

The Woman Caught in Adultery

SPEAKER	Matt Ryniker
DATE	Sunday, February 2, 2025
PASSAGES	John 8; Deuteronomy 19; Leviticus 19; Luke 17
MESSAGE	Begins at 0:00:00 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

The story of the woman caught in adultery is not Jesus handing us a rule that only sinless people may confront sin. It is a trap sprung on the men who set it, using the very law they were quoting. What it answers is the question the Gospel according to John keeps asking: is this the prophet Moses said would come, and will we listen to him?

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ “Let him who is without sin cast the first stone” is not a new enforcement standard. Scripture elsewhere tells believers plainly to rebuke a sinning brother, and a society where only the perfect may enforce anything collapses fast.
- ◆ The earliest manuscripts of John do not contain this passage, and the pew Bibles say so in the open rather than in a footnote: “we serve truth, we don’t hide things.”
- ◆ The story is very likely still authentic to Jesus. The second- and third-century church was severe about sexual sin and would not have invented a story in which an adulteress receives no penance at all.
- ◆ The scribes and Pharisees are not defending marriage. They are using a real woman as a pawn to catch Jesus between the stoning law and the two-witness rule.
- ◆ Jesus is challenging their standing as witnesses, not their sinlessness. The law’s malicious-witness clause gives a false accuser the penalty he intended for his brother — and that is exactly what they are.
- ◆ Jesus is the only person in the account who treats the woman as a person, and he neither condemns her nor excuses her: “go, and from now on sin no more.”

- ◆ A fragmentary Jesus, assembled from the lines that flatter us, is not real and does not save.

► 1:03:04

Matt opened by admitting he had not been sure he wanted to preach this one, or where to put it in the series — which, he pointed out, is fitting, because Scripture itself was not sure where to put it either. Two problems stand between a congregation and this passage, and they make each other worse.

1. A story we have learned to misread

► 1:05:22

Everyone knows the scene, and for many people it is their favorite story about Jesus: a woman caught in the act, a crowd with stones, and the line that ends the argument. What people take away is a shield — nobody may confront you unless they are perfect.

That reading does not survive contact with the rest of the Bible. Leviticus says reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him — it does not add that honestly, who can judge. Paul knows perfectly well he is a weak man and still confronts whole churches. And Jesus himself says if your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. Matt ran the alternative out loud, deadpan: “but on second thought, never mind, because you’re all kind of scummy and who are you to rebuke anyone.” And if only flawless people could enforce anything, we would need flawless police officers, judges and magistrates, and society would fall apart fast.

2. And a story the earliest manuscripts do not have

► 1:08:33

The second problem is printed right on the page: the earliest manuscripts do not include John 7:53–8:11. “One of the things I love about Christianity is that we serve truth. We don’t hide things, we don’t pretend, we don’t cut corners with reality.” The oldest papyrus fragments of John lack it. In the Byzantine and majority Greek tradition it is missing, or parked at the very end, or present with a scribal note saying we are not certain about this one but are including it anyway. The Greek fathers barely mention it for a thousand years, and some manuscripts of Luke carry it, tacked on at the close.

► 1:09:38

The West is a different picture. Ambrose treats it as Scripture in the 300s, and Augustine after him — Augustine even floated a theory that male scribes cut it out deliberately, not wanting women to think they could get off scot-free. The first full book of John containing it dates to around the year 400.

► 1:10:43

Then the argument that keeps the story standing. The same scholars who doubt it belongs to John see no reason to doubt it came from Jesus. The second- and third-century church was severe about sexual ethics and routinely assigned penance for sexual sin. A church like that does not invent a story in which one of the gravest of those sins draws no penance at all. That pushes it back into the apostolic age — genuine oral tradition that never found a home. Scripture inserted into Scripture. And if the Holy Spirit had a hand in where it landed, this is exactly where it belongs.

3. The question the whole gospel is asking

► 1:11:58

John is driving at one question, and it starts in Moses.

“The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers — it is to him you shall listen.”

DEUTERONOMY 18:15 ↗

Whoever that prophet turns out to be, listen to him. The question is live in everyone’s mind. It is the third thing they ask John the Baptist — “Are you the Prophet?” After the loaves, the crowd says “This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world.” The Samaritan woman’s evidence is a prophetic act: “Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?”

Which explains his opponents’ strategy. Prove Jesus is a false teacher and he is disqualified as a prophet by definition, so they hunt for the takedown. Healing on the Sabbath gets them a start (John 5:16), but it is thin. Jesus answers by putting Moses on their side of the scale and then taking him back: “If you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me.” The argument runs on into the Sabbath circumcision exchange, which ends “judge with right judgment.”

► 1:16:25

Matt stopped there long enough to note a second cartoon we have made. The Jesus of “judge not, that you be not judged” is the same Jesus who says judge rightly. “What we really need is the whole Jesus — not a slogan version, not a one-liner Jesus, not a fragment or echo of Jesus.” Synthesizing his words is hard work, and it gets impossible the moment we take him selectively for our own benefit.

By the end of John 7 the leadership is seething — the crowd does not know the law, no prophet arises from Galilee — and Nicodemus is asking whether the man should not at least get a hearing. That is the doorstep this story sits on.

4. The trap

► 1:18:42

So they need Jesus visibly contradicting Moses on something no one would defend. Deuteronomy 22 puts adultery under the death penalty — though Matt noted that ancient Near Eastern laws were customarily stated at the maximum penalty. Not everyone was stoned. But the maximum is available, because the crime is grave.

► 1:19:45

This is the only place in John where scribes appear at all — the big names have turned out. And catching her in the act means the eyewitnesses are the men doing the accusing — a stakeout, a sting, a crew. If she was a known adulteress, why now? The answer is that the story is not about her. “They’re using her as a pawn,” Matt said. “The only person who treats her like a real person in the story is Jesus.”

► 1:20:58

The trap looks airtight. Turn hardliner and he loses the crowds who have been hanging on his grace. Let her go and he is in open violation of Moses, which finishes him as a teacher and therefore as the prophet. Lose-lose for Jesus, win-win for them.

5. “So what do you say?”

► 1:23:11

Picture it: Jesus teaching in the temple, a crowd that came to hear him, a delegation shoving a woman into the middle. This is not a civil case — they have come for expert testimony on how to apply Torah.

“Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?” This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him.

JOHN 8:3-6 ↗

It looks like the woman is on trial. She is not. Jesus is. And they have done their homework — Deuteronomy 17 requires two or three witnesses and puts their hands on the first stones, so they have brought a posse, some of them ready to go through with it.

6. The trap inside the trap

► 1:27:33

Jesus bends down and writes, and keeps writing while they press him, and the social momentum drains out of the room because he is not reacting the way they planned. What he writes is not recorded — a mark, Matt said, of testimony rather than invention, since a made-up story would supply the juicy detail. But he writes twice, a faint echo of the Lord writing the commandments on stone twice. They think they can trap him in the Torah, which is absurd, because he was there when it was given.

His answer challenges their standing as witnesses, not their sinlessness. [Deuteronomy 19:15](#) requires two or three — and then keeps going:

“If a malicious witness arises to accuse a person of wrongdoing... the judges shall inquire diligently, and if the witness is a false witness and has accused his brother falsely, then you shall do to him as he had meant to do to his brother. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.”

DEUTERONOMY 19:16–19 ↗

► 1:29:28

The Hebrew behind “malicious” carries violence and cruelty; the Greek of the Septuagint renders that kind of witness unjust, sinful. Matt put the question to the room: does drumming up a case to tarnish a rival minister, endangering a woman’s life to do it, count as violent and cruel? They planned to catch Jesus between the stoning law and the two-witness rule. He let them walk into the malicious-witness clause instead.

► 1:31:33

Which leaves three options. Stay and recant, and look ridiculous in front of the crowd they came to perform for. Stay and press on, and be liable to the stones themselves. Or cut their losses and back away slowly. They went away one by one, beginning with the older ones — the scholars who knew the law best saw it first.

7. The one person in the room who saw her

► 1:33:04

Jesus stood up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one, Lord.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.”

JOHN 8:10–11 ↗

By the law’s own arithmetic the case is closed: the accusers have withdrawn, and no one is put to death on the evidence of one witness. She is free to go. And she is still confronted — he does not condemn her and he does not pretend nothing happened. This is not a story about giving sin a pass. It is a story about justice and mercy arriving together, which was the intent of the law all along, and Jesus would know, because he gave it.

8. Why the story belongs exactly here

► 1:33:48

One question is left hanging: would his own witness have been enough? Read the next verse.

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

JOHN 8:12 ↗

The Pharisees answer immediately that he is bearing witness about himself and his testimony is not true, and Jesus tells them it is true anyway, and that there are two witnesses — himself and the Father who sent him. Far from interrupting the flow, the story is a minor climax of the argument it sits inside. He is not disagreeing with Moses. He is protecting this woman with the laws Moses arbitrated, which were written to protect exactly this kind of woman.

Do we listen to him?

► 1:36:39

Matt finished where Moses did. If this is the prophet, the instruction was to listen to him — not to a sliver of him, not to a cartoon of the part of his ministry we happen to enjoy because it benefits us. “A fragmentary Jesus isn’t real. Cartoon versions of Jesus of our own creation, they are not real, and they don’t save. The whole real Jesus saves.”

Then he asked the room to stand in that crowd and watch it — the accusers backing off one at a time, the woman still standing, a display of love and justice and mercy he called probably hilarious and genuinely spectacular. You get to know that Lord. His justice, his mercy, his joy, his peace and his love are free for the taking. Listen to him.

FOR FURTHER STUDY**SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE**

- [Leviticus 19:17](#)
- [Luke 17:3](#)
- [John 7:53–8:11](#)
- [Deuteronomy 18:15](#)
- [John 1:21](#)
- [John 6:14](#)
- [John 4:29](#)
- [John 5:16](#)
- [John 5:45–47](#)
- [John 7:22–24](#)
- [Matthew 7:1](#)
- [John 7:48–52](#)
- [Deuteronomy 22:22](#)
- [Deuteronomy 17:6–7](#)
- [John 8:3–6](#)
- [Deuteronomy 19:15](#)
- [Deuteronomy 19:16–19](#)
- [John 8:9](#)
- [John 8:10–11](#)
- [John 8:12](#)
- [John 8:13–18](#)

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Where have you used “let him who is without sin” — on yourself or on someone else — as a reason not to have a hard conversation?
2. Matt was open with the congregation about the manuscript problem rather than smoothing it over. What does it do to your trust when a church handles a difficulty in the text that way?
3. The accusers had the law exactly right and were still cruel. How does that happen, and where have you seen it?
4. Jesus neither condemned the woman nor pretended nothing had happened. Which half of that is harder for you to extend to someone else?
5. Name one piece of Jesus you have been quietly leaving out because it does not benefit you. What would listening to the whole Jesus change this week?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Matt Ryniker is Hope Chapel's senior pastor — his own description of the job — and reports to the church's governing board, who he cheerfully calls his boss. He and his wife Mandy have been held up from Hope's own pulpit as an example to the congregation. He spent a stretch of his working life as a public school teacher, and he still teaches the parent dedication classes where families commit to raising their children to follow Jesus — a theme that runs straight into this message.

Watch the full message:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O8vs0NQw_Tl&t=0s

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.