAT'S Jesus! A glorious war horse, who's not only powerful beyond measure - able to turn water to wine, multiply food, heal people, walk on water, and ultimately defeat death by rising from the grave, BUT who's utterly responsive to your needs and sin! Willing to go to the cross so as to neither affirm NOR make you pay FOR your sin. But rather to completely cast it away and declare it "finished," so that YOU, like her, can live **un-condemned!**

That's the beauty of this incredible story. ***So how should this affect the way we live?*** Or more specifically, how can this help us navigate the culture in WHICH we're living. Let me give ya just 3 ways: ***First, If like the Pharisees/the Crowd, You're Outraged or Tempted to Join-In***

With OTHERS Who Are Outraged About Some Injustice OR You're Just Frustrated That Someone or Something Around You Needs To Change, I think the call for you is twofold: **One** and very practically: Do what Jesus does here, and before responding/certainly before lashing out, take a breath, collect yourself, maybe even doodle a bit. Cuz ya may not know this, but Jesus/the Bible is totally cool with you not always having an immediate response and being willing to be silent. Silence IS NOT, as our culture would have you believe, always equal to being complicit. Actually, more often than not, it's equal to being wise! As **Proverbs 29:20** and **18:2** say respectively, "*Ya see a man who's hasty in his words? There's more hope for a fool than him...A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion.*" Friends, you're free to breathe, be silent, and not have an immediate answer...But then **Two**, consider what's at the heart of your outrage, and really much of the outrage-culture around us. **Isn't it about injustice and ultimately sin?** Like think about the most recent debacle you've noticed in the public square or just in your own life. Think about how, depending on the level of wrongdoing that occurred, how there was corresponding discipline "from on high" that was either expected or demanded **right?** That's BECAUSE your outrage/the outrage-culture around us CORRECTLY, even if unknowingly, agrees with God...that sin requires payment. That you can't just sweep it under the rug. There has to be retractions, apologies, and accountability, which is WHY, in bringing this woman to Jesus, the Pharisees WERE in some respects correct in their outrage. What they WEREN'T correct in, is their assumption that in BEING outraged about her sin, that they could somehow be distant FROM it...Cuz see Friends, none of us - no matter how moral, upstanding, or above some particular injustice we think we are, are ever above sin. As **Romans 3:9-10** and **Ephesians 2:1** say respectively, "*all of us, both Jew and Greek, are under sin, as it is written: 'None is righteous, no, not one'...we're all dead in our trespasses and sins.*" We're all equal opportunity sinners. THAT'S what the Pharisees didn't get, which consequently lead them to believe that they were in a sense being sinned against and thus justified in their outrage...But let me give you a little principle/**write this down: 1st Sinner, 2nd Sinned Against. 1st Sinner, 2nd Sinned Against.** What that means is, while to a degree/maybe a large degree, you might be justified in being outraged toward some wrongdoing or sin - the reality is, according to the Bible, you're just as broken as the person or people you're railing against. If God decided to be outraged toward YOU, YOU would have to pay as much as or more than the person you're assuming should pay in your outrage! **You see?** Simply taking a breath and then starting from a position of "1st sinner, 2nd sinned against," doesn't minimize the seriousness of sin or injustice, but it does help you not approach that sin or injustice with hypocritical outrage. Or to say it another way: It doesn't remove the anger you SHOULD feel toward sin and injustice; it just removes the HATE wherein lies so much of the destruction OF our outrage.

Second, I think we're helped here by understanding that, **Taking Stock-Of/MAYBE Even Pushing-Away Outrage Is NOT The Same As AFFIRMING Sin Or Wrongdoing.** And I know affirmation, equity, inclusivity is hugely popular right now, to the point that it almost feels like if you DON'T affirm everyone just the way they are - as the pop song says, "*I'm perfect just the way I'm made...I'm lovin' who I be. There's no one else but me. Self love, self help, self care. Self healin', self worth everywhere.*" - If you DON'T believe that; it's considered not only un-affirming, but bigoted...But you gotta understand, this woman's sin/her adultery IS grievous!

Which is WHY you don't see Jesus winking at it and just saying, "*neither do I condemn you.*" Or "*Go, because there's no such thing as sin or the possibility of being condemned. I just wanna affirm you.*" No! **What does He say?** He says, "*Neither do I condemn you. SO go and sin no more.*" **You know what He's doing?** He's REALLY TRULY loving her! Cuz, you understand, no one loves by simply saying, "*I don't condemn you,*" when that person is clearly doing something or living in a way that's hurting em. True love can't STAND to see someone being destroyed. A parent, who in desiring to be "affirming," lets their child indulge in some self-destructive behavior or feeling, isn't loving them; they're hurting/they're neglecting/they're actually hating them. Jesus never once affirmed for this woman that there was some harmony in living an adulterous lifestyle BECAUSE/listen: *Jesus isn't in the business of AFFIRMING who you are: He's in the business of LOVING who you are and affirming who He's making you into, which is more like Himself.*... And so, all that to say, if you're feeling pressured to jump on the cultural bandwagon of having to affirm everyone's thoughts, feelings and behaviors - no matter how crazy they seem - just understand, that's NOT Jesus' bandwagon, cuz it's not actually loving!... But even more...if you're PERSONALLY - maybe struggling with whether or not to affirm, perhaps, some desire, behavior/viewpoint, even a particular lifestyle; **can I encourage you:** before you come to a resolution on that/ESPECIALLY before you decide to affirm and assume it good, can I encourage you to take it to Jesus in both study and prayer? Even get a Christian friend to come alongside IN you taking it to Jesus. Because, you understand, Jesus knows EXACTLY what's best for you. He was willing to die and able to rise FOR your best. And so He's the best person to guide you in what you should and should not affirm. So I encourage you: take it to Him and THEN resolve to trust Him with it, no matter the outcome. **Will you do that?**

Finally, Maybe You're Like This Woman Here, In That You're Not So Much Outraged Or Trying To Figure Out What To Affirm/Not Affirm, You're Just...Hurting...Feeling Exposed...Even Full of Shame! And maybe that's because like her, you're a victim of others' sins against you. OR also like her, you're suffering because of your OWN sinful decisions. Friend whatever the case, you HAVE to see how Jesus speaks to this woman, and by extension speaks to YOU. Cuz **First** you see, He calls her "*woman.*" And that may not sound significant/might even seem cold...UNTIL you remember that this is a woman who's likely to've been known to be promiscuous AND has just been thrown into the middle of a mass of sneering men, who are willing to sacrifice her. **And what does Jesus call her?** Not "whore," or "slut," or "home-wrecker"...but simply "*woman.*" The SAME thing He called His mother back in **John 2** at the wedding. It's a term of dignity that's neither cold NOR overly warm. Cuz understand, calling a woman something like the terms I just referenced would obviously be cold. But ALSO, calling her something like "sweetie" or "darling"/something overly warm like that, would in this case, be inappropriate, GIVEN that Jesus is not only alone with her BUT that this is a woman who'd likely been called all those "warm" things, but only ever in order to be used...Jesus speaks to her with honor and dignity. And so you! He says in **John 15:5**, "*No longer do I call you a servant, because a servant doesn't know what his master is doing. Rather I call you (my) friend, because all that I've heard from my Father, I've made known to you.*" **You hear that?** No matter how full of shame or hurt you might be, Jesus says to you/this morning, "*You're my friend! And AS my friend, I not only wanna invite you into my life/share with you all about how*

my Father feels about you, I wanna be invited into yours/get to know your story, no matter how messy it is. You're my friend." As Thomas Aquinas said, *"There's nothing on earth more to be prized than true friendship."*³ Cuz in true friendship there's just such respect, honor, and dignity. Ya gotta see that!...But then **Two**, you gotta see the ORDER in which Jesus speaks to this woman and subsequently speaks to you. Cuz notice, He doesn't say to her, *"Go and sin no more AND THEN I won't condemn you."* No! He says, *"I DON'T condemn you, so go and sin no more."* **See the difference?** Jesus isn't telling her/isn't telling YOU that you need to change IN ORDER to be accepted. That's what religion tells you: Change/clean up your life/get your act together AND THEN God will accept you. JESUS tells you to change BECAUSE He's accepted you. In other words, His embrace of you doesn't come AFTER you deal with your shame or get un-stuck. It comes BEFORE. Because Friend, you'll never truly have the ability to break free of that shame, that hurt, that idolatry that LEAD you into that shame and hurt in the first place UNTIL you feel the embrace of God more THAN anything else. **Listen:** God's acceptance of you in Christ IS the power that liberates you from sin and shame NOT the reward! Because Friends the Gospel is that Jesus would pay the full penalty of both this woman's sin and yours. So that in Him you can be both fully known - totally exposed for who you really are - but also fully loved. And in BEING fully known and fully loved you find yourself longing to live in a way that's pleasing to the One who's given up everything TO know and love you...**So let me ask you in closing here:** Are you hurting, bruised, full of shame, feeling accused? Take that/take whatever's accusing this morning to Jesus. Let yourself be tossed into the middle of the circle with Him as it were. Cuz while that might be scary at first, what you'll ultimately find, is that you're there all alone with Him. And He'll say, **"Is there anything accusing you?"**...And you'll say, *"No sir."* And He'll say, *"that's because I'm here with you. And I've given everything one could give to make you my friend. So even if it feels like 'crazy town' all around you, how about YOU now go live...un-condemned."*...**Let's Pray...**

³ <https://www.goalcast.com/true-friendship-quotes/>