

**Jesus in the Dirt**  
**How God Deals with Our Sin**  
**John 7:53-8:11**

Go ahead and open up to John 8 if you have a Bible or a Bible-equipped mobile device. John 8, it is on page 793 on Bibles that are underneath the seats. Throughout this year, we are doing what we always do, and that is teach through books of the Bible line-by-line, but we're also sprinkling in some messages from the gospel of John, one of the four biographies of Jesus that we have in Scripture and the story we have to look at today is an absolute doozy. It's got intrigue, it's got scandal, it's got powerful people abusing their authority, it's got Jesus going toe-to-toe with corrupt religious leaders, a life is saved, crowds are astonished, and most importantly for us today, this story gives us a powerful reminder of what God is really like. I want to warn you, we put a fill-in-the-blank on the bulletin and in the app, and normally we tell you what it is close to the beginning of the message. Not today. It's coming at the very end. So let's get to work. Our main text is John 7:53-8:11, but in order to set the scene, we need to go back a few verses to John 7:37.

**This passage takes place at the end of a festival called The Feast of the Booths, a weeklong celebration in Jerusalem.** This means the city is packed with people who have come from all over for the celebration. By this point, Jesus had already stirred up no small amount of controversy and had done plenty to agitate the Pharisees and other religious leaders in Jerusalem, and then, on the climactic final day of the festival, look what Jesus does, verse 37:

**"On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water."**

And we might hear those words and think, those sound nice. If you're thirsty, come to Jesus and drink, and streams of living water will flow from your heart. I don't know what that means, but it sure sounds nice. But for the Pharisees and religious leaders in attendance, those words immediately remind them of words that God says in Isaiah 55:

**"Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat.**

In the Old Testament, God told His people that if they thirst to come to Him and drink. That is, of course, a metaphor, and now Jesus is applying that metaphor to Himself, and that's a big no-no.

Back to John 7, verse 39,

**"Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified."** So he's talking about living water, he's talking about the Holy Spirit, and this is causing some controversy, very 40

**"When they heard these words, some of the people said, "This really is the Prophet." Others said, "This is the Christ." But some said, "Is the Christ to come from Galilee? Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the offspring of David, and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was?" So there was a division among the people over him. Some of them wanted to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him."**

And then in the next paragraph, there is this whole discussion between the chief priests and the Pharisees, and they're all looking at each other going, why didn't you arrest this guy? We've never seen anyone speak like him. This crowd is going crazy for him, some people think he's the Christ, God's chosen one, which only agitates the Pharisees more, and then they all leave in a huff, and it says in verse 53, **"They went each to his own house, but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives."**

So the festival is over, the Pharisees and other religious leaders are upset. They had tried to arrest him, but they couldn't, so everyone goes home for the night, and the Pharisees begin to plan their next move. **The issue was that Jesus had claimed to be the living water promised by God to his people. In his outstanding book *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, Kenneth Bailey says that this was a direct challenge to the Pharisees, and it had happened on their turf. That was not something they were content to let slide.** And that sets the table for our primary passage today, where we see their next move play out. It is a story that is one of the most well-known in the entire Bible. But there is one more little issue we need to address.

If you have your Bible out, look down at the page and notice that there are two open brackets right before 7:53. Then look down and notice that there are two closed brackets after 8:11. In my Bible, it says, **"The earliest manuscripts do not include 7:53-8:11,"** and I'm guessing your Bible says that or something similar. What are we to make of that?

Well, on its surface, it's exactly what it says. We have more manuscripts of the Bible than we do of any other ancient literature from that time period, and it is true that none of the best and earliest manuscripts contain this story. I carefully read about a half dozen commentaries this week, and I skimmed probably ten more, and exactly zero of them tried to argue that this story was originally a part of John's gospel. Only one even tried to argue that it was inconclusive. They all agree that it was added centuries later.

D.A. Carson, one of the most influential New Testament scholars of this last generation, says, **"Despite the best efforts to prove that this narrative was originally part of John's Gospel, the evidence is against them."**

Bruce Metzger, who was a world-renowned New Testament scholar, says that **"The evidence that this story wasn't written by John is overwhelming."** Metzger says that this story was almost certainly what is called an *agrapha*, which is a Greek word, a meaning not, and graph meaning written, so it was a story that was not written and was instead passed down through oral traditions until it was eventually written down. In fact, an early disciple of John named Papias knew about this story and commented on it. Metzger goes on to say, however, **"This account has all the earmarks of historical veracity."** In other words, almost nobody doubts that this story happened, and there is good reason to believe it happened at this moment in Jesus' life. It just wasn't originally written down as part of John's gospel.

Now, we can take a deep dive into how we know that, and we could talk about textual criticism and New Testament manuscripts and the reliability of the New Testament, and that's all pretty interesting stuff, and I'm guessing at least 3-5 of you would agree with that. But, we have a limited amount of time today, and I prefer to use that time to focus on the story itself. If you're interested in researching more about the issues surrounding this text and the details around why it is believed that it wasn't part of the original gospel of John, send me an email, and I'll be happy to send you some stuff.

But here's the bottom line: The story almost certainly happened, it almost certainly was not part of John's original writing, it does not contradict anything we see anywhere else in Scripture. And we have an unbelievable number of New Testament manuscripts and fragments, and in the extremely rare case where there are substantive differences between manuscripts, they are clearly noted, just like it's noted right here.

So with that, now we're going to look at John 8. We'll read through the story, make some comments along the way, and then I want to draw out some key ideas at the end...the Pharisees and religious leaders are upset at Jesus' popularity, they are upset that Jesus is comparing himself to God, and they want to trap him and show that he is a fraud.

Verse 2: **Early in the morning Jesus came again to the temple. All the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst, they said to him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now in the Law of Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?"**

So Jesus returns to the temple, it's the day after the festival, which was meant to be a Sabbath or day of rest, and Jesus sits down and begins to teach, something a rabbi would do to show

their authority. And it's at this moment that the Pharisees make their move. They interrupt Jesus and throw a woman in front of him, claiming she had been caught in the act of adultery. Now, already this story raises a number of questions,

1. How exactly did this group of religious leaders catch a woman in the act of adultery? Where exactly are they hanging out?
2. I'm not an expert in the subject, but I'm given to understand that adultery involves more than one person. Where's the dude? You would think if they were really concerned with keeping the law, they would have brought him, too. We'll have more on this in a moment.
3. Obviously, the concern here isn't for God's honor or for holiness or for anything like that. These powerful men had an agenda, and they used a relatively powerless woman as a prop. And some form of this story has been played out by countless women all over the world and throughout the centuries as they are used by powerful men. And this sort of thing, tragically, still happens today. She isn't heard. She isn't given a chance to defend herself. Her humanity is disrespected, and the image of God in her is violated. And it's disgusting.

And the Pharisees aren't honest about their motives. Because for them, it is less about spiritual truth and more about maintaining power. I'm going to be honest with you, I don't find power to be all that interesting. I don't really desire power. I desire influence, meaning I want to live my life in such a manner that I am trustworthy, and I want to be able to use the gifts God has given me to positively influence others, but I don't know that I have much use for power.

But I'll tell you something that I find interesting. I read a decent amount of history, and ever since I was a kid I've enjoyed reading biographies of influential people, and then I try to stay somewhat informed about world events in the present, and it never ceases to amaze me how much the desire for power can just decimate a person's moral compass. Heck, just look at the world of fiction. Most Disney movies have at least one character who craves power. And it's not Simba. It's not Cinderella. It's not Aladdin. It's the bad guy!

It seems, and history tragically bears this out in a hundred different ways, that when a desire for power gets into a human heart, nearly everything else goes out the window: honesty, fairness, humility, you name it. *Having* power isn't bad. It's when we crave it that we get into trouble. It's a lot like money in that regard.

Right now I'm reading the book about Alexander Hamilton that inspired Lin Manuel Miranda to write the play. And the other day I read a whole chapter about one of our Founding Fathers, who I will not name because his name isn't the point. But what's clear from this book and others I've read is that he was a man who was just desperate for approval and desperate for power. And what's remarkable to me is that all the evidence suggests that he wanted

these things for their own sake. It wasn't so that he could bring about positive change in the world. He just desperately wanted to have power. And nobody liked him.

And too often in the church, we see people grasping for power for the same reasons. It's not about the Kingdom. It's not about helping others. It's not about dying to self and serving God. It's about being able to bark jump and know people will say, "How high?" I've heard too many stories of people who have suffered spiritual abuse from pastors and others who have become obsessed with power and ego. If that's your story, I'm heartbroken for your experience, and I need you to know that God sees you, and He is with you.

For all of us, I think it's a good thing to desire influence because influence flows from our character. But be careful about chasing power. Or at least ask yourself the question, what is power for? Because if it's truly honestly to help people, that can be a good thing - power can be very helpful in getting things done - but if it's just for our own ego, there will never be enough, and we'll sacrifice everything for it.

In this story, the religious leaders' desire for power created all sorts of problems, not the least of which was they were totally dishonest about their motives. This wasn't about accountability for someone who had violated the law. It was about trapping Jesus.

Hear this, if we are going to be followers of Jesus who don't get hijacked by our own desire for power, we need to be people who are ruthlessly honest about our motives, all the time and with no exceptions. When we care more about gaining power than telling the truth, it wrecks families, it brings down companies, it destroys churches, and the list goes on. And it's just amazing to me how many of the controversies of our day, if we're really brutally honest, they're not about the actual issues. They're about leveraging issues to gain power. God help us.

Verse 6: "**This they said to test him that they might have some charge to bring against him.**" In case there was any remaining doubt about their true motives, there it is. Again, this isn't about justice; it's about using a defenseless woman to trap Jesus, something that Pharisees also tried to do in Mark 3, Mark 10, and Luke 6. And here's why this was a trap: In their minds, Jesus had one of two options.

**First, he could deny the law of Moses.** He could essentially say, "Yes, I know what the law says, but given the realities of the world we're living in, given that we're living under Roman occupation, we simply cannot follow the law to this degree." And if he did that, they would have branded him a coward, and they would accuse him of being against the law of Moses, not exactly a charge you want coming your way if you're a rabbi.

**His second option is to authorize the execution.** This, supposedly, would fulfill the Old Testament law, but there was another issue in play here. As I mentioned, Jerusalem was

currently under Roman occupation, and under Roman law, Jews were not permitted to carry out executions. In fact, near the end of Jesus' life, the Jewish leaders will acknowledge this in John 18 when Pilate basically says to them, if you want to execute him, do it yourselves. And the Jewish leaders say, "Uh, that's not allowed."

And this scene is taking place in a very public setting in a large enclosure near the temple where Roman soldiers would be carefully patrolling to make sure nothing got out of hand.

So you've got Jewish leaders watching to see if Jesus is going to violate Jewish law, and you've got Romans watching to see if he's going to violate Roman law. I guess Jesus is just stuck. Just kidding, he's Jesus. He's never stuck.

So what does he do? He does what any of us would do in this situation. He starts drawing in the dirt. **"Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger in the ground."**

And that, of course, begs the question, what did he write? New Testament scholars have all sorts of theories.

- Some guess he was writing something like "guilty" in the dirt as if he was saying, "You're right, she's guilty. Let's go..." to call their bluff.
- Others suggest he was merely trying to draw attention away from the woman or that he was just doodling in the ground,
- Still, others say that he was simply delaying his reply because he was so exasperated by their hardness of heart.

One idea that I saw in multiple commentaries that perhaps Jesus scribbled out a reference to Jeremiah 17:13, **"O Lord, the hope of Israel, all who forsake you shall be put to shame; those who turn away from you shall be written in the earth, for they have forsaken the Lord, the foundation of living water."** Perhaps this was Jesus prophetically enacting this verse, further inflaming the religious leaders by implying they have turned away from God.

One last theory that has some merit, Ken Bailey points out that this took place on the Sabbath day, and of course, on the Sabbath work was prohibited. Rabbis at that time considered writing that put ink to paper to be work because it made a permanent mark, but writing in the dust was permissible because it leaves no lasting mark. Perhaps this was Jesus' way of showing the Pharisees, I know the law and I know how you interpret it.

What was he actually doing and what did he actually write? We don't know, and we have no way of knowing. One of my favorite seminary professors used to say, **"The Bible doesn't tell us what we want to know, it tells us what God wants us to know, and that ticks us off."** So God doesn't need us to know exactly what Jesus wrote because it's not the point of the story. Verse 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.' And once more, he bent down and wrote on the ground. 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."**

Jesus says, "Ok, if we're going to stone this woman, let's have the one who is without sin throw the first stone." Now, we need to be clear about what he is saying here because verses like this one can get misused by those seeking to avoid accountability for their actions. He is *not* saying that a person must be perfectly sinless before they can name the sin of another.

**If you get pulled over this week, I do not recommend saying to the officer, "Let her who is without sin write the first ticket." That's not going to end well for you.** Too often, when we get held accountable for something, our first impulse is to defend ourselves by saying that our accuser isn't perfect, either, or maybe we will shift blame to someone else. We might even quote this verse. When we do that, it's basically code for, "I know I'm guilty, I would just rather lash out than acknowledge it."

So Jesus isn't saying that you have to be perfect in order to enforce justice. If that were the case, every justice system in the world would collapse. But what he's doing is, first of all, he's appealing to the Old Testament law. Deuteronomy 13 and Deuteronomy 17 both say that in the case of an execution, the eye-witnesses need to throw the first stones. He's basically saying, let the one who is truly obeying the requirements of the law, in this case, throw the first stone.

**See, in the first century, in order to prosecute someone for adultery, the law stated that you had to have eye-witnesses.** So as you can imagine, that means these cases weren't prosecuted very often because the standard of evidence was impossibly high. So what scholars think happened in this case was that people in town knew about the affair this woman was involved in, so the religious leaders went to the man involved and either bribed him or blackmailed him to confirm their situation. We don't know for sure that is what happened, but certainly, it is a strong possibility. Regardless, once again, this wasn't about God's honor. It wasn't about justice. It was about rage toward Jesus and a desperation for power.

So when Jesus says, let the one who is without sin be the first to throw a stone, they're sunk. He's basically asking, who caught her in the act? If we're so concerned about the law here, let's make sure we're following it. And they've got nothing. Jesus is also saying, you're asking me to violate Roman law, who's willing to join me? With his simple statement, Jesus exposes that they don't have the evidence they need, they are guilty of violating the law themselves,

their motives are now plain to see, and these powerful men who came seeking to shame Jesus now leave ashamed themselves. Score one for the good guys!

But before we celebrate too much, let's make sure we're clear-eyed about what happened here. Jesus has once again humiliated powerful people on their own turf. And when powerful people get humiliated, they don't tend to say, "Oh man, he really got us that time! Shame on us!" They don't tend to look in the mirror and realize they need to change. No, what do they seek? Revenge.

So this woman is saved, the men leave angry and ashamed, she was bracing for a gruesome death but now realizes she's going to live, and she knows that this rabbi has done something for her that is really going to get him in trouble.

And then Jesus looks at her, verse 10, "**Jesus stood up and said to her, 'Woman (a term of respect in that culture), where are they? Has no one condemned you?'**" Remember, Jesus never asked questions because he lacked information.

She responds, "**No one, Lord.**" And Jesus said, "**Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.**"

And that's it. And we know exactly nothing about the rest of this woman's life. We don't even know anything about her faith. The word "Lord" there in verse 11 means something more like 'sir,' so it's not an acknowledgment of Jesus' divinity. We're simply left to wonder.

The subtitle of this message is How God Deals With Our Sin, and I want you to see what Jesus does with this woman because it has just massive implications for how you think about God.

First of all, in this story, look at who Jesus has in front of him. He's got the religious folks, the supposedly holy people, the ones with all of the power and authority. And then he's got a woman, thrown in the dirt in front of him. And if Jesus cared about power, if he cared about his own reputation, don't you think he's going to side with the powerful people? Don't you think he'll look the other way at the sins of the powerful people and join them in ganging up on the less powerful person? Don't you think there was a ton of incentive for Jesus to sacrifice his integrity and side with the powerful men?

But that's not what Jesus does. Jesus doesn't stand with the powerful. He gets down into the dirt with the powerless. A generation later, Jesus' best friend Peter would write in 1 Peter 5, "**God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.**"



Jesus is not concerned with his power and reputation. Jesus is in the dirt. We're stuck playing all of our power games and trying to appear impressive, and all the while, Jesus is in the dirt.

We won't find Jesus posturing the politicking in the halls of power because Jesus is in the dirt, looking the powerless in the eye. He's dignifying them; He's affirming the image of God in them.

The dad of one of my best friends is a pastor in Southern California, and on my sabbatical I got to hear him preach and he says, **"If we can't see God, maybe we're not looking low enough."**

God is near to the brokenhearted, and He saves those who are crushed in Spirit. You might look at your life, and you might feel like you are stuck in the dirt. Maybe it's because of choices you made. Maybe it's because of circumstances that weren't your fault. Either way, I've got good news for you, Jesus is in the dirt with you.

He rejects the opportunity to stand with the powerful, and instead, with a radical commitment to truth-telling and compassion, he influences the lowly and defends the defenseless.

And look at how he engages with this woman. After this costly, sacrificial demonstration of love, what does he say to her? **"Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more."** It's not a call to perfection, but it is a call for her to change her life. But notice that he only says that to her after he has demonstrated his love for her in an incredibly costly way. Jesus upholds the law - adultery was and is a very, very serious issue in the eyes of God. He does not excuse the woman's sin, and he does not condone the woman's sin. He tells the woman not to commit adultery anymore, but what does he do before that? He saves her life. He shows that He is for her. He gets down in the dirt with you. He looks her in the eye. He humanizes her.

So when he says sin no more, he's not saying sin no more; otherwise, you might have people wanting to stone you again, and I might not be around. He's saying sin no more because you have met the living God and been transformed by a radical act of mercy and grace.

Jesus meets us in the dirt, and He loves us enough that He doesn't condone our sin but rather what He invites us to do is to step out of the shame that will only keep us trapped and to instead receive His grace and mercy and let it transform us, so our lives change.

Our inspiration for holiness comes not from fear but from love. When we're motivated by love, our pursuit of holiness is humble and sincere.

Last thing, and then we're done. Consider for a moment this story from the perspective of the woman. She is apprehended by angry religious leaders without any knowledge of their desire

to trap Jesus. All she knows is there is a penalty coming her way, and she is powerless to stop it. But then Jesus steps in. So now whatever anger had been directed from the Pharisees to the woman is now directed where? To Jesus. They didn't like him anyway, but now whatever condemnation belonged to the woman because of her sin was no longer hers because Jesus stepped in and saved her. She had to know that by confronting these powerful people, Jesus was only asking for punishment for himself, but he did it anyway. It's a costly demonstration of love that saves her.

And what this woman experiences is a picture of what Jesus offers all of us. Because we, like this woman, were condemned under the law by our sin. We were facing death and eternal separation from God. But rather than leave us to suffer that fate, Jesus came to earth, He confronted injustice, confronted religious abuse, stood up for the marginalized, healed the sick, and proclaimed the arrival of the Kingdom of God. And at the end of his life, He went to the cross, where He showed us the ultimate costly demonstration of love. **Here's the fill-in-the-blank, finally. Jesus takes our sin upon himself.** It is on the cross that the Bible says Jesus subjected the rulers and authorities to open shame. It is on the cross that Jesus canceled the record of debt that stood against us. It is on the cross where Jesus took the penalty for our sin so that by faith, we can receive His righteousness.

And so the message of the cross is not that our sin is not a big deal. On the contrary, it is a huge deal, as the old hymn says, "It was my sin that held him there." But the message is that we have a God who does not simply get into the dirt. He goes to the cross, and when we look to the cross, we are invited to see the depth of the Father's love for us, and we are invited to go and sin no more, not because we are afraid of punishment, and certainly not as a means to gain power, but because we have been transformed by the beautiful, costly, grace of God and we know He is infinitely worthy of our trust. So may the motivation for our obedience not be fear, but only love. Let's pray.