

## Wasted? The radical values of Jesus “A Waste of Grace?”

Passages: James 2:8–13

John 8:1–11

The story we just heard from John 8 is, without any doubt, one of the greatest stories of **God's grace**: a woman, caught in the act of adultery, is forgiven and set free without any condemnation! Indeed, the word ‘grace’ actually means ‘gift’, and I can think of no better gift to anyone than the gift of forgiveness, freedom and life! Here is an example of the grace of God in all its fullness!

But, of course, not everyone in Israel was happy with this outcome! Some, no doubt, believed that this was, in fact, a miscarriage of justice—letting the guilty get off scot-free! To them, Jesus was **wasting God's grace**. In their minds, God's forgiveness and grace was only for those who deserved it. Surely, not this woman, caught red-handed in sin! Surely, she must be punished—otherwise, everyone will think they can break the Law with impunity!

Certainly, this was the view of the Pharisees and the Teachers of the Law! But, others, even Christian Bible scholars like John Calvin, have also questioned the results of this story. After reflecting on this story, Calvin was totally dumbfounded! This is what he wrote; “If the punishment of adultery is remitted, ...the door will then be thrown open to every kind of treachery!” Like the Pharisees and Teachers of the law, Calvin was convinced that the good order of society depended on the proper punishment of crime. Thus, for Calvin, **too much grace** was being offered to this Law-breaking woman! It was a “**waste of grace**”!

What do you think? **Should a law-breaker** (an adulterer???...a paedophile???) **be freely forgiven for something they deliberately did? Or, is that a waste of grace? Is that a miscarriage of God's justice?**

This is a tough topic, so, before we go any further, **let's pray.**

I think the one thing that we really need to come do before we can come to grips with in today's story is to discern the proper (Biblical) relationship between **Law** and **Grace**, for that, in fact, is at the heart of today's story and the basis for the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law. But, even before we can do that, we need to understand **the wider context of the story.**

If you go back to chapter 7, you will see that **the Feast of Tabernacles** was nearing its conclusion. That's an important piece of information! Why? Because **the Feast of Tabernacles** was, essentially, **a Feast of Grace!** For several weeks following the harvest, all of Israel came to Jerusalem and lived in makeshift tents (also called 'tabernacles'). And so, all around the city, people would be living out of doors, cheek by jowl with their neighbours, having a huge party. **And all the while, they would be remembering the abundant grace of God that was poured out upon their ancestors during those 40 years in the wilderness--** all the gifts of God that kept them alive for those 40 years! Things like the manna that mysteriously appeared each morning, the quail that were blown in from the skies, and the water that miraculously gushed from the rock. All these were the gifts of God for the people of God! It was sheer grace!

But, of course, there were other forms of grace as well. God's perseverance with a stiff-necked people, for example, was a grace/a gift to Israel. So was God's patience, His mercy, His forgiveness and His loving faithfulness. During the Feast of Tabernacles, Israel remembered God's grace!

With this in mind, we can better understand why, on the last and greatest day of this Feast, Jesus came into Jerusalem and boldly stood up in the Temple, announcing to anyone who would listen; **"If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink!"**. In a direct reference to the gift of water that flowed from the rock in

the desert, Jesus was saying that, from now on, **He would be the source of God's grace!** Although Israel was still in a spiritual wilderness, Jesus was saying that He would be the One who would revive **God's grace** in Israel's midst.

Now we are better equipped to reflect on the story of the woman caught in adultery. You see, today's story begins on the first day following the Feast of Tabernacles! According to 7:53, everyone is going back to their villages. But where is Jesus? Verses 1 and 2 of chapter 8 say that He's back in the Temple! Doing what? He's gathering a crowd of (as it says in verse 2) "**all the people**". And what is He doing with them? He's teaching them! In other words, Jesus is daring to sit in the seat of Moses; He's **feeding** God's people with the bread of God's Word and **quenching their thirst** with living water. He is offering God's grace!

In contrast, where are the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees (those who were normally responsible for sitting in Moses' seat to teach the people)? They are nowhere to be seen! Indeed, instead of being engaged in their God-given role of teaching and feeding the people, they are out trying to catch people in their sins. Instead of building up God's people, they are out to tear them down! Furthermore, they are obsessed with finding a way to publicly humiliate Jesus; to bring Him down and, thus, prove that He has no authority.

Let's pick up the story at verses 3–6.

*<sup>3</sup>The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group <sup>4</sup>and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. <sup>5</sup>In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" <sup>6</sup>They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.*

The point the Pharisees and teachers of the law are making is simple: "If you think you have the authority to sit in the seat of Moses and be Israel's teacher, then you must publicly denounce this woman as an adulterer. After all, that's what the Law says,

doesn't it?"

Now, **why is this a trap for Jesus?** Because they know that, in public, Jesus has always leant towards mercy and forgiveness over condemnation. They know that Jesus has always promoted life, not death. They think that this public confrontation will, therefore, force Jesus to publicly choose between **Law** or **Grace!** If He chooses Grace, the people may love Him but He will easily be denounced by the Pharisees as a rebel against Moses and against the legal bedrock of Jewish society. If, on the other hand, He chooses Law, the Pharisees may accept Him but He will no longer be followed by the people.

In the end, however, **Jesus avoids their trap!** How?

Remember the context: It's the end of the Feast of Tabernacles, where everyone has been reflecting on the grace of God during the 40 years in the wilderness. They have been remembering all the gifts that God gave to His people to get them through the wilderness and into the Promised Land. **But**, there's one gift that the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law have obviously forgotten! Indeed, **they have disregarded the most important gift ever given by God in the wilderness! The Law!**

The Law, you see, was given to Israel in the desert of Sinai, but not for the purpose of enslaving her to a legal code or for keeping her constantly under the fear of punishment. **The Law was given to Israel as a good gift of God**, to lead her into a better future. For the Law pointed Israel to a future time when there would be no more stealing, or murder, or lying, or jealousy... indeed, no more adultery as well! God did not give the Law to Israel in order to bring **death** but to encourage **life...life in all its fulness!**

Just look at Deuteronomy 4!

**<sup>1</sup>Now, Israel, hear the decrees and laws I am about to teach you. Follow them so that you may live and may go in and take possession of the land the LORD, the God of**

**your ancestors, is giving you... <sup>6</sup> Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.”**

Understood in this way, the Law against adultery (“Thou shalt not commit adultery”) was never given as a license to kill adulterers, but in order to point God’s people to a better way of **life** aligned with God’s good purposes.

Of course, this idea aligns perfectly with what Jesus said at the very start of His ministry: **“I have come not to abolish the Law but to fulfil it!”** Jesus was declaring that He came to bring God’s people back to life—to create a people who will fulfil the Law from the overflow of their hearts in the power of the Holy Spirit. This would never involve using the Law legally – for that only brings condemnation. Instead, Jesus would use the Law gracefully; an instrument of grace, pointing people to God’s grace! Thus, **Law and Grace are not opposites**—they come united as one, reflecting God’s nature.

So, let’s get back to our story: Jesus is standing between a woman caught in adultery and a group of legalistic Pharisees and teachers of the Law. They are trying to trap Him into choosing between **Law** and **Grace**. What does Jesus do? **Verses 6 to 8** tell us!

**“But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. <sup>7</sup> When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” <sup>8</sup> Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.”**

The trap that was initially set for Jesus is now turned towards the Pharisees and teachers of the Law. In what sense? Jesus is simply proving to them that **Law and Grace must always go together!** If you want to use the Law without grace (essentially to condemn others) then you must also be ready to be condemned. So, **“Let**

**any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.”** (Jesus says pretty much the same thing in the Sermon on the Mount—**“Judge not lest you too be judged!”**) For the fact is that if we use the Law coldly and callously (without grace), we will all be condemned to death!

I think that is also why Jesus stoops down and draws in the dirt! Not only does He challenge the Pharisees and teachers of the Law to look into their own hearts and see that they are no better than this woman, but He wants them to take another look at the woman—to look her in the eyes and to recognise the common face of humanity **and** the love that God has for all sinners! That’s why He stoops down; by no longer standing between them, He no longer obstructs their line of sight to each other.

As you can see, this passage in John 8 is really about the relationship between Law and Grace. This is what prompted an on-going conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law.

But there’s still more that we need say about this conflict. For the fact is, the only way to have a correct understanding of the relationship between Law and Grace is by having **a correct understanding of the nature of God**. The Pharisees and Teachers of the Law understood God as a distant, vengeful deity, exacting absolute obedience to His Laws...or else! That’s why the Law was everything to them. They were not only ruled by it, but they ruled others by it! It gave them an absolute power over the nation.

Jesus, on the other hand, saw God as a heavenly Father—a good, merciful and gracious Father. To Him, the Law was a gift of God’s grace intended to help His children live in the fullness of life. That’s why Jesus wielded the Law only as a lever, to lift up the fallen; never as a hammer to smash sinners.

This idea has caused me to reflect quite seriously on the sex abuse scandal that was recently uncovered in the Catholic church.

The question that I've wrestled with is, **How could this sort of thing ever have happened?** Of course, most people are arguing that the reason for this abuse comes from the fact that the Catholic church has celibate males as priests. They say that being celibate has stymied their natural sexual urges, and that's why they sexually abuse little boys.

But surely there's more to it than that! Surely, at the heart of all this abuse is not celibacy, but a church culture founded on a legalistic and punitive understanding of God and His Law. In the Catholic Church, you are constantly told that you're a sinner in need of repentance. Confession in front of a priest is a 'sacrament'— that means that guilt is a constant focus of your life! (It's such a central part of Catholic culture that children will often make up stories, just to have something to confess!) **And, of course, only the male clergy have the power to absolve you!**

Now, if you think about it, this sets the stage for abuse...both spiritual and physical! A child is under the impression that that the male priests must never be contradicted or denied, for only they can absolve you of your guilt. What they say is Law... God's Law ...and if you play by the rules, the Law will let you off. **But**, if you don't play by the rules, the Law (in the hands of the priests) will crush you! Talk to any Catholic!

My point is this: **Whenever the Law is used as a tool for condemnation and subjection, there is enormous potential for abuse!** And that's exactly what we see in the story of the woman caught in adultery. These powerful men drag a helpless woman out of her house in the middle of the night and into the streets. They accuse her of adultery...but who really knows the truth? Then, they force her into a public inquiry. That's power!

More horrible is the fact that, if you were to ask the Pharisees and teachers of the Law, "So, where's the man caught in the act of adultery? Surely, it takes two to tango?" ...**they would probably dismiss your comment as irrelevant!** Or if you were to ask

them, Why was King David forgiven for doing the same thing, as well as for murdering someone over it?... **...again, they would dismiss your comment as irrelevant.**

Why? Because the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law retained their power through the Law! They could, thus, manipulate the Law to condemn whoever they felt needed to be condemned and release whoever they felt merited preferential treatment! By using the Law legally, they could hold the people of Israel to ransom under the weight of their man-made power system! To undermine the Law was to undermine their power!

It's no wonder why they hated Jesus! Indeed, this was essentially the heart of the tension between Jesus and the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law. And in the wake of the Feast of Tabernacles, the feast of grace, Jesus would not tolerate a view that pitted the **Law against Grace! He knew that they were two halves of the same thing..two aspects of God's love! Together, they reflect God's nature!** They must not be torn apart! (As I said, this is the battle that Jesus will fight right to the bitter end...a battle for which He will eventually get crucified!

And so, as we come to the end of the story, I want to go back to the question I asked in the beginning of this sermon: **When an adulterer (or murderer, or paedophile, or???) is freely forgiven for something they deliberately did, is that an abuse of grace?** Won't such forgiveness encourage that person to take God's Law for granted? Won't it encourage them to **"keep on sinning so that grace might abound even more?"**

Not in Jesus mind! Nor in Paul's mind, for that matter! Law and Grace are one. And that's why Jesus treats all law-breakers (me and you) just like He treated this woman...or the way His Father treated King David! **With grace!** As Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, **we are all adulterers** to one degree or another ...and **thieves...and murderers...and idolaters...and whatever else is listed in the 10 Commandments.** (James says much the same

thing: **“Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.”**)

Yes, we are all guilty...but Jesus refuses to wield the Law like a sword to destroy us, but to use it as a lever to raise us to a better future...a future where healing, forgiveness and love can transform sinners into saints.

In the end, this is the value-system of Jesus! Do we share it? Like Jesus, do we really believe that **there is never a waste of grace?**

Let's pray.