

## 23. The Woman Caught in Adultery

---

Many of us probably followed the events in Nigeria a few years ago when a woman accused of adultery was condemned to death by an Islamic court. According to Sharia law instituted in certain parts of the country, such a woman must be stoned, killed by having rocks thrown at her. Many people in Nigeria as well as other parts of the world opposed this decision. It was not only Muslims who participated in the debate. Sadly some who wanted to comment on the decision from a Christian perspective twisted the teaching of Jesus on such a situation. They gave the impression that it is not only necessary to tolerate sin of any kind but to approve it. Some even honor the woman who sinned.

A passage in the Bible which many quoted is found in John 8:2-11. In this passage, Jesus was confronted with the case of another woman who was accused of adultery among a people whose law prescribed death by stoning for a person found guilty of this sin. Here is the passage:

“Now early in the morning He came again into the temple, and all the people came to Him; and He sat down and taught them. Then the scribes and Pharisees brought to Him a woman caught in adultery. And when they had set her in the midst, they said to Him, ‘Teacher, this woman was caught in adultery, in the very act. Now Moses, in the law, commanded us that such should be stoned. But what do You say?’ This they said, testing Him, that they might have something of which to accuse Him. But Jesus stooped down and wrote on the ground with His finger, as though He did not hear. So when they continued asking Him, He raised Himself up and said to them, ‘He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first.’ And again He stooped down and wrote on the ground. Then those who heard it, being convicted by their conscience, went out one by one, beginning with the oldest even to the last. And Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst. When Jesus had raised Himself up and saw no one but the woman, He said to her, ‘Woman, where are those accusers of yours? Has no one condemned you?’ She said,

‘No one, Lord.’ And Jesus said to her, ‘Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more.’”

So what are the lessons to be found in this story? We will examine step by step the fault of the woman, the fault of the masters of the Jewish law who led her in front of the Lord and the pardon by Jesus.

### THE FAULT OF THE WOMAN

The woman who was led in front of Jesus had violated the seventh of the Ten Commandments: “You shall not commit adultery” (Exodus 20:14). According to Leviticus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 22:22, the penalty of death was correctly prescribed in this case.

The New Testament does not contain a civil code to govern a nation, as is the case with the Law of Moses. The New Testament does not prescribe such and such a punishment—fine, imprisonment, death penalty, etc.—for different crimes. But it agrees with the old Law on the gravity of the sin and the penalty which the sinner deserves. Chapter 1 of Romans refers to various kinds of sin: idolatry, sexual sins, injustice, love of money, murder, rebellion against parents, and many others. Verse 32 says, in speaking of sinful men “who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them.” Some people think that the church must fight the death penalty, whatever the crime, as if such a sentence were always excessive. The New Testament, to the contrary, says that the government is authorized by God Himself to punish criminals, even with the death penalty. Look at Romans 13:4: “For the one in authority is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God’s servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer” (NIV). I repeat, it is not up to the church to kill criminals, but it must declare to people that if they don’t repent, they will know a fate worse than death. Ephesians 5:5,6 warns us:

“For this you know, that no fornicator, unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater,

has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.”

Those who commented on the situation in Nigeria have said all sorts of things to justify the woman's act. “This woman was not happy in her home. She was not satisfied. This is why she did what she did.” But marriage is sacred, having been instituted by God Himself. Marriage includes vows of faithfulness. There is a time to forgive, but we must not justify or minimize the seriousness of the sin.

The woman who was brought before Jesus had been taken in the very act of adultery. Yes, she did deserve death.

### THE FAULT OF THE MASTERS OF THE LAW

But the woman was not the only guilty one in this story. The scribes and the Pharisees were also at fault. They acted in hypocrisy. They presented the case before Jesus, “testing Him, that they might have something of which to accuse Him” (John 8:6). The concern of these men was not to apply or know how to apply the commandments of God in the Law of Moses. If the woman had been taken in the act of adultery, then necessarily her partner in sin was also known. He also should have been arrested and punished. The law said clearly:

“If a man is found lying with a woman married to a husband, then both of them shall die—the man that lay with the woman, and the woman.... If a young woman who is a virgin is betrothed to a husband, and a man finds her in the city and lies with her, then you shall bring them both out to the gate of that city, and you shall stone them to death with stones.” (Deuteronomy 22:22-24)

But the teachers of the law only needed the woman, because their aim was to catch Jesus in their trap and to discredit him. This woman was nothing to them but a tool.

Of what did this trap consist? The Jews of this time lived under the rule of the Roman Empire. The Romans permitted them to judge less important issues but reserved for themselves the right to apply the death penalty. This is why the Jewish leaders would later be forced to bring Jesus before

the Roman governor when they wanted to put him to death. If Jesus told the Jews to put the adulteress to death according to the Law of Moses, they could accuse him to the Romans of not respecting their authority and of inciting the people to disobey them. They could also bring into question the compassion of Jesus.

If, on the other hand, he told the Jews not to put her to death, the scribes would have accused him of a failure to respect God's Law or they would say that Jesus did not consider adultery to be a serious sin.

But the hypocrisy of these men is also seen in the fact that they were ready to put this woman to death for her sins, without even thinking about their own sins. The Word of God is particularly severe against those who, with a blind arrogance, look down on other sinners without recognizing that they too are guilty. Romans 2:1-3,21,22, for example, says this:

“Therefore you are inexcusable, O man, whoever you are who judge, for in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things. But we know that the judgment of God is according to truth against those who practice such things. And do you think this, O man, you who judge those practicing such things, and doing the same, that you will escape the judgment of God?... You who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal? You who say, “Do not commit adultery,” do you commit adultery?

Perhaps everyone knows the words of Jesus in Matthew 7:3-5:

“And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me remove the speck from your eye’; and look, a plank is in your own eye? Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.”

Jesus did not say that the woman didn't deserve death. But in saying, “He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first,” he forced these men to face their own weaknesses. According to an ancient Armenian version of this passage,

when Jesus bent to write in the dust with his finger, he was writing the sins of these men: evil desires, secret visits with prostitutes, corruption, wickedness, guile, etc. He was helping them to see that they were as guilty as the woman. These men had to not only examine themselves and repent of their own sins, but also adopt the attitude described in Jude 22,23: pity for sinners but loathing for their sins. "And on some have compassion, making a distinction; but others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire, hating even the garment defiled by the flesh."

### THE GRACE OF JESUS

We have seen the seriousness of the fault of the adulteress, and the seriousness of the hypocrisy of the masters of the law. Let us quickly look at the grace of Jesus. He would have been able to condemn this woman, to throw the first stone at her, because he actually was without sin. He would not have been a hypocrite if he had chosen to judge her. Jesus owed nothing to this woman who had violated the law of the most holy and righteous God. But Jesus preferred to exercise his right to forgive sins. He said to the woman, "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more." The day will come, when, according to 2 Thessalonians 1:8, Jesus will come "in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ." But Jesus came first so

that people might not be condemned in the great judgment. "For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved" (John 3:17).

Notice that the grace that Jesus offers is not a permit to continue in sin. It is an opportunity to make a new start, and to turn from the evil in which we live. Far from saying to the woman, "You have sinned, but that's not important," Jesus tells her that she must change her life.

### CONCLUSION

We are all sinners. Let us not be quick to condemn others, quick to insist that they be punished fully for their faults. We will be judged as we judge. Judgment will be without mercy for those who show no mercy.

But at the same time, we must not minimize sin, justify it or take it lightly. God is truly a God of love, but God does not minimize sin. Sin deserves death. Not only the sin of adultery, but my sin and yours. God takes our sins so seriously that He paid the supreme price to remove them. At the cross of Christ, God proved at the same time both His hatred of sin and His love for us. As Paul said in Romans 5:8, "God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." When Jesus gave grace to the woman caught in adultery, he showed his love for the sinner. When Jesus died on the cross, he shows the seriousness of our sins.