

Judging The Judges

John 8:1-11

Introduction

Let us begin our study at John's gospel, chapter 8, verses 1 and 2.

But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. And early in the morning He came again into the temple, and all the people were coming to Him; and He sat down and began to teach them.

The customary position for a rabbi, or teacher, was sitting down. Then, the crowd would gather about him. It was the practice that only the disciple or student of an accredited teacher was entitled to expound scripture and to talk about the Law.

You may remember, in John, chapter 7, that the soldiers had come to arrest Jesus. Instead, however, they reported back that they had never heard anyone teach like Him before.

How is this uneducated carpenter holding sway the masses?!

From the perspective of the people, the clue is found in another gospel account. Mark, chapter 1, verse 22, reads,

And they were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

Now, when the rabbis and scribes taught, they never taught by means of personal authority. They always began their comments with, "There is a teaching that . . ." or "It is written that . . .".

But how does Jesus teach? "You have heard it said that . . . but . . .!" or "Truly, truly *I* say unto you . . .".

You see, the scribes taught *from* the authorities; Jesus taught *with* authority.

We cannot imagine how dramatic that would be. Let me try to illustrate.

Imagine that I arrive in church to preach and I say something like, "For seven years now, we have been studying what the Bible says, but, from now on, I want to tell you what I have to say."

Then, I put the Bible away.

What would happen? The first thing that would happen is that our space problems would be solved!

That is what Jesus is saying – only a million times more dramatically! "You have had the Law for several thousand years; you have heard what Moses wrote, *but*, this is what *I* say.

Now, here is the brilliance of their plot, in John, chapter 8. They are going to use the fact that He taught from His own authority as *the trap*.

In fact, jump ahead to verse 5, where they challenge Jesus.

Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women; what then do You say?

Now, go back to verses 3 and 4. Here they come!

And the scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery, and having set her in the midst, they said to Him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in adultery, in the very act."

There is no doubt in my mind that this adulterous scene was a set up; that this unknowing, yet sinful

woman was the pawn to put a noose around Jesus' neck.

The question is, "Where is the man she was with?!"

The Law required both the man and the woman to pay for adultery with their lives. Why did they not bring the man forward?!

Some suggest that the man escaped. Yet the text hardly allows for escape. Look again at verse 4.

. . . Teacher, this woman was caught . . .

The word "caught" means, "seized, overcome, overtaken". It suggests that the men literally pulled the adulterous couple away from each other. And, the tense of the verb suggests that those who pulled her away were the same ones who were still holding on to her when they came to Jesus.

How could they have missed grabbing the man?! I happen to believe that he was deliberately allowed to go free. Why? Because the religious leaders were not concerned about moral ethics, they were concerned about trapping Jesus.

I tend to believe that the leaders had already arranged with the adulterous man to allow them to capture the woman. Perhaps the leaders had discovered this illicit affair and schemed their plot – a plot that may have included telling the man that, if he went along with the trap, they would not reveal to his wife that he had been committing adultery. So, the man slips away, the leaders capture the woman, and drag her to Jesus.

Now it begins to get "sticky," in verses 5 and 6.

"Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women; what then do You say?" And they were saying this, testing Him, in order that they might have grounds for accusing Him. But Jesus stooped down, and with his finger wrote on the ground.

This is the dilemma. The Sanhedrin, the Jewish supreme court, was not in the regular practice of condemning people to death. In fact, one paragraph of the *Mishnah* records, "If the Sanhedrin condemned to death a person as often as once every seven years, they were to be considered a slaughterhouse."

One of the reasons capital punishment did not happen very often was the strict requirements, laid down by the rabbis, for someone caught in adultery. There had to be an ironclad case with numerous

witnesses. In fact, they had to, literally, be caught in the act.

And here was just that kind of case! It was "open and shut"!

Can you imagine this woman? She was publicly exposed, standing there, perhaps not even fully clothed, before the sneering, hostile religious leaders. The crowd of people are whispering, gasping, and gaping at her, as she stands before the holy teacher of Nazareth, who many believed was the Messiah.

What an illustration of the coming great white throne. All who have rejected the Savior will stand before Him – exposed, guilty, their case of sin being ironclad. The difference is, there will be no forgiveness offered then, but today, there is.

Look at verse 7.

But when they persisted in asking Him, He straightened up, and said to them, "He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her."

Before we uncover the implications of Jesus' words, I believe we need to address an important subject. I do not know how many times I have heard someone refer to Jesus' words as a justification for allowing sin to go undisciplined in the life of the believer and in the life of the church.

How many times have you heard someone say, "You have no right to judge that person. Remember, 'Don't judge, lest you be judged.'"

When Is It Right To Judge?

Let us answer the question, "When is it right to judge?"

When someone openly rebels against scripture.

1. First, it is right to judge when someone openly rebels against scripture.

In I Corinthians, chapter 5, verses 1 through 3, Paul writes,

It is actually reported that there is immorality among you . . . And you have become arrogant, and have not mourned instead, in order that the one who had done this deed might be removed from your midst. For I, on my part, though absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged

him who has so committed this, as though I were present.

In the best seller, *Looking Out For Number One*, the author wrote,

Don't be intimidated by another person's council about what is right . . . especially watch out for the moralists; forget the moral standards others have tried to cram down your throats.

Our age resists moral accountability! And the believer or church which stands and judges sin as sin is asking for it.

I read of a church that disciplined, out of its membership, a woman living in immorality. She sued the church, saying it had no right to judge her. She won the suit.

The disparity between the church and our culture is ever widening, and the opportunity for persecution is ever nearer.

When someone openly denies the doctrines of scripture.

2. Secondly, it is also right to judge when someone openly denies the doctrines of scripture.

Our culture, and increasingly, the church at large, is resisting more and more the idea of doctrinal or theological absolutes. They are too black and white; too divisive! We have replaced the word "sin" with "problem". The popular message of today is, "Let us lay aside our doctrine and unite in love."

Listen to Paul, in Romans, chapter 16, verse 17,

Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching . . .

(or doctrine)

. . . which you learned, and turn away from them.

Listen to John, in II John, verses 10 through 11,

If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, . . .

(or doctrine)

. . . do not receive him into your house, and do not give him a greeting; for the one who gives him a greeting participates in his evil deeds.

That does not sound very loving does it? I wonder how popular John would be today, to those who say, "Set aside doctrine for the sake of unity and the cause"?

Paul wrote, in Galatians, chapter 1, verse 8,

But even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed.

So:

- the minister who preaches that Jesus Christ did not literally resurrect from the grave – is accursed,
- the religious leaders who deny efficacy of Christ's atonement alone – are accursed,
- those who deny the divine inspiration of scripture – are accursed, and
- the church leaders who preach a gospel of salvation by grace – plus works, plus baptism, plus, plus, plus . . . – are accursed.

It does not sound like Paul is calling for open and loving dialogue. It does not sound like Paul is ecumenical. NO! He is calling for division – on the grounds of doctrine.

So, while the church at large is setting the absolute truths of the Bible aside, for whatever reasons they so choose, our world is, like never before, groping for the truth.

When we evaluate our own walk with God.

3. Thirdly, it is right to judge when we evaluate our own walk with God.

I Corinthians, chapter 11, has the idea of judgment occurring five times in three verses as the believer approaches the Lord's table.

Again, our Christian culture is erasing repentance and self-evaluation in the life of the believer. "It's too depressing, we need to focus instead on the power of positive thinking."

Yes, the pursuit of holiness will create conviction and the need for confession.

When we evaluate our own world in light of scripture.

4. Finally, it is also right to judge when we evaluate our own world in light of scripture.

Listen to I Corinthians, chapter 2, verse 15a,

... *he who is spiritual appraises* ...

(or judges)

... *all things* ...

What is Paul talking about? The amplified Bible renders it, “But the spiritual man tries all things – that is, he examines, investigates, inquires into, questions, and discerns all things.”

He is not critical, but he is thinking critically!

I was standing in the line at the grocery store – it was one of those rare moments when my wife sent me to the store, trusting that I would come home with what she had sent me for! I always come home with a different brand, along with chocolate covered doughnuts. If you send me to the grocery store, I will always come home with something related to the item I was supposed to buy and chocolate covered doughnuts!

Well, I was standing in line, surrounded by all the magazines with all of those wild headlines; such as, “Gorilla Gives Birth to Giraffe” or “Elvis Seen Selling Amway in Tennessee” or “Outer Space Aliens Communicate With White House” – I can believe that! It makes the wait in line really entertaining.

One headline, however, caught my attention. It read,

Do you believe in miracles? If you do, you're not alone. From visions of the Virgin on a hillside in Yugoslavia to the face of Christ on a billboard in Georgia, signs of a divine presence are touching millions.

I bought that issue of *Life* magazine – and I could not believe what people were buying into.

Why? Because they were not judging things in light of scripture!

I read about:

- Muslim gurus, who are said to be able to perform mystical healing,
- a growing group of people, in Bayside Queens, who believe they can capture the Holy Virgin on film by aiming Polaroid cameras into the air, and
- Hasidic Jews, in New York, who believe that scraps from their rabbi's table can cure illness

and guarantee a happy marriage, so they jostle about vying for his leftover food.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are living in a day when spiritual discernment is of paramount importance. The church must be capable of judging experiences, trends, and beliefs in light of scripture.

The author of Hebrews, in chapter 5, verse 14, called for a level of spiritual maturity wherein Christians, “. . . because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.”

I think of William Tyndale, who, in 1526, judged the current religious thought wrong that declared the Bible was only to be owned and read by the priests. He went on to give his countrymen an English translation – and he paid for that with his life.

I had a seminary professor who often said, “In every generation, the Christian community has been wrong somewhere. Do you know where it is wrong today?”

Now I am not proposing that we become hypercritical of everything. The truth is, a hypercritical person is a hypocritical person.

I am not saying to become critical; I am saying to begin thinking critically.

There are times and reasons when it is right to judge! Now the question is, “What are you judging today? Are you discerning, or naively open to anything and everything?”

When Is It Wrong To Judge?

Now, when is it wrong to judge?

When judging occurs before you know all the facts.

1. First, it is wrong to judge when judging occurs before you know all the facts.

John, chapter 7, verse 51, says,

Our Law does not judge a man, unless it first hears from him and knows what he is doing . . .

When judging condemns another person's personal convictions.

2. Secondly, it is also wrong to judge when judging condemns another person's personal convictions.

This goes in two directions – those who legalistically condemn others who allow certain things, and those who snobbishly sneer at the those who live a stricter life.

What a difficult lesson it is to learn that God blesses people I disagree with!

When judging attacks another person's motives.

3. Thirdly, it is wrong to judge when judging attacks another person's motives.

I Corinthians, chapter 4, verse 5, says,

Therefore do not go on passing judgement before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts . . .

We have to be careful to give people the benefit of the doubt.

The rabbis taught, what they considered to be, the six greatest works a person could do. To:

- study the scriptures,
- visit the sick,
- show kindness to strangers,
- pray,
- teach children the scriptures, and
- think the best of people.

When judging becomes a display of self-righteousness.

4. Finally, it is also wrong to judge when judging becomes a display of self-righteousness.

Jesus said, in Matthew, chapter 7, verse 1,

Do not judge lest you be judged.

Now, He cannot be talking about discernment and the other forms of judgment that we have seen validated in scripture. He is referring to the judgment that was typical of the religious leaders. It was a censorious, pietistic, critical form of judgment that exposed sin without ever proposing a solution!

The first part of verse 2, of Matthew, chapter 7, reads,

For in the way you judge, you will be judged
...

In other words, self-righteous, condemning judgment builds its own gallows.

In ancient Persia, a certain corrupt judge often accepted bribes to render a false verdict. Finally, the Persian King Cambyses discovered this corrupt judge's practice and had him executed. He then ordered that the judge be skinned and that the skin be treated as a cow's hide and turned into leather. The high court judge's chair was then covered with that skin, and subsequent judges, who rendered their judgments while sitting on that chair, were reminded, every day, of the consequences of perverting justice.

It is dangerous, as a sinful person, to sit in a chair that only God can occupy without sin. These men were playing God!

And now, in the first part of John, chapter 8, Jesus is about to skin their hides!

Look at verse 8.

And again He stooped down, and wrote on the ground.

Twice He has written now. Warren Wiersbe suggested that this was a subtle reminder of the two tablets of stone that God wrote upon with His finger.

There are some who believe that Jesus is scribbling in the sand because He is embarrassed! There are those who have held that Jesus stooped down because He did not know what to say.

It is interesting, however, that this is the only time in the New Testament that Jesus is writing anything. The normal word for "write" is "grapho," yet twice, in this passage, the word used is "katagrapho," which means, "to write down a record against".

The same word appears in Job, chapter 13, verse 26,

For Thou dost write . . .

("katagrapho")

. . . bitter things against me . . .

What, I believe, is taking place, in the stillness of that court, is these men heard the scratching of Jesus writing in the dirt. And what is He writing? I believe He is writing the list of sins that these men have hidden in the dark shadows of their private lives.

Jesus is about to judge the judges! He has seen them in the darkness; He has observed their sin; He knows them well!

Peter Marshall wrote,

Jesus Christ sees into their very hearts, and as that moving finger writes on: idolater, liar, drunkard, murderer, adulterer, there is the thud of stone after stone falling on the pavement. One by one, they creep away, slinking into the shadows, shuffling off into the crowded streets to lose themselves in the multitude.

Did these men think that they could fool God?! The trouble is, they did not know they were standing in front of Him – even though He had already told them who He was.

I can remember, in elementary school, I had a lady named Miss Longnecker as a teacher in the fifth grade. I remember getting into trouble in her class, although I was normally a model student and this was one of the few times I remember misbehaving! As was the practice of Miss Longnecker, she sent home a note describing the error of my ways and then, required that one of my parents sign it. It was an extremely cruel plan! I figured that I had two options – defect to the Soviet Union, or confess. I was in “deep water”.

Then, I thought of another option. I decided to forge my father’s signature. No one would ever know. I tried to write “scribbly,” like my father, with straight lines on the “K” and curly swoops on the “h” and “D”. I applied every ounce of skill at writing in cursive, “Keith Davey”. When I finished, it did not look anything like my father’s signature. So, I got a wet paper towel and smudged the ink so that it was barely readable. I would tell Miss Longnecker it had fallen in the sink. I never said I was a smart sinner! I was caught, of course, and all torture and punishment broke loose upon my poor soul.

That reminds me of a middle school student, named Tommy, that I read about. He was playing “hooky”. He called the school that morning and the principal happened to answer. Tommy, in his lowest voice, said, “Thomas Bradley won’t be in school today.”

The principal was suspicious of this voice, and said, “May I ask who is speaking?”

After a long pause, the voice replied, “This is my father speaking.”

Tommy and I had the same I.Q.!!

You know something more ludicrous than that?! Scribes and Pharisees, standing before omniscient deity, thinking they themselves are free from sin!

Thinking they can forge the signature of purity; thinking they can play judge, jury, and hangman.

Notice chapter 8, verse 9.

And when they heard it, they began to go out one by one, beginning with the older ones, and He was left alone, and the woman, where she was, in the midst.

Notice what Jesus does, in verses 10 through 11a.

And straightening up, Jesus said to her, “Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you?” And she said, “No one, Lord.”

Imagine this scene. The temple is silenced by the disappearance of her accusers. Jesus, alone, had the right to cast the first stone. So, in the quietness of this moment, is a disheveled woman, shoulders stooped and eyes, perhaps, still filled with fear. He looked at her, and she looked at Him, and all around was the silence of the deserted temple. Verse 11b,

And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you; go your way. From now on sin no more.”

Points To Consider

There are two very important points to consider here.

Jesus Christ did not dismiss her sin . . .

1. First, Jesus Christ did not dismiss her sin, He will die for her sin.

The human judges wanted one thing – with relish, they wanted to condemn! This is inconsistent with their function! They were supposed to restore sinners!

James Dobson once reported seeing a sign on a convent in Southern California. It read, “Absolutely No Trespassing – Violators Will Be Prosecuted to the Full Extent of the Law”.

It was signed, “The Sisters of Mercy.”

Jesus, the righteous Judge, wanted to forgive – and so He did. All the while, He knew that that was one of the many sins He would die on the cross to pay the penalty for.

He is therefore able to offer this woman another chance.

Jesus Christ will not only forgive her past . . .

2. The second point is that Jesus Christ will not only forgive her past, He will challenge her future.

Jesus confronted this woman's life. He never said, "It's all right. Don't worry. Just go on as you are doing."

Oh no, He said, "It's all wrong. Go out and, if I am indeed Lord, stop living the life of an adulterous!"

This is not an easy forgiveness. Jesus confronted the woman with a choice that day – either to go back to her old ways or to live as a forgiven woman, with a new lease on a new life.

Ray Stedman told the story of sitting on a bus next to a young man who had just received Christ. Pastor Stedman spoke to him of what his new life would mean and mentioned that he could now be free from all fear of death. The young man turned and looked Pastor Stedman in the eyes, and said, "I have never really been afraid of death. But I'll tell you what I am afraid of now – I'm afraid I'll waste my life."

Jesus said to this woman, "Go and stop wasting your life!"

Jesus Christ has always been intensely interested, not only in what a person has been, but also in what a person can become. At this moment, you have a past, but, with Christ, you have a future.

There is an old poem that reads:

*How I wish that there was some wonderful place
Called the Land of Beginning Again,
Where all our sin and all our heartaches
Could be dropped like a shabby old coat at the
door,
And never put on again!*

There is a land like that – it is called Calvary – where the weight of your sin can fall off like an old heavy coat. It is the place where Jesus Christ will forgive your past – and challenge your future.

The Bible never tells us what happened to this woman. Her story is an unfinished story – and so is yours.

What will you allow Him to do with your past?
What will you allow Him to do with your future?

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