

Caught In The Act !

John 8:2-11

This is a well-known passage, and perhaps we tend to think of it as just being about Jesus and the woman who was brought before him. But there are several other people involved, as we shall see . . .

Just the day before, Jesus had had a brush with the chief priests and the Pharisees, who had joined forces to try to arrest him.¹ The men sent to bring him in had been so impressed with what they heard him say that they were not able to arrest him and reported back to the Council (Sanhedrin). This gave an opportunity to Nicodemus to speak up in Jesus' favour. Something had evidently been happening with him since we first met him in **John 3:1-21!** (The rest of the Council also got their facts wrong when they said that no prophet would arise from Galilee; the prophet Jonah came from Gath-Hepher, several miles north of Nazareth!) People were beginning to suggest that perhaps Jesus might be the Messiah, and this really disturbed the authorities. See **John 7:25-52**.

So, Jesus comes back into Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives and goes straight back to the temple, where he had been the day before. The crowds ("all the people" !) come to him and he sits down there in the temple courtyard and begins to teach them.

The scribes and Pharisees try to grab another opportunity to trap him, to get him to say something that would give them a way to accuse him publicly and discredit him. So they bring the woman into the temple courtyard, set her down in the centre of Jesus' group of listeners and make this shocking accusation against her. She was not just suspected of committing adultery; she had been caught in the act! She makes no attempt to plead her innocence; she knows she is guilty and knows only too well what the sentence of the Jewish Law is – she is to be killed by public stoning (**Leviticus 20:10, Deuteronomy 22:22**). She will be terrified, expecting any minute to be dragged outside the city walls and executed in her public shame.

¹ This is interesting, as the chief priests at the time were Sadducees and had big theological and probably political differences with the Pharisees. Evidently both parties considered Jesus to be a threat to them.

But here she is, brought into the temple courtyard instead! And there is someone missing, who should be there as well – the man she was caught with. Where is he? The Law of Moses is very clear: **both** the man and the woman who commit adultery are to be stoned. Already the case which the scribes and Pharisees are trying to bring against her is beginning to look wrong. Why have they not arrested the man as well? There is no question of his guilt – they were caught together. It looks like they have decided to let him off and pin all the blame on the woman, making her a pawn in their campaign against Jesus.

Their plan is to trap Jesus into contradicting the Jewish Law, but already they are fudging the issue themselves. Perhaps his message of new life makes them think that he will tell the woman that she is OK and has not really done anything wrong, but he doesn't do that, not at all!

They make their accusation, stating clearly what the Law of Moses says and challenging him to say something different. After all, this is the teacher who has gained a reputation for being a 'friend of tax collectors and sinners'.¹ Surely he will try to make excuses for this woman?

At first Jesus simply ignores them. He is still seated but bends forward and is writing in the sandy dust with his finger. What was he writing? Some people think he may have written words from the Ten Commandments – perhaps the same ones that he quoted to the 'rich young ruler'², about practical relationships with other people, including murder, adultery, stealing, lying, honouring parents and loving your neighbour as yourself?

He's not giving them his attention, so they repeat the accusation and question: "What do you say?" Would he try to relax the Jewish Law? There had been several occasions (especially in the 'sermon on the mount') when he had quoted the Old Testament – the Law in particular – and had then said "... but I say to you ..."³ Was his message of grace going to contradict the Law? If so, then they think they will have caught him!

But no, he doesn't disagree with the Law at all. In fact, the things he had said in the 'sermon on the mount' went **further** than the Law and

¹ See **Matthew 11:19, Luke 5:29-32, 7:34**

² See **Matthew 19:16-26, Mark 10:17-27, Luke 18:18-27**

³ See **Matthew 5:21-22, 27-28, 31-36, 38-48**

dealt with inner motivations, not just external behaviour. He had even said:

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practises and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:17-20) He endorses those strict laws in **Leviticus 20** and **Deuteronomy 22** – and they don’t only refer to adultery, but to other sexual misconduct as well.

Eventually, Jesus stops writing on the ground and straightens up to face them. He doesn’t undermine the Law at all; on the contrary, he tells them to go ahead and carry out the sentence of stoning. But again, he goes deeper and challenges them to look at their own lives. They may not have been caught committing adultery like this woman, but is there anyone there who is completely innocent? *“Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.”* And he goes back to writing on the ground, not looking at what is happening around him.

The older men slink away first. Their memories do not allow them to forget their own wrongdoings. The younger ones, self-righteous in their accusations, pretend for a while that they have nothing to feel guilty about. But eventually they too slip away; Jesus’s challenge is too great.

Somewhere along the way, all the people who had been listening to his teaching also leave. They have been glad to listen to this new rabbi, but perhaps this side of his teaching was too close for comfort. Or maybe they just wanted to get away from this tense situation, didn’t want to get involved.

It’s all gone quiet. Jesus straightens up again. The courtyard is empty. Just he and the woman are there. *“Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”* *“No one, sir,” she said. “Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.”*

He doesn't say that she is OK and has done nothing wrong. There is no suggestion that she can just continue as before. He demands a change of lifestyle. Forgiveness without repentance is meaningless.

Jesus could not explain to her what would only become plain after his crucifixion and resurrection: that he was going to pay the penalty for the sins of the whole world¹ and that she could find personal forgiveness and the life-changing power of the Holy Spirit through faith in him.² That had to come later and, personally, I believe that all the people who had responded positively to Jesus's ministry will also have put their trust in the power of his sacrificial death and resurrection – it will have been a natural follow-on for them.

Meanwhile, with all her accusers having slunk away, the woman is still left with this paralysing thought: Will this rabbi take on himself the commandment of the Law that she should be stoned to death? She may not have realised that he is actually the only one there who is without sin and is therefore qualified to condemn her. What will he do?

He asks her two questions: *"Where are they? Has no-one condemned you?"* Obviously not; they have all gone and not a single stone has been thrown. But by getting her to answer and by saying that he doesn't condemn her, Jesus helps her to see that she really has been forgiven. Her terror of being shamefully executed suddenly lifts! She needs to follow that up with genuine repentance – a total change of attitude, a radical re-think, to the point that adultery will not be on her horizon again. A changed life!³

That is one way that Jesus defined his mission: *"I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance"* (**Luke 5:32**). The religious people missed out because they **thought** that they were OK and didn't need forgiveness. It was the ones who responded to him who experienced the transforming power of God in their lives. This un-named woman was one of the early ones. More would follow, and still do!

Dave Taylor December 2025

Further copies can be downloaded from www.justonecandle.uk

¹ **1 John 2:2**

² **Acts 2:37-42**

³ See **2 Corinthians 5:17**