

## When it's wrong to be right # 3 in "The God of the Second Chance"

Message for Sunday, May 12, 2019  
by Bruce Fraser

**Scripture:** John 8:2-11

**Children's Message:** *Need: several fist-sized rocks.*

We're going to act out the story in today's Bible reading. A group of people who don't like Jesus bring to him a woman who was doing something very bad.

Let you in on a secret: we really don't care about the woman, what happens to her. What we're trying to do here is to get Jesus in trouble. We know that he loves people too much to see this woman get hurt. But if he says, "Let her go," then we can charge him with breaking the law, and have him arrested. We've got him trapped, and there's no way out!

We've got these rocks to throw at the woman. What we'd really like to do is throw them at Jesus. But we need to get evidence that he's a bad person before we can do that.

"Hey Jesus! The Law says we should throw stones at this woman because she did some very bad things. What do *you* think, Jesus?"

We've got him! He's trapped! This is perfect!

Then Jesus says to us, "OK, go ahead. But the person who throws the first stone must be someone who has never sinned."

We raise our arms, ready to throw the stones. All we need is someone to go first. But no one does. We realize that none of us is that good. We let our arms fall down. We drop the stones on the ground. Thud. Thud. Thud. We all walk away, leaving Jesus and the woman behind.

*Pick up a stone and drop it. A couple of times.* Let that sound be a reminder to all of us: None of us is perfect. I can't say, "I'm better than you are," because all of us have sinned.

But here's the good news: God loves us anyway, and forgives our sins. He says to us the same as the woman, "Go and sin no more."

**Message** When it's wrong to be right. # 3 in "The God of the Second Chance"

### 1) Playing poker with a woman's life

It's early in the morning, and Jesus is at the Temple, teaching a crowd of eager followers. Their conversation is suddenly interrupted by a crowd of angry men who burst through the Temple gates.

The mob is made up of religious leaders, respected and important men in the community. And struggling to keep her balance as she is pushed along at the front of the group is a scantily clad woman. Only moments before she had been in bed with a man who was not her husband. A door had been jerked open, and she barely had time to cover her body before two men who were older than her father dragged her into the street. Curious neighbours stuck their heads through open windows as the parade went by.

And now the mob storms towards Jesus. "Teacher, we found this woman in bed with a man who isn't her husband!" cries the leader. "The law says to stone her. What do you say?"

They wait with tight lips and accusing eyes. They already have the rocks in their hands. The men squeeze them so tightly that their fingertips are white. They squeeze them as if the rocks were the throat of this preacher they hate.

Why do they even bother to ask Jesus? There was no question about it: she had been caught red-handed, and the law in the Bible says to kill her.

**Leviticus 20:10, New Living Translation:**

**If a man commits adultery with another man's wife, both the man and the woman must be put to death.**

Note: stoning was the common way to do this.

Obviously, the law says the same thing for the man she was with. The fact that he was not brought for stoning only emphasizes the point that she was just a pawn in a poker game (please forgive my mixing the metaphors☺). Keeping the law was not their goal. Jesus was.

The woman? She's just a piece of trash, as far as they are concerned. Just bait for the trap. Jesus saw not trash, but a treasure.

You may think that what Jesus does next is a terrible gamble—and he's not playing for money; a woman's life is at stake. Let us remember, though, who Jesus is. He is not just a wise teacher. He is God, the very source of wisdom. He knows people's hearts, and the secret sins that lay hidden there. After all, he came into the world to save people from their sins.

Jesus stands up and faces the crowd. They hold their breath, waiting for the fish to take the bait. What he says takes their breath away:

John 8:7, New International Version:

When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her."

The quiet is deafening. Then someone clears his throat. Feet shuffle. There is a thud... thud... thud as the rocks fall to the ground. One by one they slip away, not even looking at each other. The woman is safe.

## 2) Right, righteousness, and self-righteousness

Let's look at what happened here:

- The woman had sinned by committing adultery.
- The religious leaders were right when they said that the Law condemned her to death.
- Jesus did not tell them they were wrong. In fact, he even agreed with them that it would be all right to kill her.

The religious leaders were in the right. They were totally justified in their actions. Yet they backed down at the last moment.

This story shows us the difference between *righteousness* and *self-righteousness*.

- *Righteousness* is when we have a right relationship with God. It shows in our lives, as we do things that exalt God.
- *Self-righteousness* is when we are in love with ourselves; we are proud that we are such good

people. It shows in our lives, as we do things that exalt ourselves.

The religious leaders were right—but they were self-righteous. The purpose of their actions was to make Jesus look bad, and thus to make themselves look good. But when they saw themselves as being sinners, no better than the adulterous woman, all their righteousness vanished.

In contrast to them, Jesus restores righteousness to the woman. That is, he brings her back into a right relationship with God:

John 8:10-11, New Living Translation:

Then Jesus stood up again and said to her, "Where are your accusers? Didn't even one of them condemn you?"

"No, Lord," she said.

And Jesus said, "Neither do I. Go and sin no more."

Jesus took her from the brink of death—both physical and spiritual—and gave her new life. He saw her, not as she was, but as she was meant to be.

God is the God of the second chance. God can do the same thing in your life. Instead of angry judgment, you can find compassion, forgiveness, healing, and new life.

## 3) Application: When it's wrong to be right

Let's review what we've learned here and apply it to our own lives.

There is our society's typical way of responding to disagreements and conflict: I win, you lose; I'm good, you're bad; I'm better than you. But here's where the God of the second chance gives us a different way of handling this.

- Being right isn't always the best thing.
- In fact, it's even wrong when it leads to *self-righteousness*. My pride is at stake. I have to show that I'm smarter than you, better than you.
- Something else is even better than being right. That something else is called *righteousness*. Righteousness puts God first, ahead of both of us. Winning is no longer the key thing.

Here's something important: more than one person can be right with God at the same time. We can both be winners.

Here's an example of what I mean. Ruth Bader Ginsburg is a judge in the Supreme Court of the United States. She is one of the more liberal members of the Court, in contrast to the very conservative Antonin Scalia. The two often disagree vigorously. Yet they were good friends (I say "were" because Scalia died in 2016): they regularly went to the opera together, often had dinner together, and they celebrated New Year's Eve together with their spouses. Scalia always gave her roses on her birthday. Scalia was once asked how they could be such dear friends with such different views. Justice Scalia answered:

I attack ideas. I don't attack people. Some very good people have some very bad ideas. If you can't separate the two, you'd better get another job.

In today's political climate, where things are so bitterly divided (especially in the United States), I wish everyone would take that quote to heart.

### **Next Steps when you're having a disagreement:**

- Pray: ask for wisdom.
- Think: What is true and good in this situation?
- Be aware of yourself: "What is my motivation here? Is it pride?" [Is being right more important than our relationship?]
- Be more curious than judgemental. Ask "Why do you think that way?" And then listen.
- What does righteousness look like in this situation? What will be pleasing to God?

One final thought about righteousness...

### **4) Acceptance and understanding, not judgement**

I hope you're getting the picture. Self-righteousness is based on *my* goodness. True righteousness is based on God's goodness: our salvation is from God. Our righteousness is not the *result* of our behaviour; it is the *reason* for our behaviour.

If you know that God loves you just as you are, warts and all...

if you know that Jesus has forgiven you for your sins...

if you know that your righteousness comes from God, and not from your own works... then you don't have to prove yourself to others.

And they don't have to prove themselves to you, either. You can love and accept people as they are.

Then we can all help one another to become the people God meant us to be.