Freedom to Leave Our Lives of Sin

John 7:53-8:11

Sunday, March 9, 2025

There are very few things that can motivate change in our lives as much as having a brush with death.

Someone who has suffered a heart attack is far more likely to change their eating habits *after* that brush with death than they ever were before it.

Having a brush with death can motivate change.

This is especially the case when it involves being rescued.

I know this from personal experience.

I once made the foolish mistake of going out in a boat a friend lent me without first checking that it had the proper safety equipment aboard.

In the middle of the lake a storm came up and began blowing me towards the cliffs on the unpopulated side of the lake.

The engine wouldn’t start and it was only then, after I was already in danger, that I discovered there were no paddles in the boat, no emergency pull cord for the outboard engine, and no radio or other way to communicate with anyone on shore.

(This was before the days of cell phones).

I was fortunate enough to have people on shore notice my frantic waving and come and rescue me with their boat before I was blown to the other side of the lake and smashed against the rocks.

But after that experience, I changed.

I became highly motivated to know that a boat’s engine is properly maintained, that there are paddles and lifejackets and all the other legally required safety equipment aboard before taking people out in a boat.

That experience changed me.

And I have no doubt that the experience of the woman caught in adultery in this story changed her life too.

And it changed her life in a special way because her rescue from death came by means of Jesus’ forgiveness of her sin, His choice not to condemn her, even though she deserved it.

Now, from a worldly perspective, not condemning sin, not punishing wrongdoing, seems like a bad idea.

It seems like an activity that will give people license to do evil, and multiply wickedness on the earth.

If you know that Jesus will forgive you, why not just indulge in sin even more?

Well, one of the reasons why not is the experiential discovery that sin leads to death, that as attractive as it may look at the time, sin is in fact a gateway to the grave.

People who believe their own sin is harmless or no big deal are quite likely to try to take advantage of Jesus’ forgiveness.

But people whose sin has resulted in a brush with death, either literally or relationally, and who are rescued by an act of forgiveness for their sin,

Those people are almost always highly motivated to obey the final command of Jesus in this passage: to “leave your life of sin.”

And, in addition to this new motivation, Jesus always gives us power, the help of His Holy Spirit, to do what He has commanded.

And this combination of a new and powerful motivation to leave our lives of sin and the help of the Holy Spirit to do it always bears fruit.

It always sets us free from the control of sin in some new way, shape, or form.

The woman in this story didn’t instantly become perfect, she certainly still sinned in other ways.

But her rescue from death by the forgiveness of Jesus undoubtedly changed her and gave her the freedom to leave the adulterous relationship she had been engaging in previously.

Jesus’ forgiveness set her free from sin in a significant and powerful way.

Having been awakened to the penalty that her sin was leading her to, Jesus’ forgiveness became not a license to sin, but a license that set her free from the power of sin.

Jesus’ forgiveness empowered her to leave her life of sin.

That’s what this story is about.

It is about the power of Jesus’ forgiveness to set us free to leave our lives of sin.

This is a truth that is beautifully illustrated in this story about the woman caught in adultery.

And it is a truth that is taught in many other places in Scripture.

A good example is Romans chapter six, where in verse 18 Paul tells us that instead of giving us license to sin, through Jesus’ forgiveness “You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.”

And the fact that this truth, which is illustrated so well in the story of the woman caught in adultery, is confirmed so clearly in other parts of Scripture is very important in this case because we aren’t certain of the origin of this story.

In fact, it is almost certain that this story was not included in the original Gospel of John.

This is going to get a bit technical, but it’s important to know.

No one has the original copy of any ancient text, including all of the books of the Bible.

The originals have all decomposed long ago.

What we have is copies of those originals.

And what gives us confidence that the text of the Bible is so accurate is that we have thousands of copies of the New Testament, tens of thousands if you count ancient translations into languages other than Greek.

And of these thousands of copies in Greek, many of them are very close in date to the originals, some fragments within 100 years.

For most ancient texts, you’re lucky to have more than ten copies with the earliest being 800 years after the original.

So, the text we read when we read the New Testament is extremely accurate because we have so many copies, so close in date to the original that we can compare them and get accurate information about what was originally written.

And this is the difficulty with the story of the woman caught in adultery.

Out of the thousands of ancient Greek manuscripts we have, it shows up in only a handful and even most of those mark if off with asterisks indicating doubt in including it.

The earliest Greek manuscript that includes this story is from the 5th Century AD, approximately 400 years after the Gospel of John was written.

And this tells us two things:

First, a copy from within 400 years tells us this story is ancient and is early enough to be an authentic story about Jesus.

This likelihood of its authenticity is increased by the fact that we have some early Christians, like Augustine, who commented on this story and were convinced it was an authentic story about Jesus even while recognizing it was absent from almost all of their manuscripts too.

So, it is reasonable to conclude that this is a true story about Jesus.

But we must still acknowledge, secondly, that this story was not part of the Bible when the Bible was originally written.

There are simply way to many early Greek copies that go straight from John 7:52 to John 8:12 completely omitting this story to believe that this story was included by the apostle John.

Also the style of the writing is so different from what surrounds it, that it is highly unlikely it was even written by the apostle John.

So, what do we do with this story?

Well, I’d suggest two things:

First, we don’t treat it with the same kind of authority as the rest of the Bible.

If something in this story contradicts, or is used to contradict something said elsewhere in the Bible, this passage should lose.

The New Testament is the divinely-inspired record of the witness of those people Jesus chose to bear special witness about Him, what we call apostolic witness.

The integrity of that boundary should be preserved.

That being said, secondly, there are many good and true stories, including this story about Jesus and the woman caught in adultery, that faithfully illustrate the apostolic witness of the New Testament even if they aren’t directly part of that witness.

And this story is one of those stories.

It is a beautiful story of how Jesus lived out what we’re taught in other passages like Romans chapter 6.

For this reason, we should not be afraid to read this story and learn from it.

To put it another way, if we can’t count this as part of Scripture, we can definitely count it as a good and faithful sermon.

This story preaches, in story form, what the Scriptures teach in prose.

This is what still makes it appropriate to include this story in the Bible marked off with brackets or italics as it is.

And it’s why I’m happy to still preach from it.

Or, perhaps it’s better to say it’s why I’m happy to re-preach it.

It’s worth hearing and remembering.

It points to truth.

And God has used it to encourage His people for well over 1500 years.

And in my opinion, that encouragement should not stop.

This story brings home the point that Jesus’ forgiveness sets people free not just from the consequences of sin, but also from the power of sin.

Jesus’ forgiveness helps us leave our lives of sin.

So, let’s turn our attention back to this story that illustrates the power of Jesus’ forgiveness so well and see what we can learn from it.

I think we can summarize what we learn in three sentences:

Jesus brings conviction of sin.

Jesus gives forgiveness of sin.

Jesus sets us free from the power of sin.

Let me say that again:

Jesus brings conviction of sin.

Jesus gives forgiveness of sin.

Jesus sets us free from the power of sin.

That Jesus brings conviction of sin, that He does things to make us more acutely aware of our own sin, is probably the thing that’s most easily missed in this story.

It is easy to skip over the fact that Jesus actually gives permission to the men who have dragged this woman in front of Him to kill her.

Jesus says, in verse 7, “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.”

All that’s needed is one person who thinks they haven’t done anything bad and the execution will begin.

Can you imagine being the woman and hearing Jesus say that?

Especially when you know that the men who have dragged you there are Pharisees and Scribes who have a reputation of thinking of themselves as being blameless in keeping the Old Testament law?

After Jesus said those words, I’d guess that the woman was thinking, “That’s it. I’m going to die.”

Jesus’ words did not bring the woman immediate comfort.

Rather, their immediate effect was to bring her face to face with the consequences of her sin.

Less than 24 hours earlier she was probably looking forward to her romantic encounter with this man who wasn’t her husband.

But now that choice to break her marriage vows had led to this.

To the threat of public execution, to a brush with death.

And Jesus leaves her in this state for a while.

Jesus goes back to writing in the sand while she lived through the terror of knowing one of these men could throw a stone at any time.

Jesus allowed her to experience the fact that her marital unfaithfulness was not a little thing.

He allowed her to experience conviction of sin.

But Jesus was not interested in having only this women experience conviction of sin.

Because Jesus knew that every one of the men accusing her was also a sinner.

In fact, Jesus knew that this very act of bringing her in front of Him was in fact sinful.

First, they had unfairly singled her out and left the man behind.

The law of Moses clearly states in Deuteronomy 22:22, “If a man is found sleeping with another man’s wife, both the man who slept with her and the woman must die.”

But where is the man?

If they were caught in the act, certainly they could have fulfilled the law and brought him along too?

Second, the author tells us explicitly in verse 6 that,

(Read v. 6)

In other words, their concern was not for justice at all.

Their goal was to use this woman’s sin as leverage to trap Jesus by making Him have to either maintain the law and ruin His reputation for mercy, or speak against the law of Moses in order to show her mercy.

They falsely assumed Jesus couldn’t maintain the law and show mercy at the same time.

Jesus sees them sinfully using this woman to try and trap Him and He turns their own trap back on them.

He forces each one of them to examine their own sinfulness by saying “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw the stone.”

And one by one each of the accusers feels the conviction of their own sin acknowledging it by walking away in a silence that spoke volumes.

Because Jesus convicts us of our sin.

Jesus deliberately does things and says things that force you and me to come face to face with the fact that we have sinned and that that sin leads to terrible consequences, that it leads us into death.

It is this conviction of sin that is often what turns people off towards Jesus.

They don’t like feeling guilty for what they have done.

Tragically, what they fail to realize is that Jesus brings conviction of sin only for the purpose of setting up the forgiveness of our sin.

To this woman caught in adultery, Jesus first words may have felt like He was giving her over to the consequences of her sin, that He was handing her over to death.

But nothing could be further from the truth.

For it was these very same words that caused everyone who may have condemned her to leave.

Those words that convicted her, were also the words that allowed Jesus to stand up after everyone had left and say to her,

(Read vv. 10b-11a)

Jesus gives forgiveness of sin.

There was only one person there that day who was without sin and could have thrown a stone at her, could have justly put her to death for her sin, and that person was Jesus.

But Jesus, the one and only rightful judge, chose not to condemn her, He said, “Neither do I condemn you.”

For anyone convicted of their sin, there are no sweeter words than these.

To know that you have sinned, to feel some of the depth of how offensive that sin is to God and how harmful it is to others and then to have God, in the person of Jesus Christ, speak to you and say “I do not condemn you,” that is good news that goes beyond what the world can understand.

The grace and love of Jesus Christ in the moment of forgiveness is the most precious gift that any human can ever be given.

And God has told us that His desire, His longing, is to give that gift to everyone who will receive it.

As Paul writes in 1 Timothy 2 verse 4, God “wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.”

It is guaranteed that every person who feels convicted of their sin and turns to Jesus for forgiveness will be forgiven by Jesus.

They will never be condemned.

For Jesus brings conviction of sin.

But He always brings the gift of forgiveness along with it.

And every person who puts their trust in Him and in His offer of forgiveness will never be condemned.

As John puts it in chapter 3 verses 16 and 17,

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”

Jesus took the condemnation we deserve upon Himself when He died on the cross, and for this reason Jesus is delighted to look at you, just like He looked at this woman caught in adultery and say, “Neither to I condemn you.”

For Jesus brings conviction of sin *and* Jesus brings forgiveness of sin.

But the good news doesn’t end there.

For Jesus also sets us free from the power of sin.

When Jesus forgives you and me, He does it for a purpose, He does it both to cleanse us from past sin and also to give us the motivation and power to leave our sinful lives behind us and live according to His righteousness.

It is this second part of the purpose of forgiveness that is emphasized at the end of this story.

Jesus says,

(Read v. 11)

As I’ve mentioned earlier, this woman’s experience of being convicted of her sin, of having a brush with death on account of it, and then being rescued and forgiven by Jesus does at least two things:

First, it gives her a new motivation for righteousness.

She knows, in a way she didn’t know before, that her adultery was not “love;” it was a lifestyle that led to death; it was sin.

There is no way she would ever want to be caught in adultery again and have to face an angry mob that wants to stone her.

She does not want to go that way again.

So, too, when Jesus convicts us of our sin, He does it to give us a new motivation, a passionate desire to stop sinning and turn to righteousness.

This motivation, this desire is a gift from Him.

But, on its own, it is not enough to set us free from the power of sin.

Rather, this new motivation is what should keep us coming back to the One who rescued us, back to Jesus again and again and again, no matter how many times we fail.

For it is Jesus, the one who gives the command “leave your life of sin” who also gives us power to truly change, to truly be set from the bondage of sin and to instead become servants of righteousness.

This is the part we often get backwards.

Too often we think we need to clean up our lives first and then come to Jesus for forgiveness.

But the order in this story is not Jesus wants us to leave our lives of sin and only then gives forgiveness.

No!

The forgiveness comes first, before we’re given any power to leave our lives of sin.

This is true for us just as much as it was for this woman caught in adultery.

The order is important:

Jesus brings conviction of sin.

Jesus gives forgiveness of sin.

And then, Jesus sets us free from the power of sin.

This is the beauty of the gospel that this story illustrates so well.

It may not be an original part of the Gospel of John, but it still preaches the gospel.

For the good news is that Jesus brings conviction of sin, that He makes us aware of our guilt and its consequences, sometimes even through brushes with death.

And Jesus does that for a reason.

He does it because His plan is not to condemn us but to forgive us.

Jesus, the one person who can rightly judge us, gives us forgiveness of sin.

And His forgiveness comes with a new motivation and new power from the Holy Spirit to begin the journey of walking away from our sin, the journey of leaving our lives of sin behind us.

Jesus brings conviction of sin.

Jesus gives forgiveness of sin.

And Jesus sets us free from the power of sin.

And all of this is good news!

Good news we see lived out in this story of Jesus’ encounter with a woman caught in adultery.

Amen.