

The Text That's Not Supposed to Be in the Bible

John 7:53–8:11

Studies in John #17

MAYBE you have an annual event when there's going to be a moment you have to face a certain someone. It's inevitable; but you have to do it. Maybe there's a moment in your favorite movie that you just have to deal with to get through: it could be a scary scene, it could be a sad scene, it could be an unexpected scene. You know it's coming, so you prepare and get through. Maybe there's a moment in your favorite book. Preaching through John's Gospel, my moment is the passage before us today.

I'm not an expert in what is called "textual criticism." I can competently read Greek and interact with the specialists, though. Knowing this moment in the Gospel was coming I asked many friends for the best things to read on why this text isn't authentic and why it is. Unless you have a King James or New King James translation of the Bible, all our modern versions consider this text as not a part of the Word of God. After weeks of reading I expected to confirm the modern translations' reasons; instead, I'm convinced of its authenticity.¹

What's the issue? Most modern translation like this ESV have double brackets around the text with words similar to these: **The earliest manuscripts do not include 7:53–8:11**. But we don't have the earliest manuscripts. They've disintegrated. And of those we do have we're only talking about six

manuscripts from the third and fourth centuries. And they're only a century earlier than the oldest Greek manuscript that does contain it. Even more, we know this text existed as part of the Gospel earlier than the manuscripts that omit it because when Jerome translated the Scriptures into what is known as the Latin *Vulgate*, he said in 415 that there were "many manuscripts" that contained it. In fact, it's quoted as Scripture as early as the 200s.

The modern translations like the ESV may also have a footnote: **Some manuscripts do not include 7:53–8:11; others add the passage here or after 7:36 or after 21:25 or after Luke 21:38, with variations in the text.**

Some manuscripts don't include it. This could be an issue of copying, or worse, as Ambrose of Milan and Augustine of Hippo in North Africa said in the fourth century, "enemies of the true faith" removed the passage because they believed Jesus was too lenient with the adulteress. Back then contemporary practice was strict, so some removed these verses; today practice is getting more and lenient and people want to remove the Scriptural commands against sexual immorality. *Some manuscripts place it in different places.* The reality is this is only a small percentage with well over 95% including it! While moderns think moving a text meant it didn't originally belong, the ancients made copies of the Scriptures and moved texts around for ease of reading in public worship called lectionaries. We know that 7:37–52 and 8:12 was a Pentecost reading. We

know that 8:3–11 was a reading for October 8 in commemoration of St. Pelagia of Antioch that celebrated an adulteress being converted. It's "strange" to us placement at the end of Luke 21 was convenient for them as verses 12–19 were read the day before for Saints Serguis and Bacchus and the last verse of the chapter has Jesus at the temple teaching, which was a convenient insertion point. I'm convinced this is the Word of God. I'm gonna preach it!

We pick up our story with THE CIRCUMSTANCES in 7:53–8:2. After multiplying the loaves and fish around the Passover in the Spring (ch. 6) Jesus stayed in Galilee for six months because the Judean leaders were seeking to kill him (7:1). Their charge was that he was "leading the people astray" (7:12). After Jesus went up for the Fall Feast of Tabernacles the Judean Jewish leadership sought to arrest him but "no one laid a hand on him, because his hour had not yet come" (7:30 cf. 7:44). Last time we were together we saw in verses 45–52 a meeting of "the officers" whom the leadership sent to arrest Jesus. These leaders were incensed that the officers "did...not bring him" (7:45). When Nicodemus, himself a Pharisee, merely asked the question, "Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?" (7:51), the rest accused him through the innuendo: "Are you from Galilee too?" (7:52). Verse 53 dovetails beautifully: **they** (those in the meeting) **went each to his own house**. On the other hand, **Jesus went to the**

Mount of Olives (8:1), to the east overlooking Jerusalem. After the festivities ended, though, **early...the next morning**, meaning, *at dawn* (CSB), **he came again to the temple** in Jerusalem and **all the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them** (8:2).

THE TEST OF JESUS (vv. 3–6)

The first thing that happens here is THE TEST OF JESUS by those who have been trying to arrest and kill him—**the scribes and the Pharisees**. They **brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst** (8:3). If our legal antennae are as sensitive to Ruth's or Penny's then you'll notice a big thing here: they give no details. They **brought**. Has she already been condemned? Can we review the legal proceedings? **A woman**. Who is she? **Who had been caught**. Where did they find her? **In adultery**. Last time I checked it takes two to tango! Where's her husband? Where's the man caught with her? Maybe he was fleeter of foot than she?² Why is she singled out? Maybe her accusers were just chauvinists?³ As one writer said, "The inequity of the situation arouses our feelings of compassion, however guilty she herself was."⁴ This is so important in our time, brothers and sisters. We need to be more like Jesus than the Pharisees. An officer shoots a black man and many of us immediately say, "He was a thug." A young girl walks into an

abortion mill full of shame sorrow but many of us immediately say, “She’s a whore.” There’s a lot about compassion for you and me today in this story.

Placing her in the midst. Why bring her to Jesus, and not as the law prescribes as we’ll see in a moment? The lack of details leads to only one conclusion. To quote Admiral Akbar, “It’s a trap!”

Without a shred of evidence they state their charge—“**Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery**” (8:4)—then they make a beeline to the Law—“**Now in the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women**” (8:5). Turn over to Leviticus 20:10:

“If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death.”

What do you notice? *Both* shall die. What else? It doesn’t say by stoning.

Now turn to Deuteronomy 22:22–24:

“If a man is found lying with the wife of another man, [again] *both* of them shall die. If there is a betrothed [engaged] virgin, and a man meets her in the city and lies with her, then you shall bring them *both* out to *the gate of the city* [not merely to one man like with Jesus], and you shall stone them to death with stones.”

As they’re presenting their “case” they ask Jesus, “**So what do you say?**” (8:5) John tells us **this they said to test**, or “trap” (CSB) **him, that they might have some charge to bring against him** (8:6). All their efforts to arrest him so far have made them look like a bunch of Keystone Cops. Everyone

under 30, just Youtube it! It means their incompetent. It's time for a new strategy. If Jesus says, "Stone her," he sides with their misinterpretation of the law, but then causes insurrection against Rome because in Jesus' day the Jews couldn't apply capital punishment. That's why the Jewish leadership takes Jesus to Pilate! (18:31–32) If he says, "Don't stone her," he sides with Roman law and thus is against Moses so how can he be the Messiah? But look at Jesus: **Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground** (8:6). Is he ignoring them? What's he writing? We don't know. Jesus is like that. He's strange to us. That's okay. He's the eternal Son of God in human flesh who never thought, said, or did anything sinful so we expect him to be different. We need him to be different!

THE WISDOM OF JESUS (vv. 7–9)

What *do* we know? In our last two points we see two things about Jesus. First we hear THE WISDOM OF JESUS. Jesus **stood up and said: "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her"** (8:7). Was Jesus a pacifist who abhorred capital punishment? Of course not, he gave Moses the Law at Sinai before coming down to this earth! And in his Law he says things like, "If one of your own family members tries to entice you to serve other gods, you shall throw the first stone" (Deut. 13:9; para.). Then later in the Law he says, "if you hear of idol worship among the family of God you

need to investigate and have two or three witnesses and it's those witnesses who are to cast the first stones" (Deut. 17:7; para.) Jesus knows it's a kangaroo court and he calls their bluff wisely! "Let the witnesses of the crime go first. Oh, there are none? Then let all who themselves have not committed this sin go next." Again there's an application here for us as God's people in the world. Don't rashly judge based on hearsay. Don't be like the world! "I heard that this pastor over there said that. Did you see such and such's comments in those Facebook comments about that church? Yeah, what an idiot."

Strangely **once more he bent down and wrote on the ground** (v. 8). The result of Jesus' wisdom is in verse 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.** Look at what Jesus does here. To the legalists who come at him on the basis of law—or their misinterpretation of the law—Jesus repels them with the word of justice. "You wanna stone this sinner? Then go ahead sinless one!" But this leads to Jesus' speaking the word of mercy to the actual sinful woman.⁵

THE FORGIVENESS OF JESUS (vv. 10–11)

That's the second thing we hear about Jesus: THE FORGIVENESS OF JESUS.

All the sinners are gone and the actual sinless One **stood back up and** instead

said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” (8:10)

Finally we hear this woman’s only words in the entire story: **“No one, Lord”** (8:11). Either this whole thing was a ruse or she’s an actual adulteress but the man she slept with is not there, her husband is not there, and no witnesses are there.

I think it’s the latter because of what Jesus goes on to say in some of his most memorable words: **“Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more”** (8:11). Remember way back when, just after the famous words of John 3:16 we read this: “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (3:17). Yes, she sinned, but being forgiven means not returning to her sin. Do you know what Saint Augustine said Jesus did here? It’s going to sound so non-Reformed, so bumper sticker, but it’s true: Jesus “condemned sin, but not the sinner.”⁶ In other words, Jesus doesn’t condemn her, but he also doesn’t condone what she’s done. What a lesson for us to live out in how we treat others because this is exactly how Jesus has treated us. The Gospel is that God declares sinners like you and me no longer under his condemnation but acceptable to him—**neither do I condemn you**. This leads to a life of consecration to him—**go, and from now on sin no more**.

Endnotes

¹ Some, though, want to say it's a true, historical story just not original, but that we should still preach it. Ridderbos, 286. "It is undoubtedly of ancient date and in content evinces the character of an authentic tradition... we have here such a precious and—in the judgment of many—historically authentic tradition from the life of Jesus that not only does its place in the Fourth Gospel have to be maintained but also exposition of it rightly remains in most commentaries on John." See also Calvin, 206; Carson, 333–334; Morris, 883.

² This funny comment comes from Carson, 334.

³ Carson, 334.

⁴ Carson, 334.

⁵ Augustine, Tractate 33:5–6.

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