

The Church of the Servant King

Survey of the Bible Series – The Gospel of John (SB_JN8A_ The Pharisees Attempt to Trick Jesus At the Expense of A Woman)

The Setting

The Feast of Tabernacles had just concluded the previous day (7:2 cf. 37) and there were visitors that remained in Jerusalem. In chapter 7 verse 53, John ends his narrative of the events of the “last day, that great day of the feast” (v. 37) with the statement that everyone went to his own house whereas Jesus went to the Mount of Olives for the night (8:1). While Jesus frequently took advantage of the hospitality of Mary and Martha in Bethany, it is possible that on this occasion “Jesus followed the custom of the feast in dwelling in a temporary booth erected on the Mt. of Olives rather than seeking hospitality in a home.”¹ Nevertheless, on the next morning, Jesus went back to the Temple court area to provide instruction to the multitudes that had stayed in Jerusalem and that desired to hear him teach.

In John’s narrative, there has been a crescendo of hostility toward Jesus on the part of the religious Jews. This anti-Jesus-as-the-Christ sentiment is first noted in 5:16 & 18 after Jesus heals a man on the Sabbath and then proceeds to equate Himself to God the Father. John notes at the beginning of chapter 7 that Jesus did not want to go to Jerusalem at the beginning of the Feast of Tabernacles because the Jews sought to kill Jesus (7:1). Later in the chapter, Jesus asks the Jews why they sought to kill him (7:19) and the Jews later ask the question among themselves if Jesus wasn’t the one that the Jews sought to kill (7:25). When Jesus indicates that the religious Jews did not know the Father, John observes that they sought to take Jesus; however, no one laid a hand on Him because it was not His time to die (7:30). When the officers of the Jews refuse to take Jesus, the Scribes and the Pharisees respond – “Are you also deceived? Have any of the rulers or the Pharisees believed in Him?” (7:47-48). The hostility toward this man Jesus, Who claimed to be the Son of God, is at a fever pitch.

You may remember from previous lessons that the Jews extensively developed a tradition built upon various interpretations of the Law. In addition to preserving the text of Hebrew Scripture, scribes were responsible for committing the *Targums* (oral paraphrases that began as early as the 5th Century B.C.) to writing beginning in the 2nd Century A.D. The *Talmud* (instruction or teaching) was another product of these scribes. The *Talmud* represented the opinions and decisions of Jewish teachers from about 300 B.C. to A.D. 500 and consisted of the *Mishnah* (an explanation of traditions and oral law) and the *Gemara* (a commentary on the *Mishnah*). The *Midrash* (textual study) was a formal doctrinal and homiletical exposition of the Hebrew Scriptures collected between 100 B.C. and A.D. 300. The *Midrash* consisted of the *Halakah* (paraphrases of the Torah) and *Haggada* (commentaries on the entire Old Testament).² Jesus’ public ministry corresponded with this complex maze of Jewish tradition and interpretation that shackled the lives of the common Jew with a burden of guilt that could not be relieved through one’s efforts at keeping the Law.

As Jesus taught during the Feast of Tabernacles (John 7), Jesus had placed the Jews’ tradition in opposition to the Law and the Law’s purpose. For instance, Jesus reminded them that the Law permitted certain works on the Sabbath (i.e. circumcision – 7:22-23) that the Jews in their tradition had prohibited. The Jews needed a vivid example of how the Law was too harsh and needed to be interpreted. They hoped to trap Jesus into saying that the Law was too harsh to be

¹ J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ – A Study of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing, 1981), 282.

² Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 371, 502-503.

accepted as it was written and that it must be reinterpreted. If it had to be reinterpreted, they needed to force Jesus to admit that the Pharisees had authority to interpret the Law.³

The Scribes and the Pharisees Use a Woman

There is no debate that the Law prohibited adultery. Also, the Law specified a punishment of death to those who committed adultery, both man and woman. The Law also required that for any accusation of a crime to be enforceable, there had to be two witnesses.

You shall not commit adultery (Ex 20:14)

The man who commits adultery with another man's wife, he who commits adultery with his neighbor's wife, the adulterer and the adulteress, shall surely be put to death. (Lev 20:10)

One witness shall not rise against a man concerning any iniquity or any sin that he commits; by the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established. (Deut 19:15)

While Jesus was quietly teaching the multitudes, the Scribes and the Pharisees rudely interrupt Him for the purpose of trapping Him. They present a woman who had been caught "in the very act" of adultery (v. 4). One has to wonder how they caught her in the very act. Was it possible that festive atmosphere associated with the Feast of Tabernacles made such activity more prevalent?

It is probable that the hilarity and abandonment of the Feast of Tabernacles, which had grown to be a kind of vintage festival, would often degenerate into acts of licence [sic] and immorality, and these would find more numerous opportunities in the general disturbance of ordinary life caused by the dwelling of the whole people in their little leafy booths. One such act had been detected during the previous night, and the guilty woman had been handed over to the Scribes and Pharisees.⁴

Regardless of how she was discovered, the religious Jews wasted no time to seize the opportunity to use the situation to try to perplex Jesus and make Him lose credibility. They were not interested in maintaining and preserving the spirit and integrity of the Law. If Jesus said that the woman should be stoned, He would lose His reputation for compassion and mercy on sinners. Furthermore, He would be in violation of Roman law which prohibited a Jew from exercising the power to sentence a person to death except in the case of a Gentile trespassing in the Temple. If Jesus pardoned her, He would be in effect acknowledging that the Law was too severe and that it needed interpretation. Thus, He would be validating a practice that was consistent with their tradition, i.e. freeing her from the penalty of the Law.

Jesus did not immediately answer their question. Instead, He paused a moment and wrote something in the sand. There has been much speculation about what Jesus wrote. Perhaps He wrote to gain time while He thought. I believe that it is possible that He began to write the sins that He suspected were prevalent among the religious types based upon His understanding of human nature and Jewish religious culture.

Finally, Jesus makes the now oft quoted statement – "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her" (Jn 8:7). Jesus was not indicating that there should not be

³ Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus*, 283.

⁴ Frederick Farrar, *Life of Christ* (New York: Dutton, 1877), Volume 1, 4-5 quoted in Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus*, 282.

a judicial system in any society. He was merely indicating that judgment belongs to God Who can execute judgment in a manner that is consistent with His holiness. In the spiritual realm, the person who is unholy is disqualified from acting as a judge. Self-righteousness is an indication that one is unholy. In demanding that the penalty of the Law be executed, the religious Jews were taking the place of God if they had sin in their own lives.

Principle: For individuals to have any claim to be representatives of God's justice, they must first resemble Him by inward and outward purity of life.

Application: Are there deep-seated attitudes that are the result of a self-justified sin pattern present in your life? (Sometimes these can even be suppressed from your stream of conscious thought so that you or others only see the outward manifestations of anger, jealousy, pettiness, resentfulness, demanding behavior, lust, etc.) Do you have any other sin patterns that you have not dealt with before the Lord?

Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you. And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me remove the speck from your eye'; and look, a plank is in your own eye? Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye. Do not give what is holy to the dogs; nor cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you in pieces. (Matt 7:1-6)

Jesus' argument that judgment belonged to God by virtue of the fact that each of the woman's accusers had sin in their lives was so convincing that gradually from oldest to youngest, each of the self-righteous types departed. Perhaps, they knew that the multitude that had gathered around Jesus knew of their sinful practices, whatever they might have been. Therefore, even they couldn't stand the scrutiny.

Jesus Shows Compassion on a Sinner

With none of her accusers remaining, there could be no execution of a sentence. Jesus did not approve of the woman's conduct and actions. He exhorted her to leave her life of sin. Jesus will one day judge all mankind; however, that was not His purpose in His first Advent. His purpose was to offer salvation and deliverance from the bondage of sin. The religious types had revealed their unrighteousness by leaving the scene. The woman, who had been brought to Jesus in a state of unrighteousness, departed in a condition of righteousness by having her sins forgiven by the only Person capable of such an act.

The woman represents a powerful fact. One day in eternity, every man and woman will stand before the resurrected Jesus in judgment. This will be true of believers (2 Co 5:10 cf. 1 Co 3:11-15) and unbelievers (Re 20:11-15). Here, we see Jesus as the sinless Son of God in the flesh standing before a woman who could not hide her sin with a cloak of self-righteousness. When Jesus called her "woman," He used the same Greek word in verse 10 as He used of His mother (Jn 2:4; 19:26).

Is This Passage Part of the Gospel of John?

[See John Walvoord and Roy Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1983), 346-7.]