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Prayer for Enlightenment

O Lord, we pray, that you speak in this place, in the calming of our minds and in the longing of our hearts, by the words of my lips, and in the thoughts we form.
Speak, Lord, for your servants listen. Amen.

Your Bible probably has a footnote about this text. For example, my NRSV Bible has double brackets around the text with a footnote saying that “most ancient authorities lack 7:53-8:11.” The note continues on to say that most scholars don’t think this passage was originally placed here in John’s gospel. It isn’t found in the earliest manuscripts we have. It seems to have been added later by the early church leaders. When we find the passage in later manuscripts, it’s in different places: Here in John 7-8, but also John 21, and even Luke 21.

What does that all mean for us?

You can find notes of these sort throughout your Bible.

Sometimes they reflect an early controversy in the church.

Sometimes they tell of new scholarship that changes an interpretation of an older translation. Sometimes these notes describe an ancient custom that helps us to understand this text better.

Yes, our Bible is a living document which we want to bring our best understanding from our brightest minds.

I am convinced that the Bible we have in our hands is the word of God...and that Word has a message for us today and will continue to speak to us long into the future.

This story from John 7 is an ancient story. Although its location in the Bible is debated, several early church fathers reference it, and the church has historically held to its authenticity.

I find this story to be consistent with the other stories we read.

With that said, let’s look at the story.

The religious leaders loved to test Jesus with traps veiled as questions.

These debates were not just debate maneuvers. These tests were designed to get Jesus in trouble...with his followers...with the Romans. No, these were not just legal arguments among experts in the law...they were carefully planned to end Jesus’ ministry.

Today’s story begins in the temple.

Jesus was teaching when the scribes and Pharisees brought a woman in and said, “Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now in the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?”

Jesus is put on the spot in front of everyone. What would the great teacher say?

There are a couple of things worth noticing about this accusation.

First, the law they are referring to is found in a couple of places in the OT.

Deuteronomy 22:23-24 says:

“If there is a young woman, a virgin already engaged to be married, and a man meets her in the town and lies with her, you shall bring both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death, the

young woman because she did not cry for help in the town and the man because he violated his neighbor's wife.

Leviticus 20:10 says,

If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death.

Do you notice something here?

Yes, the religious leaders have brought only the woman to be punished.

The law commands BOTH parties to be punished.

So, where is the man?

At first, I think that somehow they didn't see the man, but that's not really a possibility.

To prove guilt in this case of Jewish law required a very specific type of witness.

Two (or more) witnesses must agree on absolutely everything.

There's an old Jewish story about a woman named Susanna who was accused of adultery under a tree, but she was acquitted because, in the cross-examination, the witnesses couldn't agree on the size of the leaves.

In addition to these two witnesses agreeing on the facts, they had to actually see the act being played out. In other words, it wouldn't work if they saw her leaving a room or in a compromising situation.

They had to see the act itself.

So, these religious leaders are saying they SAW this woman in the act of adultery. If that's the case, again, where is the man?

I've heard speculate perhaps the woman was set up. Perhaps.

Maybe the man was even among them in the accusing party.

We just don't know from the story we have before us.

But if these scribes and Pharisees were really concerned about upholding the law, they should have brought the man too since, by their own accusation, they surely had seen him.

Of course, the real issue is not the woman (or the man!). The Pharisees are just using her to trap Jesus.

They were more threatened by Jesus than they were by any lawbreakers.

There was no formal trial

...only an accusation

...followed by a question, "What do you say, Jesus?"

This is like the test that we looked at last week. The test last week was about Jesus' response to divorce, not about divorce.

Let's consider the stakes. If Jesus didn't uphold the law, then all he said about fulfilling the law was a lie. But if he did uphold the law and commanded stoning, how would that jive with his insistence on grace and mercy and the compassion he showed to sinners throughout his ministry? Again, like last week, the religious leaders see only two possible answers.

Either Jesus upholds the law and commands her to be stoned...or Jesus goes soft on her – which means that he doesn't think very highly of the Jewish law.

Those are the two, the only two, answers that the Pharisees see.

This isn't an easy one.

It comes down to this: is Jesus just, or is he just compassionate?

How does Jesus respond?

We read in verse 6. “Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground.”

What did he write? Don’t you want to know?

I, too, wonder what he wrote...or was he just drawing designs?

Of course we will never know.

As I think a bit about this, I’ve come to think it doesn’t matter what he wrote.

Then, after what I imagine to be a loooooong pause, Jesus stands up and speaks, “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.”

This is a brilliant retort.

First, notice what Jesus does not say. He does not say, “Don’t throw any stones.”

He says, “Go ahead, but make sure the one who throws it is without sin.”

The trap is sprung...the trappers are caught.

He confronts the accusers.

He turns the tables on them.

He said, “You want to apply the law? OK, then let’s apply it. Let’s apply the law to everyone. In fact, let’s apply it you first.”

It’s a brilliant move.

He didn’t deny the law, he applied the law...and no one can stand before it.

No one present was without sin (except for Jesus).

No one else is qualified, that is without sin, to throw the first stone.

Then he went back to writing on the ground. Again, we don’t know what he wrote. It still doesn’t matter.

Maybe all this writing on the ground shows how far outside of this fabricated drama Jesus remains. They came to him with this big deal, and he ignores them.

Of course obeying the law matters.

But he sees right through them...this is a trap...and He knows it.

I wonder if by writing on the ground is His way of showing his disinterest in their little charade.

His words hit home.

Maybe he went back to writing in the dirt because it took a few minutes for his words to sink in and drive action.

The story continues, “When they heard it, they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones.... (verse 9).”

As the older religious leaders start leaving, soon enough the younger ones leave too...eventually everyone left.

They each realize they don’t have the righteousness required to throw the first stone.

Now the focus shifts from the accusers to the accused.

Moments before, the angry crowd was ready to stone her.

Now, no one is left to condemn her.

Only Jesus and the woman remain.

Now, that’s not necessarily good news for her—not yet.

Remember, Jesus didn't say, "No stones need to be thrown." He said, "Whoever has no sin, go ahead and throw first stone." Jesus was the only one without sin. He was the only one who could truly condemn, the only one who could truly throw the first stone.

What would Jesus do? He does the most amazing thing.

Jesus confronted the accusers, but, now alone with the woman, he comforts the accused.

Jesus stands up, looks at the woman, and says to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"

Note this is the first time in the whole story that anyone addresses the woman.

The leaders drag her in, accuse her of adultery, and demand her death, but until then, no one speaks directly to her.

Jesus did not start with her sin.

When she answered that none of them condemned her, Jesus said something amazing in response. "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more."

How can Jesus say this?

Well, in a way, he could say it because now that everyone is gone, there is no real case against her. The charges are dropped, as it were.

But there's a more puzzling question.

The scribes and Pharisees weren't totally wrong.

If the law is violated, doesn't that demand punishment? Shouldn't Jesus act justly?

Is he ignoring the law?

Well, notice what he does not say. He doesn't say, "You aren't guilty."

The last thing he tells her is to sin no more. He's not saying she's innocent.

But he doesn't condemn her.

Wow!

The good news in a nutshell.

Even when we are caught in the act, Jesus does not condemn us.

Our most desperate need when we are most desperate is not to get our act together so we can come to him; it is to simply come to him and receive from his deep wells of grace upon grace.

Only then...only then do we even have a chance at getting our act together.

When we go to the law, we will get justice...and that justice can ultimately crush us. That's what the law does...everyone is guilty.

Here is the good news...when we go to Jesus, we find from his fullness, grace upon grace.

Thanks be to God.

Amen