

## The Forgiveness Question: Who Will Cast the Stone?

Series: *The Questions of Easter*

John 8:2-11

February 10, 2016

Lent. Some wonder what it is (it's not what you find in your dryer; that's spelled differently!)

Lent is the 40 days (not including Sundays) that the Christians observe in preparation for the suffering, death, then resurrection of Christ.

Lent is a time of self-denial and discipline. Some people give something up – candy, pop, Facebook, etc. – for Lent.

Lent is a time of tradition. Some people eat fish on Friday, or wear ashes on their forehead.

Lent is a time of repentance. Some people examine their hearts and ask for forgiveness for what they have done.

Lent is a time for reflection. Some people consider if their actions, thoughts, and values represent who God calls them to be. They ask questions of themselves.

In the Gospel of John, there are a series of questions that help us understand this journey of Easter towards the cross.

Tonight, we begin by asking "The Forgiveness Question: Who Will Cast the Stone?"

One day a visitor leaned on the old fence around a farm while he watched an old farmer plowing with a mule. After a while, the visitor said, "I don't like to tell you how to run your business, but you could save yourself a lot of work by saying, 'Gee' and 'Haw' to that mule instead of just tugging on those lines." The old farmer pulled a big handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his face. Then he said, "Reckon you're right, but this animal kicked me five years ago and I haven't spoke to him since."

I saw this on Facebook the other day:

You know, we can laugh about forgiveness, but in truth, it is very serious business, as it was in tonight Gospel passage:

*Early the next morning he was back again at the Temple. A crowd soon gathered, and he sat down and taught them. As he was speaking, the teachers of religious law and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery. They put her in front of the crowd. "Teacher," they said to Jesus, "this woman was caught in the act of adultery. The law of Moses says to stone her. What do you say?"*<sup>1</sup>

What's interesting here right off that bat is that this sin of adultery cannot be committed alone, so the question arises as to why only one offender was brought. The answer is that incident was staged to trap Jesus,<sup>2</sup> and provision had been made for the man to escape.<sup>3</sup>

So, the religious leaders' main desire was to trap Jesus, not to purge Jerusalem of its moral evils. Had they desired sincerely to abolish the immoralities of the city, they would not have come to Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> John 8:2-5 (NLT)

<sup>2</sup> See John 8:6

<sup>3</sup> NIV Study Bible, John 8:3

They didn't care about the women. Their whole attitude toward her was one of cruelty. The woman's accusers must have been especially eager to humiliate her, since they could have kept her in private custody while they spoke to Jesus. She, disheveled and sullen, "caught in the very act of adultery"<sup>4</sup> was catapulted into the center of a public assembly, and her sin was shouted aloud for all to hear. There was not one syllable spoken in compassion for her, guilty as she was. She was merely the bait for the trap by which they hoped to take Jesus.<sup>5</sup>

And this is the trap. First, the Romans did not allow the Jews to carry out death sentence<sup>6</sup>, so if Jesus had said to stone her, he could have been in conflict with the Romans<sup>7</sup> and the multitudes would feel that He no longer sympathized with sinners. If He took issue with the scribes and Pharisees, they would attack Him as a lawbreaker and a defamer of the Mosaic covenant.<sup>8</sup>

It seems Jesus is in a no-win scenario. What will He do?

*They were trying to trap him into saying something they could use against him, but Jesus stooped down and wrote in the dust with his finger. They kept demanding an answer, so he stood up again and said, "All right, but let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone!" Then he stooped down again and wrote in the dust.*<sup>9</sup>

Jesus stooped down and started writing in the sand. At first, this infuriated the scribes and Pharisees. It says, "They kept demanding an answer..."<sup>10</sup> The tense of the verb here means that they prodded Him repeatedly to make Him commit Himself.<sup>11</sup>

Then He said, "All right, stone her. But let those who have never sinned throw the first stones!" Then he stooped down again and wrote in the dust."<sup>12</sup>

The pronouncement of Jesus "...let those who have never sinned throw the first stones"<sup>13</sup> was a searching judgment of the scribes and Pharisees. According to Mosaic Law which they had quoted, the witness of a crime, who brought it to the tribunal, must be the first to cast the stones.<sup>14</sup>

By the challenge that Jesus flung out, the accusers themselves were put into the jaws of a dilemma. If they were sinless, how had they qualified as witnesses? You see, compromising circumstances were no sufficient evidence; Jewish law required witnesses who had seen the act.<sup>15</sup> If they had not seen the act of adultery committed, they couldn't be the first to cast a stone. If they had seen the sin committed, then they were guilt themselves, first of not following the Law they quoted. The law required that both parties to adultery be stoned.<sup>16</sup> And second, if they had witnessed the adultery, it was obvious they were part of the entrapment. And if they were not sinless, how could they consistently condemn the woman?

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<sup>4</sup> John 8:4 (NLT)

<sup>5</sup> Merrill C. Tenney, "John: The Gospel of Belief". Eerdman's Publishing, Grand Rapids, MI, 1976, p 140

<sup>6</sup> See John 18:31

<sup>7</sup> NIV Study Bible, John 8:6

<sup>8</sup> Merrill C. Tenney, "John: The Gospel of Belief". Eerdman's Publishing, Grand Rapids, MI, 1976, p 139.

<sup>9</sup> John 8:6-8 (NLT)

<sup>10</sup> John 8:7 (NLT)

<sup>11</sup> Merrill C. Tenney, "John: The Gospel of Belief". Eerdman's Publishing, Grand Rapids, MI, 1976, p 139.

<sup>12</sup> John 8:7-8 (NLT)

<sup>13</sup> John 8:7 (NLT)

<sup>14</sup> Merrill C. Tenney, "John: The Gospel of Belief". Eerdman's Publishing, Grand Rapids, MI, 1976, p 141

<sup>15</sup> NIV Study Bible, John 8:4

<sup>16</sup> See Leviticus 20:10; Deuteronomy 22:22

“Let those who have never sinned throw the first stones!”<sup>17</sup> This is a significant statement about judging others. It was a striking demonstration of Jesus’ own words: “Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.”<sup>18</sup>

Because Jesus upheld the legal penalty for adultery, stoning, he could not be accused of being against the law. But by saying that only a sinless person could throw the first stone, he highlighted the importance of compassion and forgiveness. When others are caught in sin, are you quick to pass judgment? To do so is to act as though you have never sinned. It is God’s role to judge, not ours. Our role is to show forgiveness and compassion.<sup>19</sup>

What was Jesus writing in the sand? No one knows. He could have been writing out the Ten Commandments. Maybe He was writing specific sins, then looking directly at each accuser who had that sin in their life.

Whatever He wrote, it had an effect.

*When the accusers heard this, they slipped away one by one, beginning with the oldest, until only Jesus was left in the middle of the crowd with the woman.*<sup>20</sup>

When Jesus said that only someone who had not sinned should throw the first stone, the leaders slipped quietly away, from oldest to youngest. Evidently the older men were more aware of their sins than the younger. As they filed out shamefully one by one, they tacitly confessed their own guilt, and proved that they were in no position to act as judges of others.<sup>21</sup>

Imagine the woman, trying to hide her nakedness, waiting for the impact of the first stone, only to hear, one by one, the stones, as each was dropped to the ground.

On March 22, 1824 an incident took place in Madison County, Indiana, which came to be known as the Fall Creek Massacre. Six white men murdered nine Seneca and Miami Indians and wounded another. Among the nine dead were three women and four children. The six men were apprehended and tried and some were executed. One of the men named John Bridge Jr. was sentenced to death by hanging for his part in the massacre. He was to be executed on June 3, 1825. His father, John Bridge Sr. and another man named Andrew Sawyer, who was John Bridge Jr.’s uncle, were also to be executed that day.

John Bridge, Jr., along with a large crowd, witnessed the hangings of his father and uncle as the crowd waited expectantly for a pardon from the governor. With no sign of a pardon, a sermon was preached as the crowd waited expectantly. Finally, John Bridge, Jr. was lead to the gallows and the rope was lowered over his head.

But as the men waited for a signal, a cheer arose from the back of the crowd. A stranger rode forward and looked the condemned man in the face. “Sir, do you know in whose presence you stand?” Bridge shook his head. “There are but two powers known to the law that can save you from hanging by the neck until you are dead, dead, dead; one is the great God of the Universe, the other is J. Brown Ray, Governor of the State of Indiana; the latter stands before you...” Handing over the written pardon, the governor

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<sup>17</sup> John 8:7 (NLT)

<sup>18</sup> Matthew 7:1-2 (NIV)

<sup>19</sup> Life Application Bible Notes, John 8:7

<sup>20</sup> John 8:9 (NLT)

<sup>21</sup> Merrill C. Tenney, “John: The Gospel of Belief”. Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids, MI, 1976, p 141

announced, "You are pardoned." In an instant, what had looked like a hopeless situation became a door of hope. John Bridge Jr. went back home, settled down, opened a dry goods store and died peacefully, 51 years later!

I tell that story to ask this question: Can you imagine the fear that must have gripped the heart of that young man as he watched his father and his uncle die, knowing that he was next. Can you imagine the terror as he was led onto the gallows and that noose was placed around his neck? It must have been a moment of terror like few have ever experienced!

But, I know one person who had experienced that feeling. This poor sinful woman; she knew that kind of fear. As she is led trembling into the presence of Jesus, she knows in her heart that she is about to die a horrible death by stoning. However, her path had led her into the presence of "the great God of the universe". And, when she met Him, everything changed, forever!<sup>22</sup> She had hope for a clean slate.

*Then Jesus stood up again and said to the woman, "Where are your accusers? Didn't even one of them condemn you?" "No, Lord," she said. And Jesus said, "Neither do I. Go and sin no more."*<sup>23</sup>

Jesus' method of judging sin can be contrasted with that of His foes. They brought the woman in as a captive; He questioned her as a free person. They regarded her as an accessory to their convenience; He respected her as a human being. They saw only the blackness of her past – "caught in the act"; He thought in terms of her future – "Go and sin no more." They were eager to stone her; He was ready to save her. Yet His unwillingness to condemn her was not laxity on His part. His very words of forgiveness indicated that He considered her a sinner.<sup>24</sup>

It is very important that we should understand just how Jesus did treat this woman. It is easy to draw the wrong lesson altogether and to gain the impression that Jesus forgave lightly and easily, as if the sin did not matter. What he said was: "I am not going to condemn you just now; go, and sin no more." In effect what he was doing was not to abandon judgment and say, "Don't worry; it's quite all right." What he did was, as it were, to defer sentence. He said, "I am not going to pass a final judgment now; go and prove that you can do better. You have sinned; go and sin no more and I'll help you all the time. At the end of the day we will see how you have lived."

Jesus didn't condemn the woman accused of adultery, but neither did he ignore or condone her sin.

Jesus gave her second chance. It is as if Jesus said to the woman: "I know you have made a mess of things; but life is not finished yet; I am giving you another chance, the chance to redeem yourself." Someone has written the lines:

*How I wish that there was some wonderful place  
Called the Land of Beginning Again,  
Where all our mistakes and all our heartaches  
And all our poor selfish grief  
Could be dropped like a shabby old coat at the door,*

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<sup>22</sup> From a sermon by Carl Allen, "A Terrifying Moment" 7/6/2009, downloaded March 29, 2011 from <http://www.sermoncentral.com>

<sup>23</sup> John 8:10-11 (NLT)

<sup>24</sup> Merrill C. Tenney, "John: The Gospel of Belief". Eerdman's Publishing, Grand Rapids, MI, 1976, p 141-142

*And never put on again.*

In Jesus, there is the gospel of the second chance. He was always intensely interested, not only in what a person had been, but also in what a person could be. He did not say that what they had done did not matter; broken laws and broken hearts always matter; but he was sure that every one has a future as well as a past.

Jesus told her to leave her life of sin. Jesus stands ready to forgive any sin in your life, but confession and repentance mean a change of heart. With God's help we can accept Christ's forgiveness and stop our wrongdoing.<sup>25</sup>

Paul wrote in Romans 8:1,

*"So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus."<sup>26</sup>*

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<sup>25</sup> Life Application Bible Notes, John 8:11

<sup>26</sup> Romans 8:1 (NLT)