

Message #30

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John

7/15/2018

JESUS, FRIEND OF SINNERS

JOHN 7:53-8:11

I.

A publication in England years ago had a contest in which its readers were challenged to come up with the best definition of "friend." Among the responses were these: (PROJECTOR ON--- #1 FRIEND IS...) "**A friend is one who understands my silence.**" Not bad. Another one was this: (#2 A FRIEND IS...) "**A friend is one who multiplies joy and divides grief.**" That's pretty good, isn't it? The definition that won the prize was this: (#3 A FRIEND IS..) "**A friend is one who comes in when everybody else has gone out.**" (repeat) We can see why that one was chosen.

President John Adams wrote when he was a younger man: (ADAMS QUOTATION) "**Friendship is one of the distinguishing glories of man. From this I expect to receive the chief happiness of my future life.**" For a time John Adams and Thomas Jefferson were estranged from each other. But in their later years their earlier friendship was renewed. They regarded each other as the closest of friends. In one of the great ironies of American history, they died on the same day. In a great double irony, that day was July 4, 1826.

The Bible describes friendship in a number of places. (PROVERBS 18:24) In Proverbs #18 v. 24 we are told, "**...there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.**" Jesus declared in the New Testament in the Gospel of John (JOHN 15:13) #15 v. 13, "**Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.**" That is true friendship. That love was displayed when Jesus died on the cross, proving that He was indeed the friend of sinners.

During His earthly life Jesus said this (MATTHEW 11:19) about Himself: "**The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'**" Such it is that Jesus became known as the friend of sinners. The religious leaders of His day were not happy about that. They knew that the God of the Bible was portrayed as just and righteous. They knew that their people were under the authority of Gentiles because their ancestors had strayed from the righteousness described in God's law.

So when Jesus came along and hung out with sinners, legitimate questions were raised. How can one who claims to be sent from God, who at times claims to be equal with God, hang out with the most disreputable elements of society? How can God be both just and loving. (PROJECTOR OFF) How is that supposed to work out in us who claim to be His followers? Such is the issue in the passage before us this morning. How can a just God be the friend of sinners? And how are we, as the followers of Jesus, supposed to balance a concern for righteousness and love?

I.

We come then to our passage that begins in v. 53 of #7 in the Gospel according to John. That is found on p. 894 in the black Bibles under many of the chairs. We will consider first THE STORY WITHOUT A HOME. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE STORY WITHOUT A HOME) Verse 53 in #7 and v. 1 of #8 tell us, **“They went each to his own house, but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.”**

There is one aspect of this passage and this story which makes it unique in the history of the Bible. It is not found in the earliest copies of the Bible, in this case, in the copies of the New Testament. It is absent from the earliest Greek copies of the Gospel of John, and it is absent from the earliest copies of the New Testament in other languages, such as Syriac and Coptic and Armenian. Also the earliest church leaders who wrote commentaries on the New Testament make no mention of this passage. When they are writing about John’s Gospel, they skip from v. 52 of #7 to #8 v. 12.

When this passage and this story does show up in copies of the New Testament a couple of centuries later, it most often appears here in John. But it also is found in some manuscripts after v. 36 of #7 and after v. 44 of #7 in other manuscripts. In a few manuscripts, it is found after Luke #21 v. 38. We saw last week in the concluding passage of #7 that Jesus’ dramatic declaration in the temple came on the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles. On the next day, religious pilgrims began to head home. But the story here seems to assume that there is still a big crowd in the temple. The story that follows this one also seems to assume that the crowd at the Feast of Tabernacles is still present in Jerusalem.

Scholars have also pointed out that there are language uniquenesses about the passage before us. Verse 1 speaks of Jesus going to the Mount of Olives. That mountain is not elsewhere mentioned in John’s Gospel. Verse 3 speaks of “the scribes and the Pharisees.” The term “scribes” appears numerous times in the other three Gospels. But the Apostle John does not use this term anywhere else in his Gospel.

Jerome in the late 300s AD included the story in his Latin translation of the Bible. This Latin Vulgate became the Bible used by the Catholic Church for centuries. Thus this story became a part of Christian tradition. Other scribes around the time of Jerome and later used asterisks and other notes to indicate that there was something different about this story, and to suggest that they were uncertain about where it should be included in the New Testament. But the story did appear to be widely known.

In the very last verse of John's Gospel (JOHN 21:25), the Apostle tells us this: **"Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written."** This may well be one of those stories. The question is whether it should be included in our Bibles. There is a split among students of the Bible about whether it should be included and about whether it is inspired by the Holy Spirit. There is a general consensus that this is a true story. (PROJECTOR OFF) So perhaps a good way to look at it is that if it is a true story, and if this is an exact, or even fairly accurate, account of what did happen, then this story has value to us. It provides us with additional information about the character and actions of Jesus.

The exact setting for this story is uncertain. For the reasons that I mentioned earlier, I have doubts about whether it happened here at the end of this Feast of Tabernacles. It could have happened during a feast on another occasion. The other three gospel writers specifically mention that at the Feast of the Passover in the week preceding His death, Jesus and His disciples each evening retired to the Mt. of Olives. So I would guess that the setting for our story was the week preceding the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus.

II.

Let's look then at vv. 2-6 of #8 as we consider THE PROBLEM OF SIN AND JUDGMENTALISM. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. THE PROBLEM OF SIN AND JUDGMENTALISM) In v. 2 we read, **"Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them."**

We have seen in #7 that Jesus taught in the temple on two days of the Feast of the Tabernacles. He also did it on several of the days during the Feast of the Passover, preceding His arrest and crucifixion. In #10 we will find another occasion where Jesus teaches in the temple. So it could have been at any one of these times, or another time, that this story happened. My guess is that it was during the Passover week preceding the Crucifixion.

I pointed out in our study of #7 that it was typical for Jewish rabbis to teach their disciples in the temple compound, especially during the feasts. (JERUSALEM TEMPLE 8) This was done in the courtyard surrounding this inner wall. The reference to all of the people coming to him suggests that there was a crowd around, which would be typical for one of the feasts in the religious calendar of the Jews. Perhaps the setting was the week before Jesus' death. We know from the Gospel records that Jesus taught in the temple during the days of that week. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Verse 3 tells us, **"The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery..."** The text adds that they placed her in the midst of them. "Scribes" is a term that is used for rabbis. Most of them were Pharisees, but not all. A few were Sadducees, like the high priests. There were also some Essenes. The Pharisees were the legalists and traditionalists among the Jews. They had developed detailed applications of what they counted up to be 635 laws in the Hebrew Bible.

We know that the majority of the 71 members of the Sanhedrin, the high council of Judaism, wanted Jesus dead. Probably at least some of these scribes and Pharisees were on that council. Now they brought to Jesus a woman who had been caught in adultery.

The Old Testament law laid out the penalty for people guilty of this sin. (PROJECTOR ON--- DEUTERONOMY 22:22) According to Deuteronomy #22 v. 22, **"If a man is found lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman, and the woman."** The penalty is clear. But immediately we wonder, where is the man? If this couple was caught in the act, why has the man not been brought forward?

The next two verses in Deuteronomy describe a variation of the previous verse. The situation in the next two verses involves an engaged woman. (DEUTERONOMY 22:23) Beginning in v. 23 we read, **"If there is a betrothed virgin, and a man meets her in the city and lies with her (DEUTERONOMY 2:24A) then you shall bring them both out to the gate of that city, and you shall stone them to death with stones..."** The gates of the city was the place in ancient Israel where legal actions were usually taken. The method of execution was death by stoning. (PROJECTOR OFF)

If the woman in this situation had just been caught, then perhaps she was barely clothed. To be brought into a public setting in the temple on a feast day brought another level of humiliation. This was certainly not required by the Old Testament law. There was also no legal basis for bringing this woman to Jesus. He was not a priest. He was not a judge. So clearly this was a setup designed to trap Jesus.

Verse 4 in our passage says, “...they said to him, ‘Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery.’” The woman is objectified. The accusers have little concern for her identity. She is an object to be used for the purposes of these corrupt leaders.

She has been caught in the act. So there is little doubt about her guilt. She is in violation of the Seventh Commandment about adultery. This is bad. Adultery undermines the institution of marriage and the family. In the first century, Judaism regarded idolatry and murder and adultery as the three worst sins. Even today in our sex-saturated society, adultery is recognized as morally wrong. In the view of our culture, sex outside of marriage may be permissible and normal, but sex with another person’s mate is still recognized as wrong.

In v. 5 the accusers say to Jesus, “Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?” The sin of this woman is clear. The penalty required by the Old Testament law is clear. Jesus claims to be the Son of God. He says that He is sent by God. He has told the Jews that He has come to fulfill the law. So how could He now go against it?

Verse 6: “This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him.” The motivation of these accusers is clear. This is a trap. They are trying to get Jesus. They have created a situation in which there appear to be only two possible answers to a loaded question. If Jesus is a legitimate rabbi and a defender of the law of God, then He must support the penalty required by the law for adultery. If He does not call for the death penalty, then He is opposing the law of God, and He cannot really be sent by God. He can’t be the Messiah or even a true prophet.

But to call for the stoning of this woman entails a couple of problems. For one thing, in the first century the Romans controlled the province of Judea. The Roman governor alone had the power to call for the death penalty, and that was normally reserved for crimes against Rome. Adultery did not fall into that category. So to call for the death penalty would get Jesus in trouble with the Roman authorities. Then also there was the issue of Jesus’ popularity. He had acquired some support from the masses for His opposition to the religious establishment. He had become known as a friend of sinners. To call for the death of this woman and to side with the establishment might affect the reputation of Jesus.

The real motivation of the accusers is to nail Jesus. This woman is merely a pawn, an instrument in their hands to get Jesus. In this “Me Too,” Harvey Weinstein era, women are still too often treated as pawns

by men in power. Even the supposedly liberal Hollywood types who profess to be defenders of the rights of women have proven too often to treat women as pawns for their sexual gratification. But then on the political right, some powerful men at Fox News have also treated women as pawns. The problem has not gone away.

Still this woman had done wrong, even though this was a setup job. The Biblical penalty was clear. Perhaps because of the political situation, the death penalty was rarely enforced. Divorce was the typical remedy for marital unfaithfulness, as it often is today.

Righteousness should be a concern for God's people. This was certainly the concern of the Old Testament prophets. They railed against the sins of their fellow Jews, including their sins of adultery. Even in the New Testament, God's people are called upon to have high standards of morality. Most of us recognize that our culture is faced with a serious problem, traceable to a decline in moral standards. In the New Testament there are situations where the apostles of Christ call upon churches to discipline their members for failure to live moral lives. One example of this is #5 of the Book of 1 Corinthians, where Paul calls upon a church to discipline a member who has become involved in sexual immorality.

So what will Jesus do in the situation before us? In the second part of v. 6 we read, **"Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground."** All kinds of suggestions have been made about what Jesus wrote on the ground. They have ranged from writing verses from the Old Testament to a pronouncement of guilt to a recitation of the seventh commandment to simple doodling in the dirt. We don't know. Some have suggested that Jesus was primarily trying to slow down the process to provide opportunity for the accusers and the accused to reflect upon their actions.

Jesus is confronted with real sin in this situation. But the sin is not limited to the immoral action of the woman. Probably the greater sin is the conniving and judgmentalism of the scribes and the Pharisees. They are being not only judgmental toward the woman but also toward Jesus. They are plotting to kill their own Messiah.

Such a judgmentalism is still a problem today. God's people are called upon to confront sin, but this entails an awareness that we are all still sinners. We need to be especially careful that our judgmentalism is not directed toward Jesus. We can get mad at Him for some of the circumstances that we face. We can also take to ourselves judgments that only He should make. We can be tempted to condemn our personal enemies and our political opponents and our ex-mates, our ungrateful kids and our conniving coworkers.

III.

Consider then THE PROVISION OF GRACE AND FORGIVENESS (PROJECTOR ON--- III.THE PROVISION OF GRACE AND FORGIVENESS), as it is described in vv. 7-11. According to v. 7, **“And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, ‘Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.’”**

The scribes and Pharisees begin to pester Jesus as he is writing in the dirt. They want an answer. They are convinced that they have caught Him in a trap that they have creatively laid for Him. So Jesus simply says, **“Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.”**

I do not think that Jesus was requiring sinlessness on the part of the accusers for them to be qualified to render judgment. The Old Testament law seemed to require that the death penalty be imposed in certain situations. There are examples in the Hebrew Bible where God commanded specific people to carry out the death penalty. Sinlessness was not a requirement. Soon after God gave the Ten Commandments to the Hebrew people on Mt. Sinai, a flagrant example of working on the Sabbath was found, and God specifically commanded His people to stone the offender.

So I suspect that Jesus was not saying that a sinless person was required to throw a stone at this adulteress. In this situation of adultery, there were certain protections that the law provided for one charged with adultery. In Deuteronomy #19 v. 15 (DEUTERONOMY 19:15), the law from God said, **“A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established.”** It was understood that in a situation of adultery, the two or three witnesses actually had to see the act of adultery taking place. That was a fairly difficult standard to reach. Simply seeing a man and woman not married to each other coming out of a motel room was not sufficient to meet the Biblical standard for execution. So how did that happen in this case?

Deuteronomy #17 v. 7 (DEUTERONOMY 17:7) had this additional requirement: **“The hand of the witnesses shall be first against him to put him to death...”** Were the accusers prepared to actually do this, or were they only wanting to hear an opinion from Jesus about the case? My suspicion is that Jesus was calling their bluff. They were not expecting to be put in the situation of actually carrying out the execution.

There is an additional provision of the Old Testament law that may have some relevance. (EXODUS 23:1B) In v. 1 of Exodus 23 God says, **“You shall not join hands with a wicked man to be a malicious witness.”** The oral tradition said that those who applied justice in a case like this were to be objective in their findings. It is clear that this whole situation was a setup job. The accusers were malicious. They were only concerned about nailing Jesus.

Verse 8 in our text says, **“And once more he bent down and wrote on the ground.”** Jesus again slows things down and provides opportunity for people to think about the situation. Would it not have been fitting if Jesus had written the words of Exodus 23 v. 1 on the ground? Of course, we really don't know what He did write. (PROJECTOR OFF)

But now the accusers have been presented with a challenge by Jesus. The case has, in a sense, been thrown back in their lap. If the woman is guilty and needs to be executed, the law says that the witnesses have to throw stones at her. Can they make a serious claim that they are not malicious witnesses? If they are not, where is the man? Probably at least some of these accusers are members of the Sanhedrin. Do they want other people to be aware that they were sticking their faces in a woman's bedroom? Then if they do stone this woman, and they are members of the Sanhedrin, what is the Roman governor going to say? He alone claims the right to carry out the death penalty. If they follow through on this situation in front of crowds of religious pilgrims, they cannot very well hide what they have done. What will the governor do to them? What will he do to the Sanhedrin? What will fellow members of the Sanhedrin think about what these accusers have done if the governor comes down on the whole council? I suspect that these kinds of thoughts were running through the minds of the scribes and Pharisees as Jesus wrote on the ground.

Verse 9: **“But when they heard it, they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him.”** The wind quickly went out of the sails of the accusers. Jesus called their bluff, and they had to back down. The older ones perhaps were quicker to grasp the danger of the situation and decided to melt away into the crowd. Perhaps some even experienced a twinge of conscience. Jesus spoke with divine authority. Earlier we saw that when the temple police were sent out with a warrant from Jesus, they returned to the officials from the Sanhedrin saying, “No one ever spoke like this man!”

So Jesus and the woman were left alone. Jesus was without sin. He was God in the flesh. He had the right to carry out judgment. But what did He do?

Verses 10 & 11: **“Jesus stood up and said to her, ‘Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?’ She said, ‘No one, Lord.’ And Jesus said ‘Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.’”** If there is to be justice and righteousness in the world, then there must be consequences for sin. There must be a penalty. The Apostle Paul later wrote (PROJECTOR ON--- ROMANS 6:23) in the New Testament book of Romans in #6 v. 23, **“For the wages of sin is death...”** The whole point of the Old Testament system of animal sacrifices was to teach this to the people of God. The consequences of sin is death.

The specific penalty for adultery was death. How could Jesus just blow off the sin of this woman? Adultery is serious. It should have consequences. The penalty for it that God established for it in His Word was death. If this was indeed Holy Week, as I suspect, then a few days later Jesus Himself would pay the penalty for this woman’s sin. He would pay for it by His death on the cross. And He would pay for my sin and for yours.

(1 PETER 2:24) In 1 Peter #2 v. 24 the apostle of Jesus would soon write, **“He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree...”** Because Jesus Christ was fully human, He was able to serve as our representative. Because He was fully God, His sacrifice was able to have universal benefit. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Did the woman respond? Did she accept the offer of forgiveness? We don’t know. It is possible that her judgment was just postponed.

What about us? We are responsible to believe, to accept the divine forgiveness. That is the first application of this whole story. Jesus is a friend of sinners. In His first appearance on this earth He came to save sinners. Because sin is serious and does have horrible consequences and is offensive to the holy God who is there, there must be payment. Righteousness demands it. The Son of God who became man provided the payment for that sin. The issue is whether we will accept it. Our responsibility is simply to trust in Jesus, to receive the gift of salvation that He offers to us.

Most of us have already accepted that gift. Our responsibility is to serve as ambassadors for Christ. That means that we are to promote righteousness and Biblical values. But we are also to exhibit grace and forgiveness. For that grace and forgiveness is the basis of our eternal hope.

That balance between righteousness and grace was exhibited in the conclusion of the Civil War. Last week I mentioned historian James McPherson who called July 4, 1863, the most significant

Independence Day in American history. Princeton historian James McPherson wrote a Pulitzer Prize-winning account of the Civil War entitled *Battle Cry of Freedom*. In it he describes the conclusion of the war at Appomattox Courthouse in Virginia that balanced this concern for righteousness and grace. President Lincoln and General Grant recognized that the war had to be prosecuted and won. Slavery needed to be ended. But grace was also needed.

“The terms [which General Ulysses Grant offered] were generous: officers and men could go home ‘not to be disturbed by U. S. authority so long as they observe their paroles and the laws in force where they may reside.’ This clause had great significance... It guaranteed Southern soldiers immunity from prosecution for treason. Lee asked another favor. In the Confederate army, he explained, enlisted men in the cavalry and artillery owned their horses; could they keep them? Yes, said Grant; privates as well as officers who claimed to own horses could take them home ‘to put in a crop to carry themselves and their families through the next winter.’ ‘This will have the best possible effect upon the men,’ said Lee, and ‘will do much toward conciliating our people.’

“...The surrender completed, the two generals saluted somberly and parted. ‘This will live in history,’ said one of Grant’s aides. But the Union commander seemed distracted. Having given birth to a reunited nation, he experienced a post-partum melancholy. ‘I felt... sad and depressed,’ Grant wrote, ‘at the downfall of a foe who had fought so long and valiantly, and had suffered so much for a cause, though that cause was, I believe, one of the worst for which a people ever fought.’ As news of the surrender spread through Union camps, batteries began firing joyful salutes until Grant ordered them stopped. ‘The war is over,’ he said; ‘the rebels are our countrymen again, and the best sign of rejoicing after the victory will be to abstain from all demonstrations.’ To help bring those former rebels back into the Union, Grant sent three days’ rations for 25,000 men across the lines. This perhaps did something to ease the psychological as well as physical pain of Lee’s soldiers.

“So did an important symbolic gesture at a formal ceremony three days later when Confederate troops marched up to stack arms and surrender their flags. As they came, many among them shared the sentiments of one officer: ‘Was this to be the end of all our marching and fighting for the past four years? I could not keep back the tears.’ The Union officer in charge of the surrender ceremony was Joshua L. Chamberlain, the fighting professor from Bowdoin [College] who won a medal of honor for Little Round Top. [That was a crucial engagement in the Battle of Gettysburg when Chamberlain’s Tenth Maine heroically prevented Confederate forces from rolling up his defensive line at Gettysburg. Chamberlain] had been twice wounded since then, and was now a major general. Leading the Southerners as they marched toward two of Chamberlain’s brigades standing at attention was John B. Gordon, one of Lee’s hardest fighters who now commanded Stonewall Jackson’s old corps. First in line of march behind him was the Stonewall Brigade, five regiments containing 210 ragged survivors of four years of war. As Gordon approached at the head of these men with ‘his chin drooped to his

breast, downhearted and dejected in appearance.’ Chamberlain gave a brief order, and a bugle call rang out. Instantly the Union soldiers shifted from order arms to carry arms, the salute of honor. [This was not something that was to be expected from a conquering army which had suffered many casualties at the hands of its enemies. It was an act of forgiveness and grace.] **Hearing the sound General Gordon looked up in surprise, and with sudden realization turned smartly to Chamberlain, dropped his sword in salute, and ordered his own men to carry arms.”** This act of forgiveness and grace changed the whole tenor of the surrender ceremony. It enabled the work of reconciliation to begin.

Such is the balance that we Christians are to seek in our day. We are to promote righteousness and justice---we are to fight for it, but we are also to look for the opportunity to extend grace and forgiveness. For this is the example that Jesus, the friend of sinners, has left for us.