

They Met Jesus:
Beyond Condemnation

On February 23 the Maryland Senate approved a same-sex marriage bill that was signed into law a short time later by Governor Martin O'Malley. The law, which is titled The Civil Marriage Protection Act, is scheduled to go into effect in January of 2013.

Immediately the Maryland Marriage Alliance began collecting signatures to sponsor a referendum to give Maryland voters the right to vote on the legitimacy of the law. To qualify for the November 6 ballot, opponents of the law will need to gather almost 20,000 signatures by May 31 and another 40,000 by June 30.

I personally plan on signing the petition. And here's why. I believe, on an issue of this magnitude, the citizens of our state should have the opportunity to express their voice. I believe that God has clearly defined marriage and that no society should redefine it. This has all been framed as a "rights" issue but what the media seldom tells us is about the sweeping changes that come with same-sex marriage.

Here's some of the fallout in some areas of the country already:

Religious groups who have refused to make their facilities available for same-sex couples have lost their state tax exemption.

Religious groups like Catholic Charities in Boston, Illinois and DC have had to choose between fulfilling their social mission based on their religious beliefs, or acquiescing to this new definition of marriage. They've been forced to close their charitable adoption agencies.

Nonprofit groups are faced with abandoning their historic mission principles in order to maintain governmental contracts (for things like low-income housing, health clinics, etc.). In Massachusetts, kids as young as second grade were taught about gay marriage in class. The courts ruled that parents had no right to prior notice, or to opt their children out.

Wedding professionals have been fined for refusing to participate in a same-sex ceremony.

Doctors, lawyers, accountants and other licensed professionals risk their state licensure if they act on their belief that a same-sex couple cannot really be married. A counselor, for example, couldn't refuse "marriage therapy" to a same-sex couple because she doesn't believe in gay marriage. She'd put her licensure at risk.

This isn't about treating others as second-class citizens. It isn't a civil rights issue. Those issues can be solved in another way. This is about the very fabric of society.

But that's a hard argument to make in this day and age. Because any question about the appropriateness of behavior is all of a sudden branded as hate speech.

The Barna Group does polling of cultural and religious opinions in the US. They found church attitudes about people in general, and gays in particular, are driving a negative image of the Christian faith among people ages 16-29.

In that under 30 demographic, 91% of non-Christians said Christianity was anti-gay, 87% said it was judgmental and 85% said it was hypocritical. Those are pretty big numbers.

Is it always inappropriate to make evaluations of right and wrong? What's the difference between legitimately analyzing a situation according to God's teaching and being judgmental and critical?

This is week 2 of a series we're calling "They Met Jesus." We're going through the Gospels and looking at specific instances when people met Jesus face-to-face. We not only want to see what happened, but we want to see the lessons that God had for them and has for us.

Today we're going to see God's justice and grace harmonized.

Open your Bible to John 8 page 1050

We're going to see a woman today who doesn't voluntarily meet Jesus, but in the end she's so glad she did.

I. The Bible Is A Trustworthy Record Of God's Truth

Before we look at the actual passage I want to briefly address a point of confusion for a lot of people when it comes to John 8.

If you're reading in NIV this morning you'll see a note that says, "The earliest manuscripts and many other ancient witnesses do not have John 7:53—8:11."

NASB says, "Later manuscripts add the story of the adulterous woman, numbering it as John 7:53-8:11."

English Standard Version says, “The earliest manuscripts do not include 7:53–8:11.”

We want you to have confidence in your Bible, so let me give a brief explanation.

First, we don’t have the signed, original of the Gospel of John from the hand of John. What we have is copies.

Now you might be wondering to yourself, “Wait a minute. If all we have is copies, how in the world could we ever be confident that what we have is correct?”

It’s common for all ancient Greek documents to only have copies. A good example is the writings of Aristotle. We have 49 copies of his writings. The earliest copy was written 1400 years after his death.

Compare that with the New Testament. We currently have 5,686 manuscripts. We also have lectionaries (early Sunday School literature that quoted verses), quotes from the early church fathers and 19,000 copies of Syriac, Latin, Coptic, and Aramaic translations to compare.

Here’s a shot of the oldest known fragment from the John Rylands library in Manchester England. It has verses from John 18. Obviously it’s not a full manuscript, but here’s why it’s important. It’s called P⁵² and it dates from around 100 AD. That’s within 10 years of John’s lifetime. The Gospels were written very early, not hundreds of years later.

When you correlate those manuscripts and versions you find something amazing. Ninety percent of them agree in detail. These come from various times and various locations.

What about the 10% that don’t agree in detail? Sometimes we find copying errors, which are obvious. (Haplography, dittography) But sometimes you find that passages were changed intentionally.

John 8 was a tough passage for the early church because it was misinterpreted by some as being too easy on adultery. Augustine, writing around 400 AD said, “Certain persons of little faith, or enemies of the true faith... removed from their manuscripts the Lord’s act of forgiveness toward the adulteress, as if He who had said, ‘Sin no more,’ had granted permission to sin.”

A Greek named Nikon accused the Armenians of “Casting out the account which teaches us how the adulteress was taken to Jesus, saying that it was harmful.”

The reason that I use the NKJV as my main Bible to teach and preach from is that it's based on those 90% of agreeing manuscripts. Take out John 7:53 through 8:12 and you'll see it doesn't even make sense.

You can trust your Bible. The evidence for its accuracy is overwhelming. God not only breathed out the scriptures through human authors but He used His people to preserve the scriptures accurately.

When we open up our Bibles we're reading the Word of God. That gives it authority in spite of what our culture might say. And equally as important, it gives it authority to speak into our lives.

I. The Bible Is A Trustworthy Record Of God's Truth

II. The Bible Reveals The True Horror Of Sin

Read verses 1-6a

Just before this, in John 7, there's a vivid confrontation between Jesus and the religious leadership. It was the Feast of Tabernacles, which was one of three religious celebrations that were required attendance for all Jewish men. That meant that Jerusalem was packed with pilgrims.

Each morning during the Feast of Tabernacles, at the time of the sacrifice, a priest went to the fountain at the Pool of Siloam and filled a golden pitcher with water. As it was carried into the temple area the people would recite Isaiah 12:3, *Therefore with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.*

The water was then poured out as an offering to God. While this was being done *The Hallel* Psalm 113-118 was sung by the Levite choir.

At three specific points the worshippers shouted and waved palm branches:

PSA 118:1 *Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good!*

PSA 118:25 *Save now, I pray, O LORD*

PSA 118:29 *Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good! For His mercy endures forever.*

On the last day they marched around the altar 7 times remembering the water that God brought through Moses to satisfy the burning thirst of the multitude and Jesus stands up and says: *If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.* (John 7:37, 38)

In other words, “I’m the one who can satisfy the thirsting in your soul.”

Some people in the crowd said, “He’s a prophet.” Others said, “He’s our long awaited Messiah.” In utter frustration the Jewish leaders sent out guards to arrest this Galilean rabble-rouser. The guards came back empty handed and said, “We couldn’t do it. No-one ever spoke the way this man does.”

Now the leaders are fuming. The people were following Jesus and not following them so they set out to trap Him. They went off to plot, but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives to pray.

To understand what these men were doing we need to understand that not only were they trying to trap Jesus but they had already trapped the woman.

Here’s why I say that. According to the OT Law of Moses there had to be indisputable evidence before anyone could be punished by execution. While Leviticus 20:10 did call for the death penalty for adultery, every charge had to be verified by 2 or 3 witnesses. Under those conditions obtaining the evidence in the case of adultery would almost be impossible unless the situation was a set-up. They didn’t have web cams, so they must posted witnesses in the room or at the keyhole.

Think about it. Where’s the guy? If she was caught in the very act where was her partner? At the least, the rulers had allowed the man to escape, at the worst he was in on it from the beginning. So here’s the woman having to bear the shame and humiliation alone.

All of a sudden we begin to discover that as wrong as the woman’s actions were, the actions of these religious men were despicable.

If nothing else this passage ought to drive home to us the horror and deceitfulness of sin. Not the sin of the woman, but the sin of religious hypocrisy. The sin of the woman was obvious, but the sin of religious hypocrisy is much more insidious because it’s hidden under a facade of righteousness.

Ninety percent of Jesus' words of condemnation, and He spoke very pointedly, were directed at religious hypocrisy, not society's ills or people's personal sins.

If you ever find yourself peeping through somebody's keyhole (either figuratively or literally) in order to accuse them rather than spending the night in prayer as Jesus did, then the spirit that's motivating you isn't the Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ always acted in love toward sinners. He always gave them a chance for forgiveness.

The church may get a bad rap because of media distortions or perceptions that are skewed by sin but sometimes we get just what we deserve.

In this case these men plotted this scenario. Why? They knew that three important matters were at stake here. 1) The life of the woman. 2) The teachings of Jesus about mercy and compassion. 3) The divinely given Law of Moses. The way the question of the woman was posed, the accusers believed Jesus would have to compromise in one of those areas.

This was a real problem. Without fully realizing it these men hit on the problem of all problems.

How can God be holy and still overlook sin? Or, as it's stated in the Book of Romans, how can God be both just and the justifier of the ungodly.

Everybody knew that the ministry of Jesus had been marked by compassion. He taught that love was the very heart of God's nature. He made prostitutes and sinners His congregation. He befriended the outcasts. He said in Matthew 11:28 *"Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."*

The problem was if He was consistent and waived the Law of Moses for the sake of compassion the rulers could denounce him as a false prophet. No prophet of God would speak against the law of God.

On the other hand, if Jesus upheld the law; if He said, "Stone the woman" then they were sure that they had Him. They figured, "If He says that, we'll laugh Him right out of town." "Come unto me all you who labor and are heavy laden and I'll stone you to death."

Humanly speaking these religious plotters were right when they thought, "Even if He wants to, Jesus can't show love." The only thing they hadn't figured into the equation was that Jesus wasn't just an ordinary man. He was God in the flesh and God is the Lord of grace.

So in the middle of all this tension, a very strange thing happened.

I. The Bible Is A Trustworthy Record Of God's Truth

II. The Bible Reveals The True Horror Of Sin

III. The Bible Discloses The Depth Of The Grace Of God

Read verse 6b

At first Jesus appeared to be just casually moving some dirt around, kind of like we would doodle on a napkin at a restaurant. It looked like He was ignoring them.

You know what Jesus wrote there in the dirt that day? Neither do I! John doesn't say but you can pick up a lot of commentaries that will speak with great authority filling in the blanks for us.

Some have suggested that He wrote on the ground to stall for more time to get them to repeat their charges thinking that the shame of their accusations would sink in.

One expressed how Jesus was overcome with the emotion of the situation like He was at the tomb of His friend Lazarus, or when He wept over Jerusalem.

At least one writer thought that this was symbolic of Jeremiah 17:13, *O LORD, the hope of Israel, all who forsake you will be put to shame. Those who turn away from you will be written in the dust because they have forsaken the LORD, the spring of living water.*

The truth is, we don't know. But now listen to this...

Read verses 7-8

What a brilliant reply! Instead of being trapped, Jesus turns the tables. He upholds the law of Moses – "Yes, people who commit adultery should be stoned" – but at the same time He exposes the evil motives of the Pharisees by qualifying who's able to carry out the sentence. Which, as it turns out, was none of them.

Think about all the effort they had gone through to pull this off. All the plotting and scheming. All destroyed in a moment by the God of grace.

I'm so glad that Jesus is the Lord of grace. Some of this woman's circumstances are my circumstances. The law of God speaks against me. It speaks against you.

It says, *You shall have no other gods before Me*. I so easily make idols out of things or people and put them before God.

It says, *You shall not murder*. (Jesus equated hating your brother with murder in the heart.)

You shall not commit adultery. (Jesus equated lust with adultery of the heart.)

You shall not steal. (Who hasn't at some time in their life taken something that wasn't theirs?)

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. (Who in this room has never told a lie in your life?)

You shall not covet. There's a heart issue we've all failed in at times.

If God isn't the Lord of grace then we stand accused and condemned by God's perfect standards.

Read verse 9

Jesus' enemies tried to ensnare Him by the Law of Moses; instead they had the spotlight turned on themselves in a public confrontation.

Grace didn't defy God's law, it upheld it. One sentence from the Holy One of God and they were all silenced, all convicted, and they all walked away.

Get the picture here. The Pharisees were known for their righteousness, only it was self-righteousness. They bragged and boasted about how much better they were than other people. They fasted and prayer and tithed. They believed that they were God's favorites. But when the light of God shines on a person's life there's nothing left to brag about.

When the light of God shines on our life we can't hide the truth of our own failures anymore. And every one of us are sinners before a holy God.

That's the way it was here. They all kind of slithered away.

That's just what it's like at the final judgment. When God's light flashes from the Great White Throne nobody is going to come up with any excuses. No one's going to say, "Hey God, I know your law said this but..." Every mouth will be stopped.

Now can you imagine the stunned silence at this point?

The Pharisees slinking away in defeat and frustration, Jesus stooping down and drawing in the dirt, and this poor woman sitting there with him.

What do you think was going through her mind right about then? What would be going through your mind?

At last Jesus turns to the woman and for the first time addresses her directly.

Read verses 10-11

Remember all of this was happening in the most public place in the city of Jerusalem. This was in the temple. All the people had come to hear Jesus teach. Crowds of people watched this whole thing unfold. The religious leaders had purposely made this a public confrontation.

This woman was guilty. Jesus could have shamed her and made her squirm just like He did the Pharisees who brought her to Him. Jesus had just publicly humiliated them. But not her. Instead He says: "*Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more.*"

Now, that's a really nice thing to say. But why did He say it? Was Jesus just being nice? Was it like, "Hey, you've had a really hard day now just go on home and don't do it again?" Was he just looking the other way? Was Jesus somehow making allowance for her background? Maybe she came from a broken home, or maybe she had been abused? Remember, five minutes earlier He had given the Pharisees permission to stone her. She was guilty as sin and He knew it. So, why didn't Jesus condemn her?

We tend to trivialize, rationalize, minimize sin. God doesn't do that. He condemns sin but He makes a way for sinners to find grace in His sight.

Why did she find grace? I think the answer's found in verse 11. Notice what she calls

Jesus... “Lord.” Judas Iscariot was a disciple of Jesus for three years and never once did he call Jesus Lord. This woman had something Judas never had, faith.

And her faith was accompanied by a complete admission of guilt. She didn’t make excuses, she didn’t try to justify herself, she wasn’t self-righteous like the Pharisees, she knew she was guilty.

The Pharisees were convicted by their consciences and they walked away from Jesus. The woman was convicted by the Holy Spirit and she called Jesus Lord.

Finally Jesus says, “Go and sin no more.” I’m so glad He said, ‘I won’t condemn you, go and sin no more,’ instead of “Go and sin no more and I won’t condemn you.” What hope would there be if He said that?

He was saying, “Live for me because you’re forgiven. Walk in the newness of life that I’ve given you.”

That’s grace. Grace isn’t God ignoring sin. Grace is hitting sin head on.

The Bible says, *Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, He was buried, and He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures.* (I Corinthians 15: 3, 4)

It says, *For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.* (II Corinthians 5:21)

The Bible says, *Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness.* (Romans 4:4, 5)

It says, *He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.*” (John 3:36)

Read verse 12

Remember in verse 2 how Jesus started off early in the morning teaching the people until He was interrupted? Well now He turns back to His audience again.

The sun had come up over the buildings in the temple area so they would have all been sitting in the morning sunlight and Jesus says, “I am the light of the world. Just like the sunlight you’re sitting in.”

The same light of Jesus that had penetrated and warmed an adulterous’ heart had hardened a self-righteous, religious bunch of guys who ended up driving sinners away instead of welcoming them in.

Where are you today, when it comes to the people in our culture that you don’t agree with? Where are we as a church today when it comes to people who we know are in violation of God’s truth?

Did the people who answered the Barna survey have it right? Is the church that Jesus built with His blood hypocritical and judgmental? Or do we have a biblical attitude that balances law and grace?