

Session 11

May 10, 2020

Unit 2: Jesus Encounters . . .

The Woman Caught in Adultery

Our future is more important to Jesus than our past.

The Word

John 7:50—8:11

Session Outcome

To adopt Jesus' approach toward ourselves and others with regard to sin.

Discover:

See Illustrated Bible Life for a textual history of John 7:53—8:1, and verse-by-verse commentary on the Scripture passage.

Last Week:

We examined how basic necessities such as clothing, food, and shelter meet our physical needs, but do not meet the true spiritual need of our lives.

This Week:

We will examine how God's ability to pardon us and set us on a better path towards the future means that our sins don't have to be the final chapter in our story.

Watch:

Dr. Hahn introduces this session on "The Woman Caught in Adultery."

Listen:

This week's Illustrated Bible Life podcast on FoundryLeader.com examines the story of the woman caught in adultery and its place in the Gospel of John.

Discover:

What's your favorite story in the Bible? For many, it is the story of Jesus' encounter with a woman accused of adultery because of what it illustrates about God's grace. However, it often surprises readers to learn that this passage, John 7:53—8:1, was not part of the oldest manuscripts of John's gospel. What can this mean? This week's Illustrated Bible Life article, "A Story of Grace," explains.

Engage the Word

NICODEMUS—A VOICE OF REASON

John 7:50-52

Nicodemus plays an important role at several places in the Gospel of John. First, this man is identified as a leader of the Jews who came by night to discuss questions about spiritual birth with Jesus (John, chapter 3). In the present passage, Nicodemus' voice calls for justice, urging the Jewish council (the Sanhedrin) to first carefully hear from Jesus before bringing condemnation upon Him. Nicodemus provided a voice of reason. Later, Nicodemus helped Joseph of Arimathea with burial preparations of Jesus' body (19:38-40). The relationship of Nicodemus to Jesus began with one who had questions about Jesus' teaching. Then, later, Nicodemus defended Jesus before the Sanhedrin. Finally, by participating in burial preparations for Jesus, he appears to be a disciple of Jesus and a member of the early Christian community. John, with his inclusion of Nicodemus at key points in his gospel, describes a journey of faith. What began as a limited faith, became a stronger faith, and moved finally to a significant and deep faith. John demonstrates people at different stages of faith. John wrote so people would move toward Jesus.

TEACHERS AND PHARISEES—VOICES OF ACCUSATION

John 7:53—8:6

The voices of the Jewish religious leaders sound sharp tones of accusation. They strenuously accused the woman of adultery. But the man who violated the ethical standard is absent from the proceedings. According to Leviticus 20:10, both the man and the woman who committed adultery were liable for the death penalty. It becomes quickly apparent that the teachers of the law and the Pharisees were not seeking a full resolution of the charges against the woman. They were, instead, trying to trap Jesus, depending on how He answered. The land was under Roman control, and that included the matter of capital punishment. But the law of the Hebrew scriptures continued as the Jewish standard. If Jesus spoke in sympathy with the accusers that the death penalty was to be enacted, He likely would have been in difficulties with Rome. If He deferred to

the Romans and their legal control, then He could have been charged as opposing Moses (the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible). Either position placed Jesus in a hazardous situation. Accusing voices that day were silenced by Jesus' quiet resistance to their verbal challenges.

THE WOMAN AND HER VOICE

John 8:7-11

For most of the time the woman was silent. Although a key character in the story, she has no voice. Only later, when Jesus addressed her directly, did she dare to speak. Maybe she remained quiet in the presence of her accusers because of the way they were using her as a “tool” to attack Jesus. Or, perhaps her shame paralyzed her speech. Her acts had made silence her inevitable portion. Shame might have driven her to silence. However, it seems clear that only Jesus gave her an opportunity to speak.

There is irony in the scene. This challenge to Jesus surely took place in the Court of Women, else the group of men would have chosen a different place for the encounter. It was a place that this accused woman was permitted to be, and to speak. But the harsh spirit of the accusers, and that she had indeed violated the Mosaic law, left her with no real defense. Better to be silent.

She never denied the charge of adultery, and Jesus' words indicate that she had, in fact, lived in sinful ways. It is worth noting that there is no clear indication that she repented. Jesus did not declare her forgiven, but He did command her to make a new start, to leave her old life of sin. Jesus did say she was not being condemned. Her mob of accusers had sheepishly left the area. Neither they, nor Jesus, pressed for condemnation upon her.

JESUS—A VOICE OF AUTHORITY

The impact of Jesus on the Jerusalem crowds caused the chief priests and Pharisees to seek to silence Him. But Nicodemus, and surely others also, wanted to hear Him, and hold off on any condemnation. While Jesus moved around the temple courts, it is as if He was continually on trial by individuals and groups. Charges were brought, testimony given, decisions made. Amidst these disruptions Jesus still took frequent opportunity to teach “all the people” as a rabbi with authority. He taught while seated (Matthew 5:1-2; Luke 4:20). That was one way a rabbi would then have conveyed his authority.

How did Jesus “speak” in the face of such intrusion upon His time and space? He listened, apparently respectfully, then wrote in the dust. We don't know what He wrote. Later traditions developed that Jesus wrote specific sins of individuals, which caused people to quietly drift away rather than pretend they had no sin on their own record. Jesus' “voice” spoke in His actions, and in His silence. He wrote in the dust a second time. His authoritative voice then waited for the accusers to all go away. Only then did He direct His words to the woman. With the accusers now gone, Jesus pointed out that she no longer had any who were condemning her. Jesus also did not condemn her, but left her with a prophetic challenge—“leave your life of sin.”

Did You Know?

Consider John 20:30-31 as an attempted explanation of why John selected different parts of the remembered traditions about Jesus than had Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Some of these stories were embraced as deserving of a place in the canon. In the case of the account of the woman caught in adultery, just where to locate the encounter in a manuscript was a more difficult challenge. No gospel author could have included everything about Jesus. But all four evangelists no doubt wrote to call people to faith.

Think About It

There is no indication here that mercy extended is a license to sin! Grace is never increased or exalted by multiplication of sin. Rather, the Christ of the Cross makes it possible for [people] to abstain from the sins which He commands [people] to forsake. For this woman there was now an open door. [Beacon Bible Commentary: John/Acts (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1965), 104.]

Reflect

What is the message, or messages, you received from today's story?

Rick Williamson

Discussion Guide

Insight

Nicodemus reemerges in John's gospel at Jesus' death. He joins Joseph of Arimathea, another secret disciple of Jesus, in preparing Jesus' body for burial. Nicodemus himself provides what the text describes as 75 pounds of myrrh and aloes. Such a quantity of spices would likely only be used in the burial of a king. This serves as an indication of Nicodemus' persistent journey toward Jesus. Perhaps through his gift, Nicodemus is finally acknowledging Jesus as King.

Connect to My Experience

Think back to your childhood. Share one of the earliest memories you have of knowing right from wrong...and choosing the wrong.

How did you feel when your sin was discovered?

How did the adults in your life respond?

Perhaps you were shamed and belittled. How did that response impact both your sense of self and your future behavior?

If, rather, forgiveness and mercy were extended to you, how did you experience your re-inclusion into your community?

Transition:

In today's infamous story, a woman is caught in the sin of adultery and the religious leaders are caught in their sin of merciless judgment and hypocrisy. Jesus offers a two-fold response to sin: forgiveness followed by an invitation to walk forward into new life.

Connect to the Word

Invite someone to read John 7:50-52, then discuss the following,

In John 7, Jesus finds himself at odds once again with the religious leaders. Their rage is edging closer and closer to violence when one leader speaks up, Nicodemus, the man who had met with Jesus secretly to hear His message.

While Nicodemus may not yet affirm Jesus as Lord, these verses seem to indicate he is moving away from the religious leaders' stance and toward Jesus. What might John be communicating about Nicodemus' faith journey, and the journey of discipleship overall?

Why does Nicodemus appeal to the law? Why does his appeal fail? (Ironically, the leaders called for people to observe the law, yet they themselves disregarded the law in this case.)

The other religious leaders extend personal attacks against Nicodemus and question his knowledge of Scripture.

What does their response to his request suggest about the state of their hearts? (They were wrong in their statement about a prophet. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the city of David [Micah 5:2]. Also, the prophets Jonah [2 Kings 14:25] and Elijah [1 Kings 17:1] were from that region. See also Isaiah 9:1-2; Matthew 4:13-16.)

Invite someone to read John 7:53—8:6, then discuss the following,

The religious leaders burst back on the scene, this time with an adulterous woman in tow. While the night before they seemed unconcerned with the law's requirement of hearing a person's case, namely Jesus' case, they now brandish the law as a weapon against this woman. They cite the Law of Moses and demand Jesus to offer His take on the situation, in an attempt to trap Him.

This section begins with the religious leaders returning home while Jesus goes to the Mount of Olives, a frequent refuge for times of prayer. Why would the author include that detail? What might this reveal about Jesus' readiness for the events to come the following day?

While the teachers make a scene of enforcing the law, they themselves are in violation of it by bringing the woman caught in adultery but not the man as commanded by the Law of Moses (Leviticus 20:10; Deuteronomy 22:22).

What does this hypocrisy reveal about their motives? What does it reveal about their posture toward the weak and voiceless, in this case a woman?

Jesus avoids their trap and responds with silence and unexplained writing. Why might Jesus have refused to engage them as they demand?

What do you think Jesus wrote? (No one knows!)

Invite someone to read John 8:7-11, then discuss the following,

Disconcerted and likely frustrated by Jesus' silence, the religious leaders persist in questioning Jesus, demanding he respond to the situation. Jesus finally breaks His silence by stating simply, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." At Jesus' words, the religious leaders are finally silenced and the woman is invited to speak. Jesus calls her attention to the absence of her condemners, refuses to condemn her himself, and instead challenges her to leave her former life of sin.

What do you think the condemners thought of Jesus' words in verses 7? How did they respond?

What do you think Jesus meant by this statement?

Jesus invites the silenced woman to speak, acknowledging her presence and voice. Why? What might have been the purpose of engaging her in the conversation concerning condemnation? Jesus does not exercise His right to condemn and instead calls her to a new way of life. In what ways does Jesus' response and command to her transform her future?

Connect to My Life and the World

We easily find ourselves in this story. We have been the woman—our sin found out for others to see. But we have also likely been the religious leaders, incensed by the sins of others and unwilling to acknowledge our own hypocrisy. We are trapped by the events of the past, defined by our sin. Only Jesus can break into the bleakness of our sin and hardened hearts and offer us a path to freedom. It cannot come through by policing the behavior of others. Freedom comes when we honestly acknowledge our sin, reject our former way of life, and walk forward in humble, trusting obedience.

Nicodemus vacillates between speaking up and remaining silent. What does our silence in the face of injustice reveal about our hearts?

The religious leaders are so consumed by their need to silence Jesus that they disregard the law they claim to love. In what ways can we be blinded by our own agenda that we end up working against God's redemptive purposes?

How do we practice the same hypocrisy by desiring mercy for ourselves but demanding unbending condemnation for others?

The woman was silenced by shame and fear for her future, until Jesus silenced her accusers and invited her to go a new way. Consider the following silently,

What would it look like to accept Jesus' gift of the refusal to condemn us and walk freely into the future, committed to leaving the sins of the past behind?

How can we lead with love, rather than condemnation, when it comes to the sins of others?

Consider playing the song "Your Grace Still Amazes Me" before closing in prayer.