

Things Jesus Taught Us (3)

By

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Read the Story of the Woman Caught in Adultery (John 8: 2-11)

This has always been one of my favorite stories in the Bible, but as I was reading it again this week, I noticed a pair of brackets around it I had never noticed before, and a footnote directing me to a note at the bottom of the page which read, “The most ancient manuscripts omit this story.” **I did a little more digging and discovered some Biblical scholars believe this story didn’t make its way into the Bible until around 900 A.D., and because of its dubious origins some newer translations of the Bible leave this story out altogether.**

At first I was disappointed, then I thought of the time when our Sam was about seven years old and we had these really good friends we called Aunt Denise and Uncle Steve, even though we weren’t related. **Sam didn’t know that and just assumed they were family.** He was just nuts about them. Still is. But when he was about seven, he began to understand what the words *aunt* and *uncle* implied, and asked us, “Are Steve and Denise Dad’s brother and sister or Mom’s?” **So we had to explain that matters weren’t what they seemed.** But you know what? It didn’t change his affection or appreciation for them one bit. He went right on loving them.

We don’t know if this story is an authentic Jesus story, but it’s still a great story with an important lesson, and my appreciation for it hasn’t diminished one bit.

Jesus is in the Temple teaching, and is loudly interrupted by a group of voyeuristic men who appear to have been peeking in windows trying to catch people committing adultery. **For some folks, religion is less about personal transformation, and more about catching others in some secret sin and embarrassing them.** The men have with them a struggling, frightened, humiliated woman.

But their target isn’t her, nor is their goal some supposed concern with morality. **People like this always claim to be acting in the interests of morality, which is a convenient way of excusing their immorality.** The woman caught in adultery is merely their weapon, their tool. Their supposed anguish over her immorality is insincere. They care nothing about her. **Their real target is Jesus, whom they want to entrap.** Religious law called for the death penalty for adultery, while Roman law forbid it. These men have placed Jesus in an awkward position, demanding he choose between religious law or the law of the land. **No matter his choice, he is bound to be in trouble with someone.** This is akin to the “Do you still beat your wife?” question. No matter how he answers, he is suspect.

I imagine Jesus is furious, that writing in the sand is his effort to gain self-control. His way of counting to ten. These men have been rudely interruptive. **Worse, they have humiliated a woman for their own selfish purposes.** They are religious bullies, who under the guise of piety are destroying people’s lives. We don’t know what Jesus was teaching in the Temple. **Perhaps**

he was telling his followers that true religion begins with honest self-evaluation, that true religion isn't about removing the speck in someone else's eye, but removing the log from our own. He doesn't voice his disagreement with the religious law. He doesn't question its harshness, nor does he ask where the man was who committed adultery with the woman, though the law condemned both. **He isn't going to be drawn into an argument about the Bible with fundamentalists.** Smart man. Don't ever have a battle of the minds with people who've lost theirs.

Jesus presumes the law is valid, then consistent with his belief that good religion *first holds the self accountable*, invites the men to examine their own lives, telling them the one without sin can throw the first stone. **They stop, and think, then slink away, one by one.** The order in which they leave is curious—the oldest leave first. I don't know if this is because older people sin more, or if because as we age we become more aware of our shortcomings, and more sympathetic to the shortcomings of others. **Perhaps both.**

But no man is left to condemn the woman, and Jesus won't condemn her. She has been reviled enough. **He will not add his voice to the mob's voice, won't kick a woman when she's already down.** “Neither do I condemn you. Go, and sin no more.” He won't condemn her, but he does realize the degrading effects of adultery and wants her to become well and whole. “Go, and sin no more.”

There are a number of lessons one can draw from this story. I would like to lift up three. The first lesson is this: **We are never so blind or so prone to evil as when we are self-righteousness.** Self-righteousness—the conviction that we are morally and spiritually faultless—causes us to see the shortcomings in others while denying it in ourselves. **Of all the spiritual cancers, it is the most malignant, crippling our self-awareness and blinding us to our own need for change.** While in this story Jesus caused the men to acknowledge their own sins, I have seldom seen self-righteousness cured that easily or quickly. **Our typical reaction when someone challenges our self-righteousness isn't to acknowledge it, but to attack the person bringing it to our attention.** “How dare you say that about me! Who are you to tell me that! You have a lot of room to talk!” It is difficult and painful to acknowledge our imperfections, but until we do, we'll never grow. **This story reminds us to examine our own lives, not the lives of others.**

The second lesson is this: People who talk incessantly about morality often do that to mask their own immorality. **The men in the story were so appalled at what they saw while looking through someone's window, they almost make us forget they were peeping through someone's window.** Indignation has that effect. Haranguing people about their morality obscures our own immorality. **I am never so adamant about simplicity as those weeks when I have blown lots of money on things I didn't need.**

The third lesson is this: **We're often most self-righteous when it comes to sexual sin, and treat it as if it were the worst thing someone could do.** Most often, when people act out sexually, it's an indication of brokenness or loneliness, or a deeply felt need for intimacy or relationship that is inappropriately manifested. **That doesn't deserve our scorn, it deserves our sympathy and our commitment to their healing.** But think of the unhealthy way our

society deals with sexuality. People are judged by their sexual attractiveness, as if that is all we are. **We're bombarded by media which is designed to arouse us, then we judge people harshly when they succumb to temptation or violate our sexual code, as if that were the worst sin.** Why aren't we as upset about greed or war or racism?

For his part, Jesus seemed to be much less concerned about sexual sin. As far as we know, he didn't spend much time preaching about it, and was always gracious to people who'd been accused of it, sympathizing with their brokenness, then encouraging them to become well and whole.

As I said at the beginning, we don't know if the story of the woman caught in adultery is historically factual, but we do know the lessons it teaches are true—that self-righteousness cripples our spiritual growth; that we should be wary of people who focus on the morality of others while ignoring their own immorality; and that people who are broken are more likely healed by our compassion, than by our scorn.