

**IS SEXUAL IMMORALITY SERIOUS IF GOD IS MERCIFUL AND PARDONS SINNERS?**

**John 8:2-11** - "Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them. [3] The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst [4] they said to him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. [5] Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?" [6] This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. [7] And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her." [8] And once more he bent down and wrote on the ground. [9] But when they heard it, they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. [10] Jesus stood up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" [11] She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more."

One of the signs of the Fall is the way religious people use Bible texts to their own advantage. In today's text there is something incredibly freeing the way Jesus speaks to this sinful woman. Just hearing those words, "**Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more**" (11). This is not what she expected or deserved. We're beholding a wonder of pardon in this text.

And it's precisely the wonder of mercy in this text and others like it that is the victim of so much carnal abuse. Grace-texts are dangerous things in the hands of committed sinners. I can't tell you the number of times I've winced as worldly-minded church goers use Bible grace-texts as ammunition for continuing in sinful pleasures.

The texts of choice are almost always "**Judge not, that you be not judged**" (Matthew 7:1) - by which they usually mean, "**Don't even tell me what the Bible says about what I'm doing!**" - and, "**Neither do I condemn you....**" (John 8:11) - almost always leaving out the last half of that verse. This is a tolerated abuse in the body of Christ. If **grace-text abuse** were as repulsive as **child abuse** the church would be a safer place to live and grow in Christ.

For all of these reasons today's text deserves thoughtful study and application. I think the title question is an important one - "**Is sexual immorality serious if God is merciful to sinners?**"

1) **THE WOMAN'S PARTNER IN ADULTERY WAS NEVER BROUGHT BY THE SCRIBES AND PHARISEES - AND THAT WAS TRAGIC FOR HIM**

The sexual discrimination that would bring the woman caught in the "**act**" of adultery, but not the man, is almost universally pointed out. There is no way around the fact that the "**Law Moses commanded**" (5), declared both the woman and the man were to be put to death:

**Deuteronomy 22:22** - "If a man is found lying with the wife of another man, **both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman, and the woman.** So you shall purge the evil from Israel."

Those last two words, "**from Israel,**" point to the fact that this law was God's **theocratic governance** for the Old Covenant nation Israel. The church doesn't stone adulteresses or kidnappers or Sabbath breakers or homosexual offenders or people who curse their parents. We all understand that. People who think they're being clever pointing out the unreasonableness of these Old Testament laws for today's society are just showing their ignorance.

None-the-less, this clear command still reveals the ugliness of the bias in these religious leaders when they quote **their version** of the same law to Jesus in **John 8:5** - "**Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?**"

So it's easy to see the **discrimination**. It's easy to see the **social injustice**. Obviously no law should be slanted in one criminal's favor or another. But I want to probe a deeper and less obvious question. Yes, the wickedness and injustice of the Scribes and Pharisees is revealed. Both a man and a woman were guilty of breaking God's law. **But who is the winner and**

### ***who is the loser in the adulterous pair?***

It's easy to rush to the wrong conclusion. True, the bias is against the woman. There *is* injustice on the human side. But think again. One person (the woman) received ***divine forgiveness*** and ***amnesty with God, the eternal judge***. The other (the man) avoids the disgrace and embarrassment to be sure. But, as far as we know, he remained ***locked in his same condemned life***. He probably fulfilled his days thinking he was fortunate to get off the hook. And like most people who don't feel the probing work of public scrutiny or divine presence, that escape of notice probably made him feel confident to continue in his sinful addiction. But he died one day to face eternal reckoning and damnation.

So, I ask again, who was the blessed one in this account?

The life lesson here is ***it's not always bad to be the one caught in a sin. And it's almost always bad not to be caught***. I say this because all of us go through times when our sins are exposed by others, sometimes with good intent and sometimes with nasty intent. And when that happens it's almost impossible to sense that ***God*** was involved in that painful exposure. We often miss God's painful grace in our humiliating circumstances.

While we don't like to consider it, very few of us are wise enough to always feel as sensitive as we should about our own sins. Often we don't even ***see*** our own sins as offensive to God as we sense the wickedness of the same sins in others.

So again I ask the question. Would this woman have come to find forgiveness and pardon and life in Jesus Christ if these religious hypocrites hadn't trampled all over her rights and dignity? We'll never know for sure. She ***might*** have. But not likely. Look for the hand of God in your humbling moments.

All of this relates to our title question: ***Is sexual immorality serious if God is merciful to sinners?*** I have a feeling this woman would tell us today that Jesus' mercy was the most ***painful thing*** she ever experienced. This woman's experience is miles from the kind of ***mild apology*** that gets tossed up to God when Christians have finished enjoying their season of sinful self-expression and pleasure. This woman never forgot the humiliation - the disgrace - the sheer embarrassment of having her sin ***exposed***. I'm sure she'd tell us a lot of her pride and sinful heart were ***crucified*** in front of that crowd. She would say she saw in hindsight the day was a great blessing.

Long before Jesus told her to ***"Go and sin no more,"*** a large part of her old life was torn from her bleeding heart. She came to the end of herself. Everything of her old life was seen as an unholy mess. She was forced to feel the ***pain*** of her ***old*** life before she received the ***grace*** for her ***new*** life. This is usually the liberating slow path of genuine repentance.

I'm sorry to linger here but this needs to be thought through. Is grace ***easy*** or ***hard?*** Is the entrance of grace ***simple***, or ***disturbing?*** I sometimes think we confuse the fact that God's forgiving grace is ***free*** with the mistaken notion that it's ***magic***. How much of my ***heart*** has to be effected receiving divine grace? What part of my old self has to be pushed out to ***make room*** for free, divine grace?

My grandson Jack is constantly being told he needs to remember to say ***"please"*** and ***"thank you"*** as he bargains his way through life. Usually he says them ***after*** being reminded. And, as much as I love him, I have to tell you I sometimes don't think his heart is in it. Usually he comes by my office for some candy after Sunday morning service. After being reminded he'll toss out a quick ***"please"*** while frantically opening a little chocolate and stuffing it into his mouth. If he takes another one you have to go through the whole reminder process again. It's just something he knows he's supposed to do. It helps him get what he wants while pleasing the adults in the room.

Here's a conclusion I've been processing on this whole subject of the ***freeness*** and the ***costliness*** of divine grace. The big-picture understanding comes from a one verse prayer from king David in his classic examination of divine forgiveness in ***Psalms 51***. The sentence is found in ***Psalms 51:10*** - ***"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me."***

The principle is this. The reception of free divine grace must come from a heart that longs for ***more than just being off the hook with God***. The plea for divine grace must be spawned in a heart that is sick of being what it is. David wants

forgiveness, to be sure. Nothing wrong with that. But that's not *all* David wants. He's seen something really *ugly* in his heart. He wants his *inner self* - he calls it the "*spirit within me*" - transformed. I take that to mean he doesn't ever want to see this twisted inner self directing his life again. I'm not sure forgiveness comes into a heart that doesn't long for that change.

2) **IT IS A SIGN OF OUR CORRUPT NATURE THAT WE CAN FREQUENTLY BE MORE CONCERNED WITH THE SINS OF OTHERS THAN OUR OWN**

**John 8:4-7** - "...they said to him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. [5] Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?" [6] This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. [7] And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her."

The point of this account *isn't* that the sin of this adulterous woman wasn't that serious. The point Jesus makes is religion, without the inward work of the Holy Spirit, can easily make us concerned *only* with the outward actions of others. We can think ourselves righteous because we see sins in others that we have not committed ourselves. We can get *selective* in the sins we find offensive.

Notice what Jesus does. He *doesn't* pronounce this woman innocent. He *does* call these leaders to first look into *their own hearts* - **John 8:7** - "And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, 'Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.'"

*Frederick Dale Bruner's* words here are helpful - "*Jesus' question is not intended to void civil and criminal justice* [or even the need to rebuke persistent sin in the body of Christ]. *What judge or jury is sinless? But His question is intended to probe our motives in human relations....*" Sometimes we can, to use Jesus' words, see the "*speck*" in a brother's eye while missing the "*log*" in our own.

3) **JESUS REVEALS INCREDIBLE MERCY TO EVEN SERIOUS ACTS OF WICKEDNESS**

**John 8:4-5** - "...they said to him, 'Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. [5] Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?'"

Their point in reciting the commanded punishment is to remind Jesus this was no *minor* infraction. And Jesus never said anything to weaken the cutting edge of the law. *Death* was a serious punishment because *adultery* was, and is, incredibly offensive before a holy God.

Do you ever feel you've sinned too badly to receive mercy and pardon - *again*? Do you ever feel if perhaps your failure wasn't so wicked - or so repeated - or so joy-destroying - that perhaps *then* you'd start over with the Lord? That's why this story is recorded by the Apostle John.

What shall we do with really serious moral failings? What about really "*big sins*"? O, how we need this account. There actually was one person - One without any sin - who *would* have qualified to cast the first stone at this woman. Jesus could have. But He knew it wouldn't be long - within a matter of months - before He would lay down His life to provide authentic, adequate atonement for this woman's illicit sex-life. He knew that was enough.

4) **IT IS POSSIBLE TO FEEL GUILTY IN CONSCIENCE WITHOUT RECEIVING MERCY FROM JESUS CHRIST**

**John 8:7-11** - "And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her." [8] And once more he bent down and wrote on the ground. [9] But when they heard it, they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. [10] Jesus stood up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" [11] She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more."

This is fascinating. Why does Jesus open up and lay bare the sins of these accusers? Is it just to embarrass them? Old *Matthew Henry* offers up his unique explanation in a way I never considered - "*He aimed to bring, not only the prisoner [the woman] to repentance, by showing her his mercy, but the prosecutors too, by showing them their sins. They sought to ensnare him; he sought to convince and convert them.*"

These men felt **embarrassed** enough to slip away in silence. Jesus' second writing on the ground gave them the chance to sneak off while others were distracted by what Jesus may have been writing. But they were just **convicted**. They were not engaged with Jesus' forgiving grace. It's possible to feel the weight of sin without ever actually dealing savingly with Jesus as Redeemer.

The woman just stays. Why? She had no reason to stay there once **all** of her accusers had left. No one was holding her there anymore. Jesus was still writing on the ground. His intentional **not** looking at her is His divine way of testing her heart. Everyone else left. Everyone else avoided confrontation with the holy love of Jesus. She could have just gone home along with all the others.

We learn sinners need to just stay with Jesus. We learn His heart is big and healing and forgiving for those who feel the true shame of their actual guilt before God. We learn Jesus isn't a threat to those who want a clean heart. He's still the same today.