

“Judge Not”

Psalm 11; John 8:1-11

October 1, 2023

In 2007, The Washington Post orchestrated an experiment with the renowned violinist Joshua Bell. Dressed in jeans, a long-sleeve T-shirt, and a baseball cap, Bell took his multi-million-dollar Stradivarius violin and played as a street musician in a Washington D.C. subway station during rush hour. Just a few days earlier, Bell had sold out a concert hall with average seat prices of \$100. In the subway, over a thousand people walked past him, but only a handful stopped to listen, and he collected a mere \$32. The humorous irony is that a world-class musician, whose concerts people pay a high price to attend, was largely ignored when he performed in an everyday setting. This experiment reveals how judgments and preconceptions can blind us to beauty and talent, even when it's right in front of our eyes. It's a light-hearted yet thought-provoking illustration of how easily we can judge a book by its cover, or in this case, a musician by his venue.

But the fact remains that we are all, pretty much, thoroughly well-versed in the foul art of judging other people. For some reason, we all like to feel superior to the people around us and our minds do an excellent job or twisting the record just enough to believe that we're somehow morally and intellectually superior to the people we're so easily judging in our minds. But what is that impulse and where does it come from?

Lest we think it an entirely contemporary phenomenon, we need only look to the pages of our Scriptures to see that it's a problem likely as old as time itself. Or, nearly close to it. We don't ever get the exact reason why Cain slays Abel but chances are it ultimately flowed from the belief that somehow, Cain was better, even though their offerings were considered different by God.

And then we arrive at the 8th chapter of the Gospel of John. Now, if you're looking at certain translations of the Word, then this section is likely bracketed. Why is that? Well, it's a way of showing you that, for centuries, this particular piece of Scripture didn't exactly show up here in the 8th chapter of John's Gospel. In some ancient manuscripts, it appears later in John. In other ancient sources, the material is in Luke or not in Scripture at all. So, what gives with this particular piece of Scripture?

Well, let me first say this. The scholarly conclusion is that this is a legitimate piece of Scripture despite its absence in certain ancient sources. Augustine alludes to it in his works so it isn't the case that it was just “manufactured” at a later date. In fact, several scholars suggest that this particular piece of Scripture was REMOVED by certain copyists and scribes because it potentially takes it “too easy” on sinners. As in the church didn't like the ultimate message of grace towards sinners so, well, they just deleted it. But regardless of how and why it didn't appear, the fact of the matter is that it does appear in black and white in our New Testaments. And thus, we need look more closely at the passage. What's interesting is that this is a passage that almost everyone knows about, even outside the church. In fact, I read someone's commentary that you couldn't go to a museum in Europe without coming across at least one piece of art that captures this particular scene from our Scriptures. That is to say that everyone is aware of the story that it tells. But there are still parts of the story that are left delightfully mysterious. In fact, I think there's an entire book dedicated to recording different scholars' interpretations of what precisely they think Jesus was scribbling on the ground. And even though that'll never be solved on this side of eternity, there is much we need to discuss in this material, regardless.

To begin with, let's discuss the elephant in the room. Since adultery is a two-person tango, the very first question we need to consider, right off the bat, is where is he man? Now, it helps to know a little bit about Jewish legal matters of the era in order to get at that answer. To begin with, in Jewish legal proceedings, it is essential that there are at least two eyewitnesses to the actual act, and they would have to agree on everything. There's a story told in Jewish literature outside of Scripture about a person being found innocent only because the two witnesses couldn't agree on the size of the leaves on the particular day the crime took place. No, in Jewish legal proceedings at the time, the witnesses needed to be in total and absolute agreement.

And they also needed to see the actual deed happen. There's a funny photo of me from when I was about two years old. It was Christmastime and we were staying at my grandmother's house. My grandmother absolutely went over the top for Christmas so her house was packed to the gills with

cakes and cookies and, you guessed it, chocolates. Well, here in this picture of me from way back when shows my face absolutely covered with melted chocolate. You see, while everyone was sleeping, I'd gotten out of my bed and had gotten chocolate. Not being quite coordinated enough to get the foil wrappers off, I just sucked the melted chocolate through the wrappers. I mean, just looking at me, it was obvious that I'd purloined some chocolate.

But that kind of guesswork would've have held water in a legal proceeding. That level of inference would've have been accepted testimony. No, in order to accuse someone, you had to have caught them red-handed. Which necessarily means that these men who elbow their way into the conversation with this poor woman in tow, would've had to have seen the woman with the man to level the kinds of charges they're bringing. And yet the man isn't there. Could it be that he was actually participating in the plot to frame this woman? I mean, it is possible, right. I mean, these accusers didn't have good intentions at the outset. What makes me say that? Because had they really wanted what was best for the family, they would've taken the accusations there, to the family. Not to a public place, amplifying the shame this woman must've felt. I mean, we can't help but think of Joseph here, right? Remember, Mary gets pregnant before their marriage. Yet when Joseph figures out she's pregnant, he remains quiet about it so as not to bring disgrace on Mary or the family. But that's now what these gentlemen have in mind to begin with. No, from the fact that the man isn't present to the fact that they bring the woman here, publicly, it all points in the direction that they're merely using this poor woman in order to entrap Jesus.

It's actually a rather deviously brilliant plan as much as I hate to admit it. You see, Jesus had been preaching about love and grace. On one level, perhaps these men were hopeful that Jesus was should that he was just like everyone else by bringing this woman forward for him to level a judgment on, they effectively could split Jesus' support. The people that are all law and order would've been offended by forgiveness while the people that were all about forgiveness would be turned off by Him meting out a harsh penalty here. No matter what Jesus decided, He was going to lose half of his supporters. But it's even more brilliant than just that.

Remember, the Romans didn't permit the Jews to take lives in punishment. So, if Jesus goes along with these rabble rousers, he's immediately in hot water with the Romans. And, again, if he chooses the path of mercy, the zealots would take that as his abandonment of the law and that wouldn't be good, either. No, this whole scene is brought about by people who wish to trap Jesus. That they're willing to completely ruin this woman's life in the process is of absolutely no concern to them. It shows a hardness of hart that's especially difficult to overlook.

Valerie Plame was a CIA officer whose covert identity was exposed in a highly publicized political scandal in the early 2000s. The leak of her identity was widely seen as retaliation for her husband, Ambassador Joseph C. Wilson's, criticism of the Bush administration's handling of intelligence related to Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction. In July 2003, journalist Robert Novak published a column in which he revealed Valerie Plame's identity as a CIA operative. This revelation had serious consequences for her career and personal life. It not only compromised her covert status but also put the lives of people she had worked with in the field at risk. Valerie Plame's exposure as a CIA operative led to a political firestorm. It triggered investigations, legal proceedings, and intense media scrutiny. Her life was turned upside down as she became embroiled in a political battle that had far-reaching implications.

Unfortunately, there are always people willing to shove others under the proverbial bus in order to protect their own skins or further advantage their position. This helpless woman, taken and hauled before her friends and family not really because of what she'd done, but rather because of who she could help take down. So, there they are under the sun. This group of obnoxious men elbow their way through the crows with this hopeless woman. Although it was sure to bring her misery, these men didn't care. And that's just the problem. You see, the Jewish law, of which these men were incredibly well-versed, had one major problem. There was the concept of **Lashon Hara**. Lashon Hara held that Jewish law warns against spreading false or even true negative information about another person if it serves no constructive purpose. This is based on the biblical prohibition found in **Leviticus 19:16**, "*You shall not go about as a talebearer among your people.*"

Basically, it was JUST as against the law to be a nasty gossip as it was to be an adulterer. Which is a hard concept for most of us. The idea that, in God's eye, sin is sin. You see, we all have a kind of pecking order of sins when it comes to what we think God really hates. We couldn't live with ourselves very easily if we held that our sins in particular were the ones God hated most. Ah, so what do we do? We acknowledge that we are sinners, SORT OF. BUT, and it's a really BIG BUT, we're not like those dirty rotten, fill-in-the-blank. Yes, isn't it convenient that the things that we're convinced God truly hates ARE NOT the things that we do? See how that works? It's like our minds are designed to keep us from the uncomfortable knowledge that God detests all sins. Sure, there are grosser ones, but they are all perfectly and completely odious to God. So not only are these accusers falling into this same trap, in their haste to trap Jesus, they've actually violated the same laws that they're accusing this woman of breaking. So, hearing their cries, what does Jesus do? He doodles in the sand.

I'll never forget times when my sister and I would argue and argue. Eventually, we'd need a referee so we'd seek out our parents. I recall one time that Amy and I were at each other's necks, figuratively not literally, and we asked our folks to intervene. Now, I'm sure that this was probably the fiftieth time that day they'd had to break us up. They were tired and they just weren't dealing with it. So, they sort of joked to themselves and didn't engage with us at all. Eventually, we got the message, they weren't going to indulge our fantasies any longer.

And, like I said, Jesus isn't having any of it. Not of these insistent men, not of the trap that they're trying to lay. He merely doodles a bit in the dirt. And it's maddening. We have absolutely no idea what he's scribbling there. As I said earlier, there are entire books dedicated to this particular, unsolvable mystery. There are a couple of ideas that I like, I will readily confess.

First, I saw where Jesus simply writes out the 10 commandments, thereby obliquely reminding everyone who would cast a stone that they're equally guilty of some transgressions. Yes, I think that one's good. Others believe that it was more specific than that. Perhaps these people suggest that Jesus began writing down the actual names of the accusers along with writing out their unique sins. That would be sure to run you off, wouldn't it? Because that's what happens, isn't it? All of the people leave. I can't help but find it intriguing that the Gospel of John notes that the first people to leave were the older ones.

I find that to be so totally true. When I was younger, I could believe myself to be the good guy under all occasions and situations. It's as we get older that we realize that, sometimes, we're the ones wearing the black hats. Perhaps it is only the parade of years that allows us to see our shortcomings with greater clarity. So, a good portion of our text this morning really shows us the lengths to which Jesus' opposition at the time would go in order to trap him. They were willing to violate the Lashon Hara, willing to make this woman's life miserable, the point is that they were doing bad things. But, even if it was all trumped up, the woman's guilt remains.

It's important to note that Jesus does not say to the woman that what she's done is fine. It isn't. As a pastor, I've seen the terrible damage that adultery can do to homes. No, what this woman has done is a moral wrong. And, as Jesus says "*let those among you with no sins cast the first stone!*" we need to realize that the only one who could justifiably pick up a rock and stone this woman to death was, in fact, Jesus Christ, the only sinless one in attendance that day, or ever. But He doesn't do that, does He? He instead shows her mercy. Twice really,

The first level of mercy is exemplified through Him not stoning her and allowing her to go on her way. That's clearly a mercy. But the other one is more subtle. He tells her clearly, "*to sin no more.*" That's another form of mercy. To alert someone to the real and persistent problem in their life. Their ongoing sin. It's our ongoing sin that robs us of our full life in Jesus Christ.

Pastor Matt Chandler writes about a time he and a couple of his friends invited a young woman named Kim to a gospel concert. Matt was hopeful that Kim would come to Christ that evening; however, what occurred was a manipulative "train wreck." In retrospect, Matt was grateful for the experience because it changed the way he saw how to proclaim holiness in light of the cross of Jesus. Chandler writes, "The preacher took the stage, and disaster ensued....He gave a lot of statistics about STDs. There was a lot of, "You don't want syphilis, do you?" His big illustration was

to take out a single red rose. He smelled the rose dramatically ... caressed its petals, and talked about how beautiful this rose was and how it had been fresh cut that day. [Then] he threw the rose out into the crowd, and he encouraged everyone to pass it around. As he neared the end of his message, he asked for the rose back ... [But by now] it was broken and drooping, and the petals were falling off. He held up this now-ugly rose for all to see, and his big finish was this: *“Now who in the world would want **this**?”* His word and his tone were merciless. His message, which was supposed to represent Jesus' message to a world of sinners, was **shaming** ... *“Don't be a **dirty rose**.”*

Matt didn't hear from Kim for a few weeks, until one day her mother called Matt to inform him that Kim had been in an accident. Matt immediately went to visit her. He says, “In the middle of our conversation, seemingly out of nowhere, she asked me, *“Do you think I'm a **dirty rose**?”* My heart sank inside of me, and I began to explain to her the whole weight of the gospel of Jesus Christ is that **Jesus Wants The Rose**. It's Jesus' desire to save, redeem, and restore **the dirty rose**.

You see, shame can exert such a negative force in people's lives. It isn't the case that Jesus wants us languishing under the lash of guilt over our sins. No, Jesus wants to free us from the burdens of our sin. And to that end, He forgives us. So, even though these men brought this woman out of their own malicious desire to entrap Jesus, something good did indeed come of it.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Sermon Outline on John 8:1-11: "Mercy Over Condemnation"

Introduction:

- The story of Valerie Plame and the public reveal of her identity, leading to personal and career consequences.
- Drawing parallels between political motivations of revealing her identity and the motivations behind the accusation of the adulterous woman.

I. The Scene is Set:

A. Presentation of the adulterous woman to Jesus

- Background on the political intentions of her accusers.
 - Their primary goal: trap Jesus, make him stumble in his teachings.
- #### B. The Jewish law and the concept of Lashon Hara
- The danger of being a gossip and its moral equivalence to adultery in the eyes of the law.
 - Irony: accusers themselves are violating Jewish law.

II. Jesus' Reaction: Wisdom and Silence

A. Doodling in the sand: an unsolvable mystery

- Theories about what Jesus might have written.
- The symbolism of not immediately responding to the accusers.

B. The power of non-action and introspection

- Personal anecdote of seeking parental intervention and them not indulging the issue.
- Jesus forces the crowd to look inward, makes them reflect on their own sins.

III. The Departure of the Accusers: Realization and Guilt

A. The significance of the older ones leaving first

- Wisdom and introspection come with age.
- Realization of one's own sins.

B. Everyone is guilty of something

- The universal nature of sin, no one is exempt.
- Jesus, the only sinless one, could have cast the first stone but chose mercy.

IV. Jesus' Mercy: A Dual Message

A. Mercy in sparing the woman's life

- The obvious act of kindness: not condemning her to death.

B. Mercy in instructing her to "sin no more"

- The deeper, transformative act of kindness: guiding her to a better path.
- Recognizing the destructiveness of continuous sin.

V. Holiness in Light of Jesus' Mercy

A. Pastor Matt Chandler's story of Kim and the "dirty rose"

- The danger of shame and guilt without the context of grace.
- Jesus wants to redeem and restore, not condemn.

B. Jesus' true mission

- Not to shame us for our sins, but to free us from them. - Forgiveness as a path to transformation and new life.

Conclusion:

- The seemingly negative act of bringing the woman to Jesus led to her ultimate redemption.
- A call to self-reflection: Recognizing our own shortcomings and embracing Jesus' message of mercy and transformation.

Additional Quotes/Insights:

- “Every saint has a past, and every sinner has a future.” - Oscar Wilde
- Reflect on the nature of public shaming in our current culture and the need for a message of mercy and redemption.
- “Grace does not excuse sin, but it does treat it differently – with compassion not condemnation.”

Illustration:

- A broken vase that is pieced back together. It might not be perfect, but it can still hold water, still serve its purpose. Like the vase, we may be broken by our sins, but through Jesus' mercy, we can be restored and continue to fulfill our purpose in life.