

15 *A Stone's Throw Away*

John 7:53–8:11

Purpose: To show Jesus' compassion toward all of us who are guilty of sin.

In the New International Version, this section of John's Gospel (7:53—8:11) is separated from the verses preceding and following by solid lines. The verses are missing from most of our earliest Greek manuscripts of the Gospel of John. Most later manuscripts include the verses at this point in the text (although a few insert them at other places in John and a few make them part of Luke's Gospel). While it raises some textual problems, most evangelical scholars agree with Dr. F. F. Bruce, who calls it "a fragment of authentic gospel material not originally included in any of the four Gospels" (Bruce, *John*, p. 413). For a full discussion of the textual problems, see Morris, *According to John*, pp. 882–84.

Nothing is more humiliating than being caught in an act of disobedience! Whether it's a child with his hand in the cookie jar or an adult driving over the speed limit, we all know the sinking feeling of being caught. In John 8, a woman is caught in the most awkward of situations—in the very act of adultery. The way Jesus responds to her may surprise you.

1. Have you ever been kept after school for detention? Interrogated by the police? Been in the wrong place at the wrong time? Were you guilty or innocent?

2. Think of a time when you hurt someone and that person was willing to forgive you. How did it feel to be forgiven?

3. Read John 7:53–8:11. What do we know about the character and motives of those who bring this woman to Jesus?

4. How do you think the woman feels when the men make her "stand before the group" and publicly expose her sin?

5. How do you feel when someone exposes a sin in your life—either privately or publicly?

6. While it is obvious that the woman is guilty, what elements of injustice can you find in this situation?

Question 6. It is obvious that these men were using this woman to trap Jesus. If Jesus had agreed that she should be stoned, he would be authorizing capital punishment, which could only be authorized by the Roman government. In addition, he would appear to be supporting an unpopular position that would seem to contradict his reputation for compassion and willingness to forgive. But if Jesus set her free, he would have set himself in opposition to the Law of God. Where is the man involved? (The Law prescribed that both of them should be stoned, see Deut 22:22.) Perhaps he escaped, but it is also possible that the Pharisees were not concerned about him because he did not suit their purposes. It may also be the case that they deliberately set her up with someone they knew, for the express purpose of using her to test Jesus. In any case, their concern was more about tripping Jesus up than it was holding to God's Law.

"Although capital punishment by stoning is still meted out today in some Muslim countries for the offence of adultery, there is little evidence that it was carried out very often in first-century Palestine, especially in urban areas. John suggests as much: the authorities were not interested in the intrinsic merits of this case, still less in assuring that justice be done and be seen to be done, but were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him."
(Carson, *Gospel According to John*, 335.)

7. In your opinion, what was Jesus writing in the dirt?

Question 7. "There is no hint of why he wrote or what he wrote ... One suggestion is that He wrote the words He later spoke. In other words His sentence was written as well as pronounced ... T. W. Manson is of this opinion. He says, 'the action of Jesus might be explained from the well-known practice in Roman criminal law, whereby the presiding judge first wrote down the sentence and then read it aloud from the written record ... Jesus defeats the plotters by going through the form of pronouncing sentence in the best Roman style, but wording it so that it cannot be executed.' An ancient opinion is that Jesus wrote the sins of the accusers (cf. Job 13:26)" (Morris, *According to John*, p. 888 and note).

Another ancient interpretation in the church was that he wrote part of Jeremiah 17:13, "Those who turn away from you will be written in the dust because they have forsaken the LORD, the spring of living water."

Obviously, what Jesus wrote or whether he was writing anything at all is one of those questions that we will never know unless we are able to ask Jesus or the woman herself in eternity. What we do know and must focus on is what he said, If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her."

8. The Pharisees and teachers were often very self-righteous. Why do you think they went away rather than stoning the woman (vv. 7–9)?

9. Why are we tempted to condemn other people's sins rather than our own?

Read Matthew 7:1-5. What do these verses say about the danger of hypocrisy?

10. How would you describe Jesus' attitude toward the woman (vv. 10–11)?

11. Do you think Jesus was condoning the woman's sin by not condemning her? Explain.

Nowhere in this discussion does Jesus set aside the Bible's condemnation of sexual sin (in fact, he even strengthened it in his condemnation of lust in Matt 5:27-28). We live in a day in a highly sexualized culture where sexuality is used to sell everything from toothpaste to automobiles. Sexual freedom is celebrated in the lyrics of songs as well as on TV and movies. We can become so accustomed to it that we become desensitized to the dangers of sexual sin. However, the Bible has a lot to say about the tragic consequences of sexual sin, which is defined by the Bible as all forms of sex outside the confines of marriage. See 1 Cor. 6:13, 18; Eph. 5:3; Col. 3:5; 1 Thess. 4:3; Heb. 13:4.

12. If you were the woman, how would you feel as you left Jesus' presence?

13. What can we learn from this passage about Christ's attitude toward us—even when we feel awful about ourselves?

What does it teach us about forgiving and accepting others?
