

Early in the morning He came again into the temple, and all the people were coming to Him; and He sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery, and having set her in the center of the court, they said to Him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in adultery, in the very act. Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women; what then do You say?" They were saying this, testing Him, so that they might have grounds for accusing Him. But Jesus stooped down and with His finger wrote on the ground. But when they persisted in asking Him, He straightened up, and said to them, "He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." Again He stooped down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they began to go out one by one, beginning with the older ones, and He was left alone, and the woman, where she was, in the center of the court. Straightening up, Jesus said to her, "Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you?" She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "I do not condemn you, either. Go. From now on sin no more."

(John 8:2-11)



SHE WAS GUILTY. As much as she loathed the self-righteous fools conducting her down the street, she had to admit that they were right: She was guilty. But what business was it of theirs anyway? Why should they care? And besides, how did they know to be there, sniffing around her business like a pack of wolves? Who tipped them off?

She smelled a setup, and if she could prove it, she'd make sure their condemnation stuck in their throats like a dirty rag. After all, what did she have to lose? She'd make so much noise that surely *someone* would take notice, and get her off the hook. Then these miserable hypocrites would be forced to crawl back into their empty temple holes.

She was no angel. Didn't pretend to be. But she certainly didn't deserve *this* sort of treatment; her actions didn't warrant this sort of public humiliation. They were taking her to the temple, and a man on either side gripped her arms firmly, making sure she didn't bolt—which she would have, given the opportunity. The hour was so early that most of the streets were silent and bare. A thin mist still hung over the city, like a thin veil masking the ugliness on the other side. A damp chill ran down her back.

In the large Court of the Gentiles a number of people were seated around a teacher. Even at this early hour, they listened intently, held enthralled by every word the man spoke. It was toward this group that her captors moved. Just why, she didn't know. The men rudely interrupted the teacher's instruction. Setting her in the middle of the group, before the teacher, they loudly demanded His attention.

"Teacher," one of the leaders said in a voice as cold and damp as the still morning air, "this woman has been caught in the very act of adultery. The very act! The Law of Moses commands us to *stone* such women. What do *you* say?"

She knew a challenge when she heard one, and she knew enough of politics and temple intrigue to know that this bizarre scene had nothing to do with her—and everything to do with the contempt her captors held for this teacher. But none of that mattered, since she was the pawn in this dark cat-and-mouse game. It was still *her* life on the line.

The teacher said nothing, but leaned down and made some marks in the dirt and gravel covering the stone pavement. From the movements of his hand it seemed that he was forming



letters, but, upside-down to her, she was unable to tell what was being written. His appearance was unremarkable except for its quiet calm before the challenge of these powerful, influential men. She had never seen Him before, and there was little about Him that would have caught her attention on the street. Even so, she sensed a peaceful strength in Him.

Standing in the middle of this group, she was surrounded by an awkward silence. A few of the teacher's students whispered nervously to each other behind her while her accusers shifted uneasily, waiting for some answer to their challenge. Finally one of the men broke the silence. "W—well," he stammered impatiently, "what have you to say?"

"If there is a man who commits adultery with another man's wife, one who commits adultery with his friend's wife, the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death."

(Leviticus 20:10)

to say, *Give us the chance. We'll lead the way.* And she saw her death approaching.

But before the headstrong could act, this curious rabbi bent down and wrote more in the sand and dirt of the temple grounds. Then some of the older men silently turned and walked away. More followed. With relief she realized that this was sapping the blood-hungry energy from the group, and before long even the younger, head-strong members of the pack turned away from her and departed. She suddenly realized that they were all gone, sliding back into the damp morning chill from which they had come. And she was left with the teacher who had, by His words, obtained her release.

When she turned her face up to offer her gratitude, she discovered that He was looking at her. She had no idea what to expect from Him. Would *He* now turn on her, point a long bony finger in her face and denounce her for her immoral acts? or at least for interrupting his teaching?

Instead, in a voice that was neither accusing or forgiving, He said, "Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you?"

"No one, sir," she answered, mystified by her unexpected good fortune.

"Then neither do I. Go on your way, and from now on, sin no more."

With her eyes locked into His, she rose to her feet. Was this man a prophet? Was He just a wise teacher? Did He actually hold the power to change her life? Or was He simply a quick-thinking rabbi who could outfox the Pharisees and scribes. She didn't know. She didn't even know His name. But somehow she felt different—different from even a few moments earlier. She knew that for some mysterious reason this bizarre episode had become a turning point in her sorry life.

Reluctantly the teacher straightened and turned his gaze on them. In a firm, steady voice He answered, "Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."

She recoiled when a few of the younger of her accusers quickly grabbed some small stones lying at their feet and clenched them defiantly in their fists. They shifted forward, as if

As she left the courtyard, lost in her thoughts, the sun broke through the gray mist and bathed the temple in its warm, golden light. The street outside was coming alive, the beginning of another new day. She smiled, and turned toward home.

Compassionate Correction

Because words today have been discounted to the point of meaninglessness, people are in the habit of offering absolution where none is deserved, typified by the following exchange:

A man shows up thirty minutes late for a scheduled appointment. As he slides in the door, he grins and, with a dismissive toss of his head, announces, "Sorry I'm late. Lost track of the time."

The woman with whom he had the appointment, not wishing to make a scene (which would result in even more of her valuable time being wasted), swallows her irritation, smiles weakly, and says, "That's all right."

Well, the man who was late wasn't *really* sorry, and his indifferent tardiness was certainly not "all right." But our society's sense of acceptable behavior has become such a bland pot of wallpaper paste, that people expect to be excused for their behavior without bothering to first apologize.

Jesus never winks at sin. The broad reach of His love for us does not include casual dismissal of our transgressions. But God's wrath was quenched at the cross, so His correction is expressed through a compassionate Savior, rather than through the condemnation of a stern taskmaster.

Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.

(Romans 8:1-2)

Jesus did not declare the adulteress innocent; she neither confessed or repented before Him. Instead He demonstrated for her what life was like in His Kingdom, where wrong is not excused, but dealt with in a loving, respectful way. Shown a loving alternative to the condemnation of the Pharisees and scribes, she was given the opportunity—and incentive—to turn her life around in Christ.

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