

Jesus and the Adulterous Woman

With the current revival emphasizing the grace of God, it seems that teachers are trying to outdo each other in praising the effects of God's love. The account of Jesus and the adulterous woman affords a popular text for this. From it three particularly disturbing conclusions are implied by some expounders.

They leave us to believe that the sinner is not as bad as the one who points out the sin, that the sins of accusers may negate those of the accused, and that love and sympathy erase guilt.

Here is the story. *“But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. At dawn he appeared again in the temple court, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, ‘Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?’ They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, ‘If any one of you is without sin, let him begin stoning her.’ Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, ‘Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?’ ‘No one, sir,’ she said. ‘Then neither do I condemn you,’ Jesus declared. ‘Go now and leave your life of sin.’”* (John 8:1-13 NIV. The most reliable early MSS omit this text.)

The accusers were correct in their statement of what the Law said. *“If a man is found lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman, and the woman ... If there is a betrothed virgin, and a man meets 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, the young woman because she did not cry for help though she was in the city, and the man because he violated his neighbor's wife...”* (Deut. 22:22-24).

Jesus never disputed that this woman was a sinner by adulterating her marriage. Neither did he extend forgiveness of sins to her. It is generally assumed that he did, but it is not stated. Since her accusers knew the Law of Moses required the stoning of the woman, why had they not stoned her? Such a sentence could be administered while Israel was an independent nation, but now they were in subjection to Rome, and they were not permitted to inflict capital punishment.

Because of that, they thought to trap Jesus and hang him on both horns of a dilemma. They found this despicable woman who lived a “life of sin” and made a test case for Jesus. If he were to answer that she should be stoned, he would be defying Roman rule. If he denied that she should be stoned, he would be defying the Law of Moses and upholding adultery. So how could Jesus respond? The Law also states, *“If a malicious witness rises against any man to accuse him of wrongdoing, ... the judges shall inquire diligently, and if the witness is a false witness and has accused his brother falsely, then you shall do to him as he had meant to do to his brother...”* (Deut. 19:15-19). So Jesus simply turned the sentence back on them by exposing them as malicious witnesses who themselves were guilty of a capital violation. Who knows -- this text might have been what he wrote on the ground! After exposing their hypocrisy, he gave them the opportunity to exit the scene without evidence of gloating on his part.

So, after their departure, Jesus asked, “*Has no one condemned you (to death by stoning as the Law of Moses stated -ch)?*” “*No one, sir.*” Then he declared, “*Neither do I condemn you (to death -ch).*” He did not excuse her sin or pronounce her forgiven. It was not in his scope to enforce the law, either that of the Romans or of Moses. Even if we rightly assume that he was forgiving her, it was not without his recognizing her sin and calling for repentance. “*Go now and leave your life of sin.*”

Does a person who calls attention to someone else’s sin become a sinner by doing so? Not necessarily. Righteous prophets have always cried out against sins. All of us should! Those men were sinners because their whole action was hypocritical. They were not righteous men seeking to uphold the Law, else they would have brought the adulterous man also, not to Jesus but to the authorities. They were seeking to entrap Jesus at the expense of this errant woman. We can sympathize with her public humiliation, yet their sins did not excuse hers.

But can we not add hypocrisy to her sin of adultery? Can we assume that she confided to her husband that she was being unfaithful to him? Or would she not be hypocritical in pretending to be faithful while adulterating their marriage, living a “life of sin,” as the text indicates? The text reveals no indication of remorse or plea for mercy. So, because of his unconditional love for all persons, if Jesus could show unconditional love to an immoral, hypocritical woman, why would he not show that same unconditional love for men with their evil intent and hypocrisy? If unconditional love equals forgiveness, then both the accused and the accusers were absolved even before they came to Jesus. This would distort grace by absolving the wicked without repentance on their part.

With these points in consideration, we may conclude that the story is not about the mercy and grace of Jesus but about how he dealt with the dilemma by which they sought to bring accusation against him. It was similar to the dilemma when he was asked, “*Is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar?*” (Mark 12:13-17).

As we see her abused by those callous hypocrites, we sympathize with her. Seeing the utter dejection that must have pained her countenance we can love her. But public humiliation does not make one a hero or a heroine, and our sympathy and love do not have the power to remit guilt before God. Sympathy and love must have been evident, however, as Jesus declared, “*Go now and leave your life of sin.*”

Listen now as he may be saying to you and me also, “*Go now and leave your life of sin.*” []

(Cecil Hook; May 2005)

Talkin’ Texas: By sitting outside for a few minutes in this springtime, one can readily understand why the mockingbird is the state bird of Texas.