

Dear friends of Jesus,

Ask some people on the street—maybe your street or your office or sports team... ask them why they don't attend church. Listen closely. You will undoubtedly hear some version of a comment that may sound harsh to your ears. I've heard them and I suspect you will hear someone say something like, "Christians are the most judgmental people in the world. Christians are hypocrites. They talk like they are better than everyone else." But, say our critics, "We see how Christians are just like others, maybe even worse." In fact, they often see us as haters. We are anti-sexual revolution. We are against premarital sex. We are against the LGBTQ+2 lobby. We are anti-drunkenness and anti wild partying. We are anti-abortion. Anti-euthanasia. We are anti-legalization of marijuana. Anti-liberalization of society. People may see us as wanting to be the morality police for everyone.

That may seem very harsh to us. But whether you and I disagree with those assessments of us doesn't really matter. Even if those criticisms are false, that doesn't change the fact that some—perhaps many—people outside of the church think we are not the kind of people we profess to be as followers of Jesus.

By and large, I think Jesus has a pretty good reputation in our society. It may not be correct but people—in general, I think—put Jesus alongside of Mother Teresa or Ghandi or Buddha or someone like that. So Jesus is okay. But Christians are accused of not doing a very good job of being like Jesus. So we are hypocrites.

Looking at our text now, you can perhaps understand how we as Christians can be seen as being like the teachers of the law and the Pharisees, instead of being like Jesus.

The Story Behind the Story

Follow along with me for a moment as we set the stage for this story.

By the time we get to John 8, Jesus has already been labelled as a troublemaker among the Jewish leaders who are in power over their people. The teachers of the law are sometimes called the scribes. But they and the Pharisees feel threatened by Jesus. They are angry with his fast and loose handling of the law. And they don't like the fact that people are being drawn to Jesus and his false teachings. Their job is to protect the common folks from being deceived by Jesus and his ungodly ways. And that's what they are trying to do.

Their opposition to Jesus grows throughout the gospel. As the Gospel of John starts off, John the Baptist denies that he's the Messiah and quickly points people to Jesus. Then we see ordinary people following Jesus. He doesn't go to the religious leaders and try to convince them to follow him. He comes to the likes of Peter and John, fishermen. John tells us how Andrew and then Nathaniel and Philip each follow Jesus.

Just ordinary guys. Then Jesus cleanses the temple and ticks off the religious leaders as the Passover festival gets underway. By chapter 3, a member of the Jewish ruling council, Nicodemus, comes to Jesus on the sly. He doesn't want his colleagues to see that he's interested in following Jesus, but he is. In chapter 4, Jesus associates with a woman of low repute—a loose Samaritan lady, someone that a good Jew would stay away from. And his disciples tell him so. But Jesus doesn't listen. His love for her and his insight into her deepest needs convinces her to follow Jesus.

By chapter 7, the Jewish leaders have a huddle to discuss what to do with this troublemaker Jesus. They are concerned about keeping the people from following him. Nicodemus tries to subtly defend Jesus from further attacks but he himself is attacked by his colleagues in the ruling council. And that's where we pick up our text.

If you're looking in your Bibles, you'll probably notice that this passage is set apart from the regular text of the book. It's noted that some early Bible manuscripts don't include John 7:53 to John 8:11. If you omitted this section, you could see how the book flows naturally from John 7:52 to John 8:12. I don't have time this morning to go into all the ways that Bible translators decide how to include or omit certain texts but the note in our pew Bibles hints at it. The older a manuscript is, the more like the original it is likely to be. Less opportunities for copying or translation errors. That's part of the science of putting the Bible together. We want the most reliable manuscripts to inform our translations. So there is a good level of dispute around whether this story was always or originally located right here in John's gospel.

However, there's very little disputing that this story happened. So we aren't doubting that it's a real event. Instead, our job with respect to this passage is to discern how it fits into John's gospel at this point. And I would say it fits well. Remember how John has been showing us that the Jewish leaders are out to get Jesus, but they are afraid to do anything drastic for fear that the people will get upset and rally around Jesus. Their discussions make me think about how our Prime Minister and his advisors must have talked amongst themselves to figure out how to stop the Jody Wilson-Raybault ordeal from exploding. The religious leaders were likewise in control-mode. Not necessarily damage-control but they were certainly trying to keep the people on their side while figuring out how to get rid of the threat posed by Jesus. They were playing politics with their religion.

Somewhere in their behind closed doors discussions, they agree to bring an adulterous woman to Jesus and ask him how to deal with her. To understand what's going on in their minds, you need to know two things. First of all, the Jews had no authority to kill anyone because they were under Roman control, meaning only the Romans could declare someone guilty and have them put to death. That's what happened with Jesus later on. Here, though, these leaders are hoping that Jesus might say that this woman should be stoned to death and that way he will get the Romans against him and he'll probably be arrested, imprisoned and out of their way! Problem solved and things can go back to normal. The second option is that Jesus will tell the Jewish leaders that they should let the woman go. If he does that, these leader will point out to the people that Jesus doesn't care what Moses said in the law and therefore he is not worthy of their trust. If this happens, Jesus will be discredited. The people will stop following him. And life will go back to

normal. All this backroom discussion has led them to set the perfect trap for Jesus. Either way, he'll be out of their hair.

Hypocrisy Exposed

However, Jesus outsmarts them. Our Lord so masterfully sees through their schemes and plots. And he exposes their hypocrisy.

It starts, I conclude from the text, by the fact that Jesus went to pray while the others just went home, says v.53 and v.1. Jesus spends time alone with the Father, seeking wisdom and strength as a man, so that he can continue the battle he is called to fight against sin. Let that be a reminder to us of an important starting point for dealing with every situation that arises.

The next morning at sunrise, according to v.2, Jesus entered the place where he knew the religious leaders would pick a fight with him. And he was ready.

In their desire to get rid of Jesus with their trap, these leaders of the Jewish church didn't present a fair picture. If this woman before them was caught in the act of adultery—caught red-handed, as we say—then the man must have been with her. So where is he? Why don't they bring him to Jesus too? The law to which these teachers refer calls for the death penalty of both the man and the woman who commit adultery. It didn't specifically call for stoning. In any event, by not bringing the man to the scene, these religious police show they are not really serious about fulfilling the law. Jesus knows this hypocrisy.

Moreover, they choose to use the sin of adultery as part of their plot to trap Jesus and get rid of him. But Jesus is kind of like a modern day "Me-Too" movement participant. He's standing up to affirm this defenseless woman. He's protesting the male chauvinism of the religious leaders who bring out the woman but leave the man off the hook. They are using the woman, however guilty she might be of serious sin, as a tool in their attack on Jesus. And, in so doing, they are enjoying their sense of moral superiority over her and Jesus. More hypocrisy.

This is where I think we all need to pause and look at ourselves for a bit. We are often not fair in the way we call out sin. And this is where our neighbours can find fault with us and accuse us of hypocrisy. We all have our pet sins. And it's easier to see, as Jesus said elsewhere, the speck of sawdust in our neighbour's eye than the log in our own. We make ourselves the judge of everyone around us. Consequently, we are more often known for what we oppose than for what we stand up for. We are against lazy people who milk the welfare system. But are we for defending the poor against the injustice that puts them on the street? It's one thing to oppose abortion and euthanasia by carrying signs on the streets, but are we signs of love on the street? Do we actually do something positive to help the women and men who are considering ending a life? Do we offer them love and support or only condemnation if they should go against our desires? We are sometimes quick to condemn divorce. But are we known as a place where those with marriage trouble can find help and hopefully healing or a new start? Likewise, do we only condemn homosexual acts? Or do we open our hearts to those who struggle with their sexual identity? Do we make room for them in our families, in our church? I don't

know how true it is, but I've heard recently—and I don't know the exact numbers but they were alarming. Apparently many young people who come out of the closet are kicked out of their parental homes and forced to live on the streets. That's so sad and also a huge window of opportunity for Christians to step in and show love. Those are just some examples.

You see, it's easy to say what we're against. And if that's all we're known for then we rightly deserve the label "hypocrite". But how about if we respond to things we are opposed to by finding a way to show love? Create a means of showing mercy and love, rather than simply condemning.

Friends, the only way we'll love other sinners is by recognizing that we're no better than them. No less sinful. No less in need of grace than anyone else. Some of our outward acts might be a little more polished. But sinful desires stick to us like peanut butter and honey on our fingers.

Jesus surprises the religious posy with his response to their trick question. He says nothing. Not a word. At least not right away. He just bends down and starts writing on the ground with his finger. Rabbis did that more often in Jesus' day. As their disciples followed them and they wanted to make a point, they didn't have a chalkboard. So they used the ground.

The Bible doesn't say what Jesus wrote on the ground. We are left to guess. Or not. But in the guessing department, some speculate that he wrote down other sins that might convict the religious teachers of their own sin. Others think that maybe Jesus wrote down the names of those who were accusing this woman. The truth is we don't know. But if he were to write down our name and sins, what would be there? Rich deLange: secret lustful thoughts? Your name: a closet drinker? A drug user? Dishonest at work? Constant gossip in online chats with her friends? Grumbling and complaining or dissatisfaction with what you have? How about pride? The list is endless. We're all guilty of hypocrisy. We confess to believe one thing and promise to live one way, but we do another. We are not perfect. Far from it.

While Jesus keeps writing on the ground, the leaders keep peppering questions at him. Then finally he stands up and looks them each in the eye. Maybe he glances at their hands too. These guys are ready to act on their misguided thoughts. They have stones in their hands at the ready. Say the word, and they will pelt that sinful woman to death. Jesus chooses his words carefully. And the leaders are surprised. He comes up with a response they hadn't planned on. They aren't expecting what they hear. That wasn't one of the options they considered.

Jn 8:7 "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her."

And then he starts writing on the ground again.

Now notice how John tells us that the older—and wiser—men walked away first. I imagine the sound of rocks falling to the ground accompanied them. A couple of rocks fall to the ground and one old guy walks away. A few more rocks and the next one turns around. More rocks drop and a few more head off. Some younger Pharisees don't clue in

as quickly. However, one after another, the rocks fall and no one is left. Jesus has his head down, still writing on the ground. And the woman has her head hung in shame. They both heard the sound of rocks falling to the ground and footsteps walking away. It was the sound of life for this tormented woman. Jesus saved her life!

This story fits well in chapter 8 in the sense that this chapter starts with the teachers wanting to stone this adulterous woman. But ends with them wanting to stone Jesus. In v.58 Jesus says to these same teachers,

Jn 8:58 "I tell you the truth...before Abraham was born, I am!"

Then we read in v.59,

Jn 8:59 At this, they picked up stones to stone him....

It's a powerful example of how Jesus takes on the judgement for sin that should fall on us. Ultimately, salvation came at the price of Jesus being put to death. Our sins brought him to our world. No, his love for us brought him here. And in love for us, he endured hatred, mockery, and torture. That's how he responded to sinful people. He bore our hypocrisy on the cross. He "bore the deep-rooted sin in our hearts which sometimes even uses the God-given law to paint ourselves as righteous. Here Jesus exposes that corruption and shines the light of God's standard into the dark places of our heart. Jesus shows himself to be the Saviour John has been painting him to be: The lamb God who takes away the sin of the world. The lamb of God without whom the adulterous woman can't be saved. Without whom the Pharisees can't be saved. And without whom you and I can't be saved. We all need Jesus alone for salvation. He has come in love to rescue us just as he rescued this adulterous woman.

The Response

Now what do we do with it? Jesus gives this hurting woman guidance that speaks to us as well.

First of all, remember that if Christ has paid for your sins, you are not condemned. You can believe that this woman was terribly ashamed of her sin. And publicly disgraced by the religious leaders. But not by Jesus. He does not belittle her. But neither does he make light of her sin. He says, "I don't condemn you. But go now and don't return to that sin." He doesn't whitewash it and say, "No problem. We all make mistakes." He, first of all, offers her grace. No condemnation!! None! He'll take that on himself for her later. But he calls for a response to grace that includes turning away from the sin for which he takes our condemnation. If she has been forgiven—if she's been rescued from imminent death—she must live by that forgiveness.

Part of our response to Jesus' grace to us must also include repentance. Embrace the forgiveness. Hold tightly to the good news that there is no condemnation for us when we are united to Christ by faith. God isn't sending us to hell. No matter what other people say, we can go on living with God and enjoying his love because he doesn't condemn us. Our sin is covered by Jesus. All we can do is look to Jesus for more grace to help us turn away from our ongoing sins so that we can live life to the fullest. That's always the aim of our Lord Jesus. He wants us free from condemnation

and from bondage to sin so that we can enjoy freedom in Christ. So we can love others more freely—without a condemning attitude—because we know what it's like to be freed by Jesus.

And now I'm going farther than this story goes, but I suspect that when this ordeal was over for her, this woman in John 8 responded much like the Samaritan woman at the well did in John 4. After she experienced the love and acceptance of Jesus, she went out and told others about Jesus and his grace. The Samaritan woman said, "Come and see this man..." That's the natural overflow of a heart that has been changed by Jesus' love. We all know we're guilty of sin. But we also need to know that we are free from sin through Jesus. He's our beloved, devoted, self-giving, "all-in for us" Saviour! Let us adore him. The lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. All we can do is turn away from our sin because he's freed us from it. Praise him and tell others what the Lord has done for us and is continuing to do in us. Hallelujah.

Prayer for Government and Queen

Sovereign God, ruler supreme, we acknowledge your mighty and loving hand that holds the world together each and every day. We confess that this world belongs to you and we as humans are your servants, called to steward your amazing creation and to care for one another. We call us to seek justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God.

You have granted authority to governments to rule people with justice and mercy. We pray for forgiveness for the ways in which we have neglected to honour our rulers, for the times we have spoken ill of them and neglected to pray for them, as your tell us to do. The task of government is immense and, most often, thankless. We lift up our rulers before you.

We begin with the official head of state, our Queen, her majesty Queen Elizabeth II. We thank you Lord that in her old age, she continues to have health and strength. We especially thank you that she belongs to you and acknowledges You as her Sovereign Lord. While she does not wield power over us, she does have influence and standing. Will you continue to give her wisdom as she reigns. Bless her aged husband and her family which is always in the spotlight. Give them grace and peace and may the coming generations walk in faith.

We pray for our Prime Minister Trudeau. He has had his share of scandals or problems of late. But he is a man like us. We pray that you give him strength to continue in his work until his mandate is complete. Bless his wife and his children who likely feel the pressure upon their husband and dad. Will you dwell in their home with your Holy Spirit. Remind them to look to you and seek your strength and wisdom and blessing. Help him to surround himself with wise counsellors and cabinet members, people who will help him pursue true justice and mercy for all peoples of our land, that the government may not show favouritism to the rich and leave the weak and vulnerable destitute and hurting. Our country needs a revival of faith and we plead with you Lord that let that begin from the top down so that all the people will know you as our Supreme Ruler and desire to walk in the path of righteousness and seek your kingdom first as we turn our hearts to Jesus.

And Holy Spirit of power and grace, fill the heart of our new premier, Jason Kenney. Let him know your presence and power. Help him as he begins his mandate to have a clear and wise vision for Alberta. We know he is full of ideas and ready to act. May his plans meet your approval. May he truly have the good of all the people in mind. May his cabinet members and other counsellors find their guidance and ruling power in the direction given in your Word and by your Spirit. We ask not only for economic prosperity for our province and country. So often that is an idol in our land. We ask for hearts set on doing your will and serving others in humility.

Almighty God, may your kingdom come and your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven, for Jesus sake.