

John 8: 1 - 11. Madam, go and sin no more! Jesus upholds God's holiness through mercy.
Scripture Readings: *Deuteronomy 17: 5 - 7; Isaiah 42: 1 - 4 and John 8: 1 - 11*

Introduction:

God holds Jesus up for us to see, in order for us to be able to see the heart of the Father. When we understand and recognise what Jesus did during his ministry on earth, we become aware of what the Father intends for us and feels about us. One of the characteristics of the ministry of Jesus - and one that truly reveals the heart of God the Father - we find in the prophecy about the Messiah that says: *"A bruised reed He will not break, and a dimly burning wick He will not extinguish."* (Is42:3)

Jesus in conflict with the religious establishment of his day:

We need to also understand the message of our text in John 8 against the background of the radical difference between Jesus and the religious leaders and the temple establishment of his time.

Their main approach was to keep people who were, so called, ritually impure, from entering the temple and God's presence. Financially they benefited a lot from this, because the cleansing baths around the temple brought them a lot of money and they owned every single one of these baths!! All the prescribed sacrificial lambs which they sold to hundreds of thousands of pilgrims, brought them wealth and power.

The consequence of their stance that only those who were ritually perfect could enter the temple, was that many could never be accepted as worshippers in the temple, not even after going through the prescribed rituals. Those whose sins were openly offensive to the morals of society did not have a chance to be restored into the fellowship with God: Tax collectors, prostitutes, adulterers, strangers, foreigners!

Through out his ministry, Jesus challenged this system where people who are as bruised reeds and who look like smouldering lamps were thrown out by the temple establishment, yes simply thrown away! The ministry of Jesus entailed that the broken and the dimly burning can be restored by the grace and power of God, and be brought back into the fellowship of the believers. Jesus did not require expensive ritual baths or sacrifices - he simply spoke to outcasts about the love of God. Healing them and forgiving them, he reinstated them into a relationship with God. This is why the religious leaders wanted him dead! He threatened their power over "impure" people and therefore the basis of their authority; he threatened their theology and most of all, he threatened their most profitable business based on the importance of ritual purity.

One example is the woman found in adultery.

She was a bruised reed, a dimly burning wick. When Jesus encountered her, she was about to be stoned by men who were quick to judge.

The accusers.

Her accusers had no sympathy or mercy for this woman. They probably were not even concerned about what she has done. The Bible says it really was an opportunity to set a trap for Jesus. They knew that Jesus wanted to restore bruised reeds and make the light of dimly shining wicks shine brightly again. But then there was the Law of Moses which required the death penalty. Could they exploit the merciful heart of Jesus to prove that he was more concerned about this broken person, than being obedient to God's decrees? If that was the case, they could bring Jesus before the Sanhedrin and judge him for that. They could kill him for that.

They thought they could force Jesus to choose between the mercy and grace that save a soul on the one hand and upholding God's holiness and justice on the other hand - and they thought that if Jesus sided with mercy rather than with upholding the Law they could get rid of this Man who threatened their privileged position.

At first Jesus did not answer. He wrote on the ground. We do not know what he wrote, but that is not important. What is important is that Jesus is not willing to be drawn into this discussion in a rush, because the very life of the woman was at stake. Careful consideration should be required before any judicial system condemns to death - or any severe punishment. After all, those who apply justice should not have to choose between justice and mercy. Our safeguarding of justice should be merciful and gracious. We should honour God's perfect holiness by showing God's perfect love. It is not either or - we should uphold both. But how was Jesus going to do this? And if you abuse the judicial system for political purposes, as the accusers were doing - who really cares about fairness, justice and mercy?

And Jesus - what does he think of her sin?

According to this Law of Moses, that her accusers only in part are quoting, the witnesses to a sin that could lead to the sinner being sentenced to death, should throw the first stone.

*Deut 17: 5 -7: 5: Take the man or woman who has done this evil deed to your city gate and stone that person to death. 6 On the testimony of **two or three witnesses** a man shall be put to death, but no one shall be put to death on the testimony of only one witness. 7 **The hands of the witnesses must be the first in putting him to death, and then the hands of all the people.***

It would be a confirmation of the reliability and the trustworthiness of their evidence, if such witnesses would be willing to cast the first stone. It was part of the Law's way to ensure that an innocent person is not sentenced to death, or be put to death, if it was not the result of a fair judgement and not in the best interest of society. This requirement of the Law also incorporated something of the principle that we in modern history find in British law, where one is judged by your peers. The jury system. It is based on the principle that not to apply the law within the context of peers' insight into all the realities of one's life, makes judgement harsh and therefore not merciful and not fair and not just. To throw the first stone is to acknowledge this: If I ever do this - you should sentence me to death as well. I admit that I would deserve that...

By writing on the ground, Jesus gave them time to contemplate what they are doing. What would happen to them if they were tried with the same malice and with the same wrong motives, as they were doing to this woman?

But they are too occupied with their ulterior motives, to even consider what they do. "Come on Jesus, speak up! You are not getting out of this one!!" they might have been shouting, while Jesus was writing on the ground.

And Jesus said. Let the one without sin (could also be translated: the one who can judge with a clear conscience) cast the first stone.

Apply the law of Moses, if that is what you really are after! Confirm the fact that this is the kind of law enforcement you believe is in the community's best interest. Acknowledge that you too are willing to be stoned to death if the truth of your lives (and secret adulterous thoughts and deeds!) are revealed. After all - how did it happen that you were eye witnesses to this poor woman's sin? The Law requires at least 2 eye witnesses before the death penalty can be enforced. Were you really eye witnesses?

These men were angry because Jesus threatened their position. But Jesus showed them that their nasty abuse of the woman's embarrassing dilemma threatened them even more than he did. The older men left first. They understood what Jesus was saying by quoting Deut 17 sooner than the younger ones. Life experience did help a little bit after all!

If anybody was in the moral position to stone, to judge and to kill the woman, it was God; it was Jesus.

But Jesus came to our world to show us the heart of God. Although he alone is holy and perfect - he too does not break the bruised reed or snuff out the smouldering wick! God's heart is to restore life, not to take a life. Jesus did not come to throw away the lives of sinners. God's heart is to save from sin. God's heart is to forgive and create a new life - one in which adultery and every other sin is forgiven, but is also taken out of the equation.

Madam, he said to the woman, I also do not sentence you to death. Go, and sin no more!

Jesus is God's grace and mercy!

God's grace is dependent upon Jesus and what he has done for us. He is revealed as the one who will make something out of your life when the world is ready to throw you away. He will complete his work in you. **2 Corinthians 12: 9-10 says that his power is perfected in our weakness.** 1 Corinthians 1 says that God chose the weak things of the world, rather than the strong. ***God chooses us, not because we have so much to offer, but because of what he can do in our lives.*** We may not ever forget that. We need to understand that in the midst of our failures, God is there for us. Every time I get up to preach, I am aware that there are broken, bruised people present, even if they won't admit it. People just as bruised as I am. Yes, there are things in your life, situations and failures, that make you wonder, "What good is my life? How can I ever be used?" Sometimes we are the people that smile on the outside and hurt on the inside. We are run over by other people.

When we are those bruised reeds, we need to understand that God hasn't given up on us. He is the reed-repairer and the flax-restorer. He is the One who can take a bruised reed and work with it until it plays beautiful music as a "reed-flute", or provide life giving light. He can take that smouldering, smelly wick that is disturbing to others and make it burn brightly again. Sometimes, it is in our very weakest places that he makes us the strongest. He takes those bruised, burnt, charred places and he uses those experiences of hurt to enable us to minister to others.

In conclusion:

God wants to use people who are sensitive like Jesus was. All of us should consider how we offend God and society. We should do unto others as we need them to do unto us. He doesn't want us to be high and elevated in the ivory towers of our prideful self-righteousness looking down on those who haven't arrived yet.

If we understand that God's grace has been sufficient for us, ***if we have been picked up in our time of need, received mercy and forgiveness and set upon a rock, we can understand how God can do that for other people as well.***

This makes our hearts soft and sensitive, and less judgmental. We can point people to Jesus. We can receive the broken and the smouldering and lift them up. Has Jesus not forgiven them? Thinking about the meaning of Deut 17: 7, are we really in a position to judge, to stone, to eliminate, others?

Jesus wouldn't point to people's shortcomings, he would just minister to them. ***When God forgives people, they become a glorious testimony of the grace of God.*** I would rather see one living testimony to God's grace than listen to a hundred sermons about it. You can study commentaries and books about grace, or I could preach a whole series on it, but you might still leave not knowing what God's grace really is. Where you really see grace is in a human life that was broken and bruised and full of failure; a life that God restored. ***That is the kind of business God is in, and the church needs to be in.***

Today Jesus wants you to understand that he is not throwing you away - in spite of your sin. He wants to have fellowship with you, set you on a rock, eat his Supper with you. He wants you to share in the joy of forgiveness with your peers. He wants to restore your life, whatever you have done. He wants to uphold God's holiness through forgiveness and restoration. Jesus wants you to

accept that he is not sentencing you and that the purpose of his forgiveness is that he wants to turn your life around!

And as you accept his kind words of forgiveness, also hear his concerned words about the rest of your life:

Madam / Sir, go - and sin no more!

This is the Word of God.

Amen.