

THE SINNER'S FRIEND

John 8:1-11

If you would find the solution of any problem, hear what the Lord Jesus has to say about it, for "never man spake like this man." If you would discover an example of proper conduct toward the unfortunate or the sinful, watch the Lord Jesus at His work with the one or both, for never man wrought as He wrought.

Early one morning Christ Jesus was teaching a group in the area of the temple in Jerusalem. Suddenly He was interrupted by a group--really a mob--of scribes and Pharisees, who pushed their way through the crowd, bringing to Him a woman whom they had caught in the act of adultery. According to the law of Moses (Deuteronomy 22:23-24), such a person should be stoned when her sin was attested to by two persons.

I. The Crime.

"And the scribes and Pharisees brought unto him a woman taken in adultery" (John 8:3). The Scriptures do not seek to minimize her sin, or to employ soft terms in the description of it. Not only was this nameless woman an adulteress, but she had been caught in the act of shame. To be guilty is bad enough, but to be caught is, in the mind of many, worse still. Of course there was a partner who shared her sin, but he is not mentioned or accused, perhaps because in that day there was a double standard of morals. A man exercised rights that a woman did not have.

The truth concerning the woman can be told by declaring that she was a criminal. There is no question whatever about her criminality because she had been caught in the act of sin, which, in the eyes of men in that day, was the supreme sin. Consequently, according to the law of God as it had been enunciated to the people through Moses, she was condemned. Since there was no escape from the fact of her guilt, her attitude was that of sullenness and defiance.

1. The woman's crime was against herself.

What greater loss could she have sustained than that of her character and self-respect?

2. The woman's crime was against society.

Adultery is a word of bad repute. It despises the most sacred relations between men and women; it ignores domestic interests; and it imperils the social order. Society has always been compelled to regard this sin as a crime, and the state or nation that does not legislate against it, and then execute its laws, is doomed. This was the sin that wrecked Rome; it was the moral gangrene of this sin that made for the downfall of Greece; and today the governments of the world are threatened by this social vice as by no other iniquity.

3. The woman's crime was against God.

He Who had home interests at heart, and Who must maintain His own righteous character, had said, "Thou shalt not commit adultery." His command had been trampled under foot by this woman; His honor had been forgotten; and His law had been violated.

II. The Critics.

"And the scribes and Pharisees brought unto him a woman taken in adultery; and when

they set her in the midst, They say unto him, Master, this woman was taken in adultery, in the very act. Now Moses in the law commanded us, that such should be stoned: but what sayest thou?" (John 8:3-5).

1. The critics criticized in unsparing speech.

After waiting until Christ was teaching the assembled group, they dragged this unwilling subject into His presence, and used the darkest word known to them with which to tell the Lord of her crime. The scribes and Pharisees may have been about as well behaved as any people of their time, but they took particular delight in parading the iniquities of others, under the impression doubtless, that they were thereby proving their own righteousness.

2. The critics criticized in an unsympathetic spirit.

"This woman was taken in adultery, in the very act." There was not even a suggestion of sympathy in the direful indictment. In voices loud enough for everybody to hear they shouted the facts of her shame. A mob of hardened, self-righteous people can be coarse and cruel. Those hypocritical scribes and Pharisees greatly enjoyed dragging her before Christ, pointing the accusing finger at her, and wanting to have her put to death. Such great delight was theirs to know that a poor woman had stumbled into sin.

3. The critics demanded the severest penalty--death.

"Now Moses in the law commanded us, that such should be stoned: but what sayest thou? This they did, tempting him, that they might have to accuse him" (John 8:5-6a). It is a pitiful sight to see a sinner in the hands of other sinners. There was not any mercy in those critics, any sparing of details, or any consideration for the one who had done wrong: just an angry demand for the death penalty. It was an evil design perpetrated by those who pretended to be religious. Many people believe in law and order just so long as they can write the laws and give the orders.

These critics clearly revealed their prejudice. They were not so much indignant over the woman's sin as they were concerned about an opportunity to entrap Christ. Under the guise of being zealous for the law of Moses, they violated Moses' law by bringing the woman to Christ and not bringing to Him the man who was probably the aggressor in the act. They brought her to Christ instead of taking her before their own court or the Roman tribunal. They did not recognize the Lord Jesus as a qualified teacher, and yet they bypassed their own constituted authorities in order to get His opinion. They pretended to seek His advice instead of following the clearly stated law of Moses. Their own minds already were made up as to the punishment demanded.

Such did the critics hope to accomplish by their question, "What sayeth thou?" The skilled logicians were really attempting to place Him on the horns of a dilemma.

The Mosaic law definitely stated that a woman guilty of this crime was to be stoned to death. Those critics asked Christ if the law of Moses should be administered in this case, or would He propose another rule for them to go by? Really they were not concerned about this sinful woman, but they were vitally interested in finding some basis on which to bring both religious and civil charges against Christ. They rejoiced in this opportunity of presenting Christ with this dilemma. In the event

that He should say that she should not be stoned to death, they would accuse Him of being an enemy of Moses and charge Him with repudiating or setting aside his law, which prescribed the death penalty. If Christ should agree with Moses and declare that the woman should be executed, He would then be in trouble with the Roman government, whose officials had the sole authority to impose the death penalty upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem at that time. If He should say to let her go, He would be lowering the standards of morality and condoning sin. Either course would destroy His hold upon the people. Thinking that they had Christ in a hopeless predicament, the angry mob shouted, "Shall we stone her?"

Some of you who are listening to me may ask, "What has this to do with me? Why bother me about an incident which happened nearly two thousand years ago?" Actually the issue involved here was one of law versus grace. The law said that she must die. Grace demanded that she receive mercy. Had our Lord said that the law should take its toll, He would have been accused of being unmerciful. Had He counseled—mercy, He would have been accused of encouraging indulgence in sin. Deep in their minds they were thinking, "If you say, 'stone her,' then you are not a person of love and mercy. If you do not say, 'stone her,' then we will crucify you for abrogating the Mosaic law. We have you on the horns of a dilemma. Now what are you going to say?"

III. The Christ.

Christ did not reply to His hypocritical questioners, but stooped and with His finger began writing in the sand. This is one of the loveliest scenes in His life. He was always the perfect gentleman. He knew the woman's embarrassment and so He refused to add to it by looking at her. Some people seem to enjoy another's shame, but not the Lord Jesus. He refused to add to her humiliation and mental agony.

We are told that when Elizabeth Fry visited Newgate Prison in London, where the women were packed in one room like cattle, she was much interested in a girl who had committed a terrible crime. When a woman asked her what crime the girl had committed, Elizabeth Fry declared, "I do not know; I never asked." All that she wanted to know was that this poor, unfortunate girl had made a mistake, and that she needed love to heal the wound and help her to reform. Likewise, Christ turned His eyes away from this woman, shielding her from unnecessary shame, engaged Himself by writing in the sand, instead of humiliating her by fixing His gaze upon her.

Undaunted by His ignoring them, and thinking that perhaps they had puzzled and perplexed Him to such an extent that He did not know what to say, His questioners pressed for an immediate answer. Christ stood erect, looked the mob straight in the eye, removed Himself from the dilemma in which they had placed Him, cut through the tangled web of their hypocrisy, and replied in a way which was different from anyone else. Knowing that they really wanted to murder the Messiah, while pretending that they were shocked by the adultery of this woman, Christ exposed the unfitness of these men to be sitting in judgment on her. He confounded them by saying, "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her." How appropriate that remark was! Christ was willing for any of them who had never committed adultery in their hearts to stone the woman for her sin.

In the presence of the competing laws--the Roman and the Jewish, Christ did not refer to either of them, but He did enunciate an eternal principle. He declared that there was only one condition upon which any should have the right to ultimate judgment and the infliction of punishment, namely, that of sinlessness. When He said to the critics: "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a

stone," the memory of some sin flashed through the mind of everyone of them, and one by one the stones dropped from their hands. They had found in Christ a Judge Who convicted every one of them of sin. They were standing before One to Whom sin is sin, to Whom an attitude may be sin as well as an act may be. The critics had sinned as certainly as their victim had sinned. While her sin was that of the flesh, theirs was the sin of disposition, and perhaps of the flesh also. God does not merely condemn the scarlet sins of the flesh while He condones or ignores the sins of the spirit. He condemns both, but to Him the sins of the spirit are basic. These two kinds of sinners are always with us. There is not a one of us who does not sin. We are accustomed to condemn those who sin after the flesh far more severely than those who sin by their indifference and coldness of heart. But this was not the case with our Lord. He seems to have hated most the sins of the disposition.

Christ suggested equal codes for both sexes. In His days on earth, people actually believed that adultery on the part of a man was to be condoned, but when committed by a woman it was to be condemned, even to the point of her death. With such views Christ did not have any sympathy whatsoever. Christ rose above the prejudices of His time, put both sexes on a common level, and pronounced righteousness for all the centuries.

Again, Christ stooped and wrote in the sand. Realizing their lack of qualification for executing the sinful woman, beginning with the oldest, all of the thoroughly humiliated critics withdrew themselves with the least possible notice from others.

Standing erect again, Christ was alone with the woman who was a sinner. He spoke to her and befriended her with a word of gracious comfort. He ministered to her deepest need in the hour of her supreme humiliation. Out of His redeeming and reclaiming friendship, Christ asked her two questions in quick succession: "Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee?" In answer to His second inquiry, she said, "No man, Lord." Then He said, "Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more."

From this incident, I want to bring out, in closing, a few things about the sinner's Friend.

1. The fairness of Christ.

Christ's fairness did not permit Him to deny the charge which was brought against the woman. He was fair to the men who brought her into His presence; He was fair to the woman whom they brought; and He was fair to Himself.

Christ displayed His fairness by His refusal to permit the charge to be limited. The accusers wanted the charge limited to one woman and one sin, but Christ was fair and would not have it that way. He wanted each person present to know that he was guilty of sin also, and of his own kind of sin. Our Lord never ignores or excuses sin, whether the sin be what some would call a refined one, like pride, arrogance, and temper, or one of the gross sins, like that of adultery. In His consistency the Lord would not confine Himself, or allow the critics to confine Him, to one particular sin. This woman was guilty of a terrible sin, but the sins of her critics were an offense to Him also. Christ is fair always and everywhere.

2. The tenderness of Christ.

Something had to go from the scene before Christ would or could go any further, and that was the men who had accused the woman. Christ wanted to get them out of the way so that He could deal with her. Before Christ can really get anywhere with us, almost always He has to get people out of the way. The critics had to be out of her sight and out of her thoughts before Christ could deal successfully with her. For all practical purposes Christ and that woman were left alone, just the two of them, the sinner and the Friend of sinners. If anyone is going to have his sin dealt with, he wants to be and should be alone with the Lord.

3. The forgiveness of Christ.

Looking into the heart of the woman, and observing there a desperate hurt, pain, and grief, in love and in complete courtesy He spoke to her and said, "Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee?" She answered, "No man, Lord." Those are the only words the woman spoke, so far as we know. She did not make any excuse for her misconduct. She did not attempt to justify herself. She did not blame anybody else for what she had done. She did not say that she was not any worse than a lot of other people, or that some had done worse than she had done. Sorry for her sin, she wanted Christ to forgive her. The others had left and could not condemn her, but the thing that mattered most with her was the reaction of Christ, whether or not He would forgive her.

It was not necessary for Christ to condemn her. Her own conscience had condemned her. Others had already condemned her. The Mosaic law had condemned her. The person who transgressed the law of God is condemned--make no mistake about that. Christ had something far better than condemnation to offer her. He gave her forgiveness. He pronounced absolution for her sin of which she had repented. No sinner ever approached Christ in the spirit which this woman did without receiving forgiveness. Absolution from sin is the speech in which the Saviour delights most. What a wonderful Saviour is He!

4. The holiness of Christ.

After this woman was forgiven, I am confident that she stood erect, with a smile on her face, and a joy in her heart. In this convicted and condemned woman Christ worked the greatest miracle. He did not excuse her sin, or condone it, but He did not have any intention of trying to make her sin something that would be a hindrance to her for the rest of her life. Not wanting her future life ruined, Christ said: "Go, and sin no more." Thus He expressed His expectation. Christ wanted her, and all who read this passage of Scripture, to know that by the grace of God sin can be forgiven, and that sinful habits can be overcome through the power of God. What Christ did for that woman He can and will do for you, if you will repent of your sin and believe on Him as your Saviour.