

A stone's throw from God

John 7:53-8:11

You know that feeling, when you catch someone out? When you discover some awful thing that they've done? The initial offensive jolt to your everyday thoughts; the blood boiling; the indignation about the wrong they've done, the hurt they've caused. The desire to let them know just how angry you are, the desire to punish them. The desire to throw stones.

And do you know that feeling, when someone catches you out? When you've done some awful thing that you thought would stay hidden away but is suddenly discovered, unveiled, and on show. Your wrongdoing is clear and bare and undeniable in the presence of the person who's caught you. Your hanging head. Your fearful thoughts. Bracing yourself for the consequences you'd so hoped you'd never face. Waiting for the stones to hit you.

In John 7:53-8:11, we read about a woman who was waiting for the stones to hit her. Can you imagine being this woman? One minute she was sharing a bed with a man she was committing adultery with, caught up in the excitement and tantalising secrecy of all that...

The next minute, she is shocked to discover that she has been witnessed, by religious leaders who drag her out in the dawning light, and throw her before a crowd of people to make an example of her. Her heart must have been beating so fast; her mind swirling with fear and guilt and thoughts of what the crowds will do to her. Perhaps you don't really like to admit it, but maybe you know how that feels.

And we read about these religious leaders. Can you imagine being them? Witnesses to a hurtful deception, charged with a sense of moral responsibility and filled with a sense of wanting to see justice exercised upon this sinner; eager to make spectacle of this fallen woman before as many people as they can, and especially eager to bring the case before Jesus to test Him out and see what He's going to do about it. Perhaps you don't really like to admit it, but maybe you know how *that* feels.

Question - Do you identify more with the one who gets caught out; or the one who catches others out?

In this passage, Jesus deals with sinners. Not just the one that stands before a crowd, exposed and afraid; but the ones who are shouting in the crowds, self-righteous and angry. When people read this passage, they often think

about how Jesus deals with the woman, and we'll look at that later on, because how He deals with her has so much to teach us about how He deals with you and me.

But first, let's look at how Jesus deals with the other characters in the story - the holier-than-thou religious people who need to change every bit as much as the woman they are shouting and fussing about.

It's dawn. Jesus comes to the Temple Courts in Jerusalem once again, where He had been stirring up and offending the religious leaders the day before. He sits down, as is customary, to begin teaching the crowds that gather around Him.

Everyone settles into listening to Him, wondering what intriguing, expectation-challenging, life-defining words He is going to offer today - when the scene is interrupted dramatically by a group of religious leaders dragging a woman before Jesus, demanding a response from Him.

vv.4-6 tell us what they say, and why they say it. "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.'

The trap was this: If Jesus responded, 'No! Don't stone her!', these religious leaders could have said, 'Aha! You see! Jesus doesn't care about God's law! He's teaching us to turn our backs on it!' It was one way to discredit Him and get rid of Him.

On the other hand, if Jesus said, 'Yes, you're right. You must go ahead and stone her,' they might have said something like, 'So much for your teaching about forgiving even people like this.' Or, they might have gone to the Roman authorities, who alone withheld the right to put people to death, to report that an upstart called Jesus told a crowd to stone a woman to death.

The motives of these religious leaders, when dragged into the same light that was shining upon the guilty woman, are every bit as ugly and sinful as the adultery she had engaged in.

They don't really care that much about the woman's actions. For a case like this, the Old Testament Law declared that two or more witnesses would be necessary to see an adulterous person put to death. How did that come

about, but that the religious leaders knew, or at least suspected, that this woman was having an affair?

They meant to catch her in the act. They designed to trap her that night. Despite the Old Testament Law also calling for God's people to stop people and warn people against sin, they sat and watched and waited for 'the deed' to be done. Because the woman was just a pawn for their purposes.

And they did choose the *woman*. The Old Testament Law called for both the man and the woman involved in the adulterous act to be put to death. But the religious leaders, like most world cultures and most scandal stories, throw her to the crowds and let him off lightly.

And it's all with the intention of trapping Jesus, so that He'll say something that they can use to have Him disappear - perhaps with a demolished reputation, perhaps killed off, whatever - so long as Jesus went away.

This is sin. Focusing on other people's wrongdoing, getting angry about it, *wanting* to see them trapped in the act, and questioning the justice and authority of the God of the Bible revealed in Jesus Christ. Does *that* sound closer to home than you'd like to think?

Reflection on paper - Whose wrongdoing gets you really angry? Write down a name. Write down the things you're angry about. Write down the questions it makes you ask of God. Scrunch it up into a ball.

Now, picture the person who has made you so angry standing here in the middle. Are you ready to throw your ball of paper; ready to throw your stone at them? Are you ready to hurl your list of offences and your questions of God with full force, as if you can turn your back on that person and on God once you've got all that off your chest?

Here's how Jesus responded to the crowd who were ready and tensed with stones in hand...

He ignored their questions. He ignored their self-righteous, smug test. He just bent down and started writing on the ground. We don't know what He was writing. If God wanted us to know, He'd have seen it written for us in this passage. It doesn't matter.

What mattered was that Jesus would not have His actions and His focus dictated to Him by those who wanted to trap and manipulate Him. What

mattered was that Jesus stilled the moment, and gave that brief quiet space where every person holding a stone at the ready had a moment to ask themselves, 'What am I doing?'

There is a difference between the deliberate effort to sideline and discredit and dismiss Jesus Christ from your life, your worldview, and your sense of how things work; and the genuine hurts and questions we have of God when people really hurt us. But all of that rage and rancour, wherever it comes from, has to deal with a God who stoops down silently and gives you a minute to let go.

And the raging, the self-righteous, the sure-they're-in-the-right, have to deal with what Jesus says when they keep pressing with their demands in v.7...

'If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.'

And then He carries on writing. Jesus speaks a few simple, strong words that have the power to make a crowd pumping with sex scandal and blood lust, let their stones fall to the ground, and depart one by one in quiet humility. And then He gets on with what He was doing.

Those simple words still challenge every raging human heart. Are you really ready to get the knives out for somebody? Have you looked in the mirror recently? Have you taken a good, long look at your own life, and concluded that there's nothing wrong in your thoughts, words, actions and relationships?

Jesus isn't asking the leaders if they have *never* done anything wrong. Of course they have. But the Old Testament Law provided a way to seek forgiveness, to get themselves into a right relationship with God, in the sacrifices it describes, so that they could have a clear conscience before God.

Jesus' question is penetrating to the core of who these leaders are, right *here and now*. Are they, here and now, without sin? After that quiet moment, that short time where they were forced to blink before their equivalent of pulling the trigger, it's all there before them in their minds - their deliberate trapping of the adulterous couple. Their using them as pawns in their political game. Their dragging the woman along, and letting the man go. Their intentions to see Jesus killed off through all this.

When you still yourself before God for a moment, and examine your self-righteous anger towards Him or towards others, are you without sin? Really? What's in your heart and your motives?

Finally, every one of the threatening crowd that had encircled the trembling woman had disappeared. And Jesus stands up once again.

Now, Jesus meets the eyes of this guilty woman. Now, it's just He and she. One-to-one. There's nothing for her to hide from Him. He knows it all, after all, the *whole world* knows it all. Pretence is useless. She is who she is, in all her guilt and fear and ugly mistakes, standing before the one person now who is 'without sin', the one person who does have a right to throw the stones.

Jesus won't tolerate bloodthirsty spectators, and He dismisses the crowds who want to see the public execution, to have a good look in the mirror. But what now? Will He exercise His right to throw every stone at her till she pays for her crime? If He is God, as He seemed to be so powerfully claiming in His teaching the day before, then won't He now fulfill God's law by killing her for this adultery?

Question - Why does Jesus respond as He does in vv.10-11?

Not only did Jesus hold back from throwing a stone. He never had a stone in His hand in the first place.

Jesus asks the woman, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' She replies, 'No one, sir.' Jesus speaks the words that must have brought floods of relief to her as she awaited her fate at the hands of this clearly powerful figure from God - 'Then neither do I condemn you.'

That was not what Jesus had come to do. Back in John 3:17, we read this - 'For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him.' Jesus purpose in coming to this world was not to throw stones at any one.

He came so that as we trust in Him, *we might not be condemned by fellow human beings*. He came to overthrow the moral league tables that human beings establish for their societies and all of the points systems that we use to determine who is good and bad, better or worse.

He came to dismiss the criticising crowds who point and stare and judge and look down upon you; to dismiss human judgement of your life. He came with the power and authority of God to declare, 'nobody has a right to judge you, condemn you, or write you off.'

But much more than that, Jesus came so that as we trust in Him, *we might not be condemned by God*. Jesus let the adulterous woman walk free. If Jesus is indeed God, and God's law said, adultery deserves death, why this pardon? John's gospel will go on to show us why.

It is because Jesus is going to receive the condemnation in her place. In the last verse of the chapter we're reading, we'll see the same crowds pick up their stones to kill Jesus. It's an image that hints at how Jesus has come to take the woman's rightful punishment.

By the end of John's gospel, we will see Him die on a cross, to take the full force of God's wrath for *her* ugly sin, and *my* ugly sin, and *your* ugly sin. All of our warping and distorting of life leads to death. But the grace of Jesus is that it leads to His death in place of mine; the one person with the right to judge me, forgiving me *and* taking the blame instead.

There is a day, the Bible tells us, that Jesus Christ will return to this world, as the judge over all. When your time's up, or this world's time is up, where is God's wrath for your wrongdoing going to land? Make no mistake, it will hit you will all of its force and ruin you forever if you choose to bear it yourself.

But if you will stand as honestly and dependently before Jesus Christ as this woman was forced to - if you will trust in Him bearing God's wrath for you - then not only eternity, but life right now, is full of the hope of something very different.

Something that's often overlooked by people as we read about Jesus' extravagant forgiveness, is the last thing He says to the woman. 'Go now *and leave your life of sin.*'

Jesus tells this woman to go free, without condemnation, for this shameful thing she has done. But He doesn't just say, 'Go now and say sorry for sleeping with a man and breaking a marriage.' It's much more than that. 'Go now and leave your life of sin.'

Meeting Jesus, and experiencing His forgiveness, does not mean 'business as usual,' only now, you've got a god to go to every now and then to salve

your conscience by saying sorry for all the habits and patterns and heartbreaks you keep pursuing just the same.

It means being transformed. For Jesus to tell this woman, whose life was defined by sin, '*Leave that life*', tells me, that's possible. Jesus calls this woman to change course - that's what it means to 'repent' - to live a different life in the light of this powerful experience of His forgiveness.

More and more I hear people arguing that, 'Jesus welcomes everybody, no matter what. All are welcome.' This story in John's gospel shows that yes, all *are* welcome - even those under the death sentence for their crimes, even those who have done things that God despises.

But here's the thing - God takes us, whoever we are, just as we are - *but He never leaves us there*. He calls us to change. He calls us to be transformed in the life we come to know welcomed in the Father's arms. He calls those who are doing what He clearly declares to be wrong, to stop.

Being a follower of Jesus rules out holding stones over other people's heads. It demands the humility to look in the mirror of your own mind and heart. It means having no man or woman as the judge of your life, but only God Himself.

It means experiencing the overwhelming, incredible forgiveness of a Saviour God who loves you so much that He Himself physically died to take God's wrath for your real wrongdoing on His own shoulders, to the bitter end. It means the power of the same Spirit of God that raised that Saviour from death, at work in our lives to transform us and enable us as God says to us - 'Go now - and leave your life of sin.'

Put your stones down. Take your masks off. Look in the mirror. Stand before God. Wonder at the cross. Receive that flood of forgiveness. Then walk on - free of the past, excited about eternity, and changing all the way in between.

Amen.