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Marvel: What Did Jesus Do?

Woman Caught in Adultery
John 8:1-11

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1 but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. 2 Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them. 3 The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst 4 they said to him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. 5 Now in the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?" 6 This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. 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." 8 And once more he bent down and wrote on the ground. 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. 10 Jesus stood up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" 11 She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more" (John 8:1-11).

Have you come to church this morning, broken? Have you come with a burden of sin that is weighing you down? If we are perfectly honest this morning, all of us probably have skeletons in our closet that we would never want anyone to know about. How would you feel if all that were dragged out in the open for all the world to see?! That's exactly what happened to the woman in our story today. And then she met the Savior!

We are in a series this morning from the book of John entitled "Marvel!" and we're going to see in our story today a picture of the most lovely, most attractive, most marvelous person in the universe, but a person who has been misunderstood, misconstrued, misjudged, misinterpreted, and misrepresented ever since he stepped foot onto our planet.

Many people in our society today are turned off by Christians because they feel Christians are too judgmental. Tolerance has become the unquestioned bedrock of our society and we don't like people who tell us what we should be doing or, more irritatingly, what we should not be doing. The Church is seen as a group of people who do just that, who stick their noses where they don't belong. And so many are not interested in even coming to church. Even some in the church, and maybe you're one of those, are driven away from it because it feels so critical of others. Let me suggest, though, that the question, properly, isn't whether Christians are judgmental but whether their leader is.

Is Jesus judgmental? In our story today is a woman, caught in an act that most societies in most places of the world consider wrong. And Jesus doesn't judge her! John began his gospel with, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. . . For the Law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:14, 17). The marvelous glory of Jesus is in his grace and his truth.

Excursus on the Text

You may have noticed some special brackets around our text for today in your Bible. If you're the kind that likes to read footnotes, your Bible may say something like, "Some manuscripts do not include 7:53-8:11." What is going on here?

Something pretty big, actually—big enough that we need to head down this trail for a few minutes. It has to do with what scholars call textual criticism, a topic that Pastor Mark wanted me to tackle this morning, in light of our passage. The upshot of it is that this particular story was in all likelihood not written by John or meant by him to be a part of his gospel. What in the world?!

In the providence of God, we don't have any of the original documents, the actual pieces of paper, or papyri, that the Bible writers wrote their books on. Since the invention of the printing press was still a good 1,400 years away from Jesus's time, the only way to get additional copies of what the biblical writers had written was to handwrite another copy. You can well imagine that over time and distance, during that process of copying, minor differences began to appear in the manuscripts, due to human error. So instead of having, for instance, *the* copy that John wrote of his gospel, we now have copies of copies of copies of his book, that were written well after John wrote the original. The way we get back to what John actually wrote, to reconstruct it, if you will, is to compare all these copies. This is actually quite a precise science. Because we have several thousand of these manuscripts, ranging from the second to the tenth century A.D., by careful analysis and comparison, we can come up with what almost certainly was what John actually wrote.

But before you freak out, know that this isn't a problem for the Bible alone; it is true for all ancient literature, and is the only way we know any ancient history at all. Do you believe in Plato? We have only seven copies of his works—the oldest one from the tenth century A.D., 1,200 years after him. We have ten of Julius Caesar's *Gallic Wars*—none earlier than the tenth century. We have forty-nine of Aristotle and 643 of Homer's "Iliad," and yet we take their works as historically accurate.

Consider that we have over five thousand copies of the New Testament, with 99.5 percent accuracy.

All that to say, there are still a few minor things we are not sure about in the biblical text: a pronoun here, a verb tense there, a number over there; but nothing that impacts the meaning or the theology of the text in any way. And the more messes that are discovered, the closer we get to the original. It is far and away the best-attested book of ancient literature.

This problem comes to bear in our passage for today. Here, briefly, are the reasons most scholars don't think it was written by John:

1. It is not in most of the older, best-attested manuscripts
2. The writing style is unlike John's; thirteen words are used in these twelve verses that are used nowhere else in John
3. It does not fit well in the context of John 7:52, which flows better straight into John 8:12. In fact, this story appears in five different places in John in various manuscripts.
4. All the early church fathers omit this narrative, and it is not even in the Bibles or commentaries of the Eastern Church for its first thousand years.

Bruce Metzger summarizes this by saying, “The committee of the United Bible Societies’ Greek New Testament was unanimous that the pericope was originally no part of the Fourth Gospel.”

So, if I were you, I’d have at least three other questions by now:

1. If it’s not in the Bible, where did it come from?

As you can imagine, lots of things that Jesus did and taught are not in the Bible. In fact, John says at the end of his gospel that he supposes that if everything Jesus did had been written in the Bible, the world could not contain the books! Our story for this morning almost certainly happened, and somebody did write it down. It just wasn’t written down, as best we can tell, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to make it authoritative Holy Scripture.

2. How much else of the Bible falls into this category?

Answer: Very little. Mark 16:9-16 is the only other extended passage that lacks solid textual consensus, and a few other verses here and there.

3. If it’s not in the Bible, why’s it in my Bible? And why are we studying it this morning?

When the King James Bible was translated in 1611, they didn’t have all the manuscripts that have been discovered by archeologists since then. So, at that time they felt that this passage belonged in John’s Gospel. That’s why Metzger, again, speaking of the United Bible Societies’ committee, says that, “In deference to the evident antiquity of the passage a majority decided to print it in the Greek New Testament, enclosed within double square brackets.”

As to why we should study it, D. A. Carson says, “There is little reason for doubting that the event here described occurred, even if in its written form it did not in the beginning belong to the canonical books.” Leon Morris goes on to add: “But if we cannot feel that this is part of John’s Gospel we can feel that the story is true to the character of Jesus. Throughout the history of the church it has been held that, whoever wrote it, this little story is authentic. It rings true. It speaks to our condition. It is thus worth our while to study it, though not as an authentic part of John’s writing” (p. 883).

So today we read a story about Jesus that almost certainly happened, but it doesn’t have the canonical authority of the rest of the Bible. And so, since everything we do here at College Park Church is based on the Bible, our hermeneutical method (interpretation) will be this: we’re going to see what this true story tells us about Jesus and then preach those points from other passages in the inspired Bible. If you have further questions on this, just email Mark Vroegop from the church website.

In this story, we find three characteristics of Jesus to marvel at.

Marvel at His Wisdom (vv. 1-8)

Jesus’s enemies were jealous of his popularity. The best way they could think to take him out was to get him to say something that would turn the people against him; then they could post it on Twitter and he would be finished (v. 6). It is more than obvious that the scribes and Pharisees were not the least interested in seeing true justice executed. It was a trap for Jesus, plain and simple. And it was a good one.

It seemed clear that the woman was guilty—caught in the act. And he knew as well as they did what the Law of Moses said, in Deut. 22:22-24 and Lev. 20:10, that adultery was a capital crime. So, if he says to let her go, they can accuse him of not following the Law of Moses. But if he allows the Jews to execute

her, he will be going against the laws of Rome—the overlords of Israel at this point in history, who reserved capital punishment for their courts. Does he obey the Law of Moses or of Caesar?

So, what does he do? Kids, tell your parents your solution! Here are some options:

- 1 there was obviously something fishy going on here because as we all know it takes two to tango, and he could have called them on it and asked, where is the man? Notice the extreme male chauvinism in the culture of the day.
2. He could say, “none of my business, go to your own judges.” But he doesn’t attack his attackers; he doesn’t evade responsibility. This marvelous man bent down and wrote in the dirt (v. 6b).

Now everybody wants to know what it is that he wrote, but the simple fact is that if God has wanted us to know what he wrote, he would have told us. Possibly, he wrote to give folks a chance to cool down. Maybe he was deflecting attention from the embarrassed, perhaps scantily-clad woman. When the religious leaders realize he is not going to answer them, they ask him again, “You, what do you say?” And now he shows his profound wisdom. He says something no one else would have thought of, something that was not even in the law: let the one who is without sin be the first to cast a stone at her.

The thrust of Christ’s statement was this: “Judgement is for God alone to make. None of you is in a position to stone this woman, for you have disregarded the very law you profess to honor.” Who are you, sinner, to judge your fellow human being?

They realize that for every one of their fingers pointing at her, three are pointing back at them. While they might not have done the exact same sin as she had, they could not deny that they had themselves indeed broken God’s holy Law. As James 2:10 says, “For whoever keeps the *whole law* and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of *breaking* all of it.” They realized that they were, at the core of it, just as bad as she—and so, less interested now in her sin than their own, they dropped their case and walked away. As the significance of His words sunk in, the men slunk out. And now, instead of them catching him, he has caught them! This is a good lesson in humility: we either are, have been, or may be what we so easily condemn in others.

Do you recall another time when Jesus’s opponents tried the same trick? In Matthew 22, they asked Jesus if Jews should pay taxes to Caesar. The dilemma was similar: if he said yes, the Jews would reject him for not being a patriot; if he said no, they could turn him over to the Roman authorities for sedition. Just when they thought they had him, he flipped the board and with one simple move checkmated them by asking them to show him a coin and asking whose inscription is on it. Then he made this famous statement, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” His enemies were dumbfounded; they had no answer. “When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away” (Matt. 22:22)

In this mental battle, they realized that they were punching way above their weight. They were trying to take on the one who is the wisdom of God, who was the workman at God’s side when he marked out the foundations of the earth and laid the beams of the heavens, the one in whom lies all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col. 2:3). Believe me, you don’t want to tangle with this God-Man, now or ever. This man knows literally everything!

Some of you are not yet followers of Jesus or are wavering in your faith, because you have some very legitimate and deep questions about Christianity. Such as the questions about the text of the Bible we have already mentioned. Or the canon of the Bible. O: “Why is there evil in the world?” and, “The Bible

has unscientific things in it.” You might even ask, “Isn’t eternal hell too harsh a punishment?” Hard questions, important questions. Those are fine to ask. God is not afraid of your questions! He is the one who made you and gave you even the ability to reason! Keep asking, searching. There are answers—not necessarily iron-clad, but enough for a reasonable person to accept.

But here’s what I would warn you against: thinking that you are smarter than your Creator. Don’t get into the brain game with God. Just because you don’t understand him doesn’t mean you’re smarter than he is. It would be like a first grader criticizing Einstein for a mistake in his theory of relativity. On the last day, when everything is finally clear and God is vindicated in his wisdom, I would not want to be in the position of having one day thought that I was smarter than God. He is as much wiser than we are as the sun is higher than an anthill—even if he keeps some of his ways and his purposes cloaked in mystery for now.

For those of you who have, by faith, submitted to Jesus, you may be facing a situation in life that seems intractable. Remember—nothing is unsolvable for God. So, turn to him, ask for his wisdom. He will not rebuke you but will give it to you generously (James 1:5).

Marvel at His Mercy (vv. 9-11a)

This woman was guilty. She had no case to plead—had been caught in the act. She deserved punishment, and, yes, according to the Law of Moses, she—and her paramour—should have been executed. By the way, aren’t you glad that the New Testament doesn’t reiterate this punishment for adultery? But don’t make the mistake of thinking it’s not a serious sin. In fact, God’s punishment of stoning for adultery in the old covenant is a potent reminder to us of how seriously God takes the act of sex and the marriage covenant. I suspect there are some in my hearing who are right now having an affair or are thinking about it. My word to you is *flee*, like a bird from the snare. The wages of sin is death. Listen to Proverbs 6:27-29: “Can a man carry fire next to his chest and his clothes not be burned? Or can one walk on hot coals and his feet not be scorched? So is he who goes in to his neighbor’s wife; none who touches her will go unpunished.”

But back to our story. There was one in that group in the temple who was without sin and could have cast the first stone. Jesus! If he had started it, just thrown that one first stone, everyone else could have jumped in and soon the woman would have been dead. But he doesn’t! And from this, we learn this important lesson about our marvelous Savior: Jesus wants to redeem before he condemns. He wants to save before he destroys.

Right after the most famous verse in the Bible that declares God’s love for the whole world, it goes on to say, “God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (John 3:17). He came into the world, first, to save sinners. He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. He does not want any to perish but all to come to repentance. He is the Shepherd who seeks out the straying sheep, searches for the lost coin, waits for the prodigal child to return. And when they do, he embraces them in his love. “He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy” (Titus 3:5).

But he requires something first before he forgives. We must realize that not every Bible story has every Bible truth in it, and when we study theology, we must do so by putting all of Scripture together. Jesus

began his ministry by saying this in Mark 1:15, “The time is fulfilled, *and* the kingdom of God is at hand; *repent and believe* in the gospel.”

“Repent!” are Peter’s first words to the crowd on the day of Pentecost when they are cut to the quick by his sermon and ask what they must do (Acts 2:38). “Believe in the Lord Jesus” are the first words out of Paul’s mouth when the Philippian jailer asks him what he must do to be saved (Acts 16:31).

It starts with repentance, admitting we are sinners and deserving of punishment. Not like the haughty woman in London who asked a well-known painter to do her portrait. She added, “And see that the painting does me justice.” Taking one look at the hard features of this brash woman’s face, the painter observed: “Madame, what you need is not justice, but mercy and grace!” Or the Somali Uber driver in London who said he didn’t need a Savior because Muslims are good people and pray five times a day. We must become like G.K. Chesterton who, when he responded to a *London Times* question asking what was wrong with the world, sent this notable reply: “Dear Sirs: in response to your question, ‘What is wrong with the world?’ I am. Yours Truly, G.K. Chesterton.”

Jesus must have seen in this woman a flicker of the only things he requires of all sinners—repentance and faith. You say, “where do you see that in the story?” I see it first in the presence of the woman after all the men had left. Jesus was still bent down, writing in the dirt. She could have easily slipped away with the crowd and “gotten away” with her sin.

But she senses something unique in Jesus, something attractive, something marvelous. And so, she stands there, in the dock, awaiting word from this man, willing to accept whatever sentence he gives her. She put her hope in this man who was given the name “Jesus” because he came to save his people from their sins.

When Jesus asks if any are left to accuse her, she says, “No one, Lord.” A term of respect for a teacher, a ruler; but here, I think, even more. She has come to realize that the one standing before her is one like no other who has ever walked on the face of the earth. And she is ready to leave her fate in his hands. In verse 11, Jesus makes his pronouncement: “Neither do I condemn you.” It was much the same response Jesus gave to the paralytic who was lowered to him on a mat through the roof in Mark 2, “Son, your sins are forgiven you.” Jesus looked with tenderness at this woman and, based on her embryonic faith, forgave her. He took her sins which were like scarlet and made them as white as snow; though they were red like crimson, he made them like wool.

There is one more important point here, a key element of the gospel that is not mentioned in this story. How does his mercy become operative? Let me share with you the story of Tim and Titus. Titus sprayed insect repellent on after being told not to. Then he said “no, I didn’t do it” When Tim asked him to tell the truth, Titus then came to grandpa, grabbed my leg, and said, “I want grandpa.” Is that who Jesus is? A kind grandpa we can run to when we’ve been bad and hope he just sweeps our sin under the carpet? If Tim had said, “that’s okay, grandpa loves you so it doesn’t matter what you did,” it would have made him an inconsistent father. No—disobedience has consequences, or else our words and our wishes have no meaning. So, as a grandparent, I was glad to see that Tim had Titus take a ten-minute time-out inside the house as punishment for disobeying. God is not a wishy-washy, forgetful old grandpa who just ignores our sin if we sidle up to him and grab his pant leg. He who declared that the wages of sin is death has never repealed that law.

And so, the way Jesus saves us is that he came to earth to be our sin-bearer. Our iniquities were laid on him and he, on the cross, paid their full price. He said, "I came not to be served but to serve and to give my life as a ransom for many." Because he gave his life in our place and paid the punishment we were due, he is free to now forgive us and be consistent, be just.

Matthew Henry once said, "The Law, which accuses us and calls for judgment against us, is by the Gospel of Christ made to withdraw. Its demands are answered, and its clamors silenced by the blood of Jesus."

Jesus didn't condemn this woman because he had come to be condemned for her. He wasn't sweeping her sins under the carpet. He was anticipating shedding his blood for her on the cross. That's God's solution for sin—not ignoring or minimizing it but taking it upon himself. Jesus's forgiveness of the adulteress was free, but it was not cheap. It cost him everything, and so we should shudder at the seriousness of our sin.

Sinner, do you have a load of guilt today? Do you, like Lady Macbeth, have the stain of blood on your hands, crushing your conscience, and are you crying "Out, damned spot!"? There is nothing, nothing, you have done that He cannot forgive! His mercy is wide, and it is deep! Jesus has not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. If that's you today, come to Him, as this woman did and receive His marvelous mercy, that He stands willing to give if you would but turn to Him in repentance.

Marvel at His Righteousness (v. 11b)

There is a final, critical point in this encounter: "Go, and from now on sin no more." Jesus came into this world to make an end of sin. Not just the penalty of it, but also the power of it. While Jesus has mercy on any penitent sinner and is willing and able to forgive any sin, he still demands holiness. Because that is who he is. And where he would be, sin must not.

God has standards for his children and they are very high: "Be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). In six words, Jesus told her what Paul said in six chapters in Romans, and then summed up with, "We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?" And yet he never requires what he doesn't enable. He provides what we need in the form of his indwelling Holy Spirit to help us be holy as he is holy. So, to this woman, a brand-new Christ-follower, it would seem, he says in a nutshell 2 Corinthians 5:17, new creature in Christ, old has gone, new has come. What is that "new?" It was what Ezekiel 36 promises: God took out her heart of stone and gave her a heart of flesh, he wrote the Law on her heart now by his Spirit, not just on stones; in her mind, not just in a book. And he has done that for each of us who have received his mercy by repentance and faith.

A quote oft-credited to John Bunyan (1628-1688) says, "Run, John, run, the law commands, but gives us neither feet nor hands. Far better news the gospel brings: It bids us fly and gives us wings." That is the Holy Spirit.

And here's the beautiful thing. God's demand for our holiness is not a burden, it is for our good. Listen to how Scott Hubbard of *Desiring God* describes it, "For all the liberation sin promises, handing ourselves over to it degrades us, dishonors us, dehumanizes us. Sin promises to give us whatever we want, and then leaves us with less than we ever had. Jesus is forward-looking, not past-focused. He is ready to give her a new life, a new identity, and the power to overcome her sin. Jesus is not only

interested in what we've done but also in what we can become. He loves us too much to let us keep living the way we have been."

"Those who give themselves to God find themselves walking in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4). They discover the grand secret that holiness is not a stuffy thing, not a grim thing, not a "religious" thing, but rather, as Thomas Watson puts it, "Heaven begun in the soul. God's servants become more dignified, more ennobled, more of what they were always supposed to be—in a word, more like Christ. Imagine the man with the nail-pierced hands, and then follow him. Come walk in the freedom of the children of God. Come feel the first tremors of eternal life. This life stretches back from eternity to enliven us now, if only in part, as God's Spirit roams through the former wastelands of our souls. Our holiness here is like a flower rising up from the ice, a guarantee of the coming spring when we will stand on God's new earth, immortal and incorruptible, and breathe in the fragrance of eternal life."

Maybe this is the lesson you need today. You've marveled at his wisdom; you've gratefully received his mercy. But you've slipped back into your old lifestyle, you're caught in sin, you're denying by your life the Savior you claim to believe in. Turn back today, receive his forgiveness, and receive his power to live a new life. Sin no more.

Conclusion

So, what do you make of it? Is Jesus judgmental? The best answer to that question is: he will be. Since he is God, he has standards, and he has revealed them to us in his holy Law, and he has never changed his mind or uttered an idle word. He will bring into account all we have done and judge us by his awe-full standards. Revelation 20 tells us of a great white throne before which every single human will one day stand. Books will be opened, a record of everything done by everyone who has ever lived. And the one sitting on that throne will be Jesus. John 5:22, 27 say, "The Father judges no one but has committed all judgment to the Son. . . and has given him authority to execute judgment also, because he is the Son of Man."

But here's the good news: with Jesus, it's always mercy first; then judgment. Though none is more severe against sin, for he is infinitely just and holy, none is more compassionate to sinners than Jesus, for he is infinitely gracious and merciful. The question is, "How do you want to meet him?" For you will meet him! In mercy and grace now? Or in judgment later?

On that great judgment day, there's another book. The Book of Life. If you will receive the mercy of Jesus now by repentance and faith, he will write your name in that book. So that when your name is called and you are standing before that great white throne with heaven and all the world watching and your books are opened, with all those skeletons in the closet ready to come tumbling out, the judge, Jesus Christ, will turn to you and say, "There's nothing here, for I paid it all. You are welcome to enter heaven."

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