

THE ADULTEROUS WOMAN FROM JOHN 8 HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH SHOWING LOVE OVERRIDES THE LAW

From Situation Ethics by Dave Miller, Ph.D.

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Another way to grasp the substance of a false philosophy is to assess the way in which the Scriptures are given treatment to support the philosophy. The remainder of this article will confine itself to examining two favorite proof texts frequently marshaled in an effort to defend situationism. [Additional proof texts (e.g., 2 Chronicles 30:18-20; Matthew 12:1-8; 1 Corinthians 6:12; 10:23, the notion of “legalism”) are examined in a lengthier, unabridged version of this article, which can be found on-line at www.apologeticspress.org/rr/rr2004/r&r0411b.htm.]

“What about the woman taken in adultery? Didn’t Jesus free her from the rigid restrictions of the Law?” One of the most misused, mishandled, and misapplied passages in the Bible is the narrative of the woman caught in adultery, recorded in John 8:1-11. [For a discussion of the technical aspects of this passage as a textual variant, see Metzger, 1968, pp. 223-224; 1971, pp. 219-222; McGarvey, 1974, p. 16; Woods, 1989, p. 162.] This passage has been used by situation ethicists (e.g., Fletcher, 1967, pp. 83, 133), libertines, and liberals to insist that God is not “technical” when it comes to requiring close adherence to His laws. The bulk of Christendom has abetted this notion by decontextualizing and applying indiscriminately the remark of Jesus: “He who is without sin among you, let him cast a stone at her first” (vs. 7). The average individual, therefore, has come to think that Jesus was tolerant and forgiving to the extent that He released the woman from the strictures of God’s law that called for her execution. They believe that Jesus simply “waved aside” her sin, and thereby granted her unconditional freedom and forgiveness—though the Law called for her death (Leviticus 20:10). After all, isn’t it true that Jesus places people “in the grip of grace” (Lucado, 1996)?

Those who challenge conclusions such as these are derided as “traditionalists” who lack “compassion,” and who are just like the “legalistic” scribes and Pharisees who cruelly accused the woman and wanted her handled in strict accordance with Mosaic Law. Did Jesus set aside the clear requirements of Mosaic legislation in order to demonstrate mercy, grace, and forgiveness? A careful study of John 8:1-11 yields at least three insights that clarify the confusion and misconception inherent in the popular imagination.

First, Mosaic regulations stated that a person could be executed only if there were two or more witnesses to the crime (Deuteronomy 19:15). One witness was insufficient to invoke the death penalty (Deuteronomy 17:6). The woman in question was reportedly caught in the “very act” (vs. 4), but nothing is said about the identity of the witness or witnesses. There may have been only one, thereby making execution illegal.

Second, even if there were two or more witnesses present to verify the woman’s sin, the Old Testament was equally explicit concerning the fact that both the woman and the man were to be executed (Deuteronomy 22:22). Where was the man? The accusing mob completely sidestepped this critical feature of God’s Law, demonstrating that this trumped-up situation obviously did not fit the Mosaic preconditions for invoking capital punishment. Obedience to the Law of Moses in this instance actually meant letting the woman go!

A third consideration that often is overlooked concerning this passage is the precise meaning of the phrase “He who is without sin among you...” (vs. 7). If this statement were to be taken as a blanket prohibition against accusing, disciplining, or punishing the erring, impenitent Christian, then this passage flatly contradicts a host of other passages (e.g., Romans 16:17; 1 Corinthians 5; Galatians 6:1; 2 Thessalonians 3:6,14; Titus 3:10; 2 John 9-11). Jesus not only frequently passed judgment on a variety of individuals during His tenure on Earth (e.g., Matthew 15:14; 23; John 8:44, 55; 9:41; et al.), but He also enjoined upon His followers the necessity of doing the same thing (e.g., John 7:24). Peter could be very direct in assessing people’s spiritual status (e.g., Acts 8:23). Paul rebuked the Corinthians’ inaction concerning their fornicating brother: “Do you not judge those who are inside?...Therefore put away from yourselves that wicked person” (1 Corinthians 5:12-13, emp. added). Obviously, Paul demanded that Christians must judge (i.e., make an accurate evaluation of) a fellow Christian’s moral condition. Even the familiar proof text so often marshaled to promote laxity (i.e., “Judge not, that you be not judged”—Matthew 7:1) records Jesus admonishing disciples: “...then you will see clearly to remove the speck out of your brother’s eye” (vs. 5). The current culture-wide celebration of being nonjudgmental (cf. “I’m OK—You’re OK”) is clearly out of harmony with Bible teaching.

So Jesus could not have been offering a blanket prohibition against taking appropriate action with regard to the sins of our fellows. Then what did His words mean? What else could possibly be going on in this setting so as to completely deflate,

undermine, and terminate the boisterous determination of the woman's accusers to attack Him, by using the woman as a pretext? What was it in Christ's words that had such power to stop them in their tracks—so much so that their clamor faded to silence and they departed “one by one, beginning with the oldest” (vs. 9)?

Most commentators suggest that Jesus shamed them by forcing them to realize that “nobody is perfect and we all sin.” But this motley crew—with their notorious and repeatedly documented hard-heartedness—would not have been deterred if Jesus simply had conveyed the idea that, “Hey, give the poor woman a break, none of us is perfect,” or “We've all done things we're not proud of.” The heartless scribes and Pharisees were brazen enough to divert her case from the proper judicial proceedings, and to humiliate her by forcibly hauling her into the presence of Jesus, thereby making a public spectacle of her. Apparently accompanied by a group of complicit supporters, they cruelly subjected her to the wider audience of “all the people” (vs. 2) who had come to hear Jesus' teaching. They hardly would have been discouraged from their objective by such a simple utterance from Jesus that “nobody's perfect.”

So what is the answer to this puzzling circumstance? Consider two possibilities. First, it may be that Jesus was calling attention to their failure to follow legal protocol in dealing with the woman. He was challenging them for violating the law with regard to treatment of the woman, essentially condemning them as being incapable of making a solid legal case against her.

A second possibility is that Christ was striking at precisely the same point that Paul drove home to hard-hearted, hypocritical Jews in Rome: “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” (Romans 2:1, emp. added). Paul was especially specific on the very point with which Jesus dealt: “You who say, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ do you commit adultery?” (vs. 22). In other words, no person is qualified to call attention to another's sin when that individual is in the ongoing practice of the same sin. Again, as Jesus previously declared, “Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck out of your brother's eye” (Matthew 7:5). After all, it is the “spiritual” brother or sister who is in the proper position to restore the wayward (Galatians 6:1).

Consequently, in the context under consideration, it may well be that Jesus knew that the woman's accusers were guilty of the very thing for which they were willing to condemn her. (It is not beyond the realm of possibility that the fellow with whom the woman had committed adultery was in league with the accusers.) Jesus was able to prick them with their guilt by causing them to realize that He knew that they, too, were guilty. The old law made it clear that the witnesses to the crime were to cast the first stones (Deuteronomy 17:7). The death penalty could not be invoked legally if the eyewitnesses were unavailable or ineligible. Jesus was striking directly at the fact that these witnesses were unqualified to fulfill this role since they were guilty of the same sin, and thus deserved to be brought up on similar charges. They were intimidated into silence and retreat by their realization that Jesus was privy to their own indiscretions—and possibly on the verge of divulging them publicly.

Observe carefully that, at the withdrawal of the accusers, Jesus put forth a technical legal question when He asked: “Woman, where are they? Did no man condemn thee?” (ASV), or “Woman, where are those thine accusers? Hath no man condemned thee?” (vs. 10, KJV). The reason for Jesus to verify the absence of the accusers who had brought the charges against the woman was that the Law of Moses mandated the presence of eyewitnesses to the crime before guilt could be established and sentence passed. The woman confirmed, “No man, Lord” (vs. 11). Jesus then affirmed: “Neither do I condemn you....” The meaning of this pronouncement was that if two or more witnesses to her sin were not able or willing to document the crime, then she could not be held legally liable, since neither was Jesus, Himself, qualified to serve as an eyewitness to her action. The usual interpretation of “neither do I condemn you” is that Jesus was flexible, tolerant, and unwilling to be judgmental toward others or to condemn their sinful actions. Ridiculous! The Bible repudiates such thinking on nearly every page. Jesus was declaring the fact that the woman managed to slip out from under judicial condemnation on the basis of one or more legal technicalities. But, He said (to use modern-day vernacular), “You had better stop it! You were fortunate this time, but you must cease your sinful behavior!”

Incredible! These scribes and Pharisees were trying to catch Jesus in a trap. Yet Jesus, as was so often the case (e.g., Matthew 21:23-27), “turned the tables” on His accusers and caught them in a trap instead! At the same time, He demonstrated a deep and abiding respect for the governing beauty and power of law—the law that He and His Father had authored. Jesus was the only Person Who ever complied with Mosaic legislation perfectly (2 Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 4:15). He never sought to excuse human violation of law, nor to minimize the binding and authoritative application of law to people. Any interpretation of any passage that depicts Jesus as violating the law of God in order to forgive or accommodate man is a false interpretation, as is any interpretation that relegates law to a status of secondary importance (cf. Deuteronomy 6:24; 10:13; Psalms 19:7-11; Romans 7:12). Jesus was not in sympathy with the permissive mindset of today's doctrinally lax thinkers who soften doctrine and the binding nature of law in the name of “grace,” “freedom,” or “compassion.”

