

Voices: Drop the stones: Mercy over judgment

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Legends have a way of capturing our imagination. Whether it's King Arthur pulling the sword from the stone or Prometheus stealing fire from the gods, legends often speak to our deepest longings for justice, for truth, for grace. Many legends may be built around a core of truth, but they're usually treated as something separate from history.

Some critics argue John 7:53-8:11 is just a legend.

Though this passage isn't found in some of the earliest biblical manuscripts, church history suggests it was indeed part of the original oral tradition.

Papias, a disciple of the Apostle John, references the account. Augustine even suggested the story was removed from some early copies because it could be misused to excuse immorality. But far from contradicting Jesus' teachings, this scene fits perfectly with his pattern of mercy, justice and heart-piercing truth.

A trap, not a trial

Jesus is teaching at the temple when the religious leaders interrupt, dragging in a woman caught in adultery. According to Leviticus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 22:22, adultery was a capital offense requiring the execution of both the man and the woman. But the man is conspicuously absent here.

The scribes and Pharisees aren't interested in justice. They're interested in discrediting Jesus.

If Jesus sides with them, he violates Roman law, which reserved capital punishment for Roman authorities. If he lets her go, they can accuse him of rejecting the law of Moses. It's a cunning trap.

Instead of engaging, Jesus stoops and writes in the dirt with his finger. That same divine finger that carved the Ten Commandments now scribbles on the temple floor.

Sin's seriousness

As they press Jesus, he finally answers: "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her."

In one sentence, Jesus both upholds the law and exposes the hypocrisy of its enforcers. He does not minimize the sin. He doesn't dispute her guilt. But he forces them to consider their own moral failings.

In our modern context, we often echo the Pharisees. We judge the drunkard while ignoring our own secret vices. We criticize someone's broken family while ours teeters on the brink. We call for accountability in others while we make excuses for ourselves. Jesus' call is not to overlook sin, but to examine our own hearts before we condemn someone else.

Grace that melts stones

Jesus stoops again to write. And one by one, the accusers leave—starting with the oldest. The word used in verse 9, "*heard*," implies more than just sound. It suggests they *listened*, deeply, and were convicted. Something in what he wrote pierced through their defenses. The would-be executioners walked away, each recognizing their own unworthiness.

Now only Jesus and the woman remain.

He asks her: “Where are they? Has no one condemned you?”

“No one, Lord,” she replies.

And Jesus says: “Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.”

It’s a breathtaking moment of grace, but it’s not license. Jesus doesn’t excuse her actions. He calls her to change. He gives her not just forgiveness, but an invitation to a transformed life.

Mercy and righteousness hand in hand

This moment illustrates the perfect balance of Jesus’ heart. He takes sin seriously, but he also lavishes grace. Sin must be confronted. But it must be confronted with the goal of restoration, not ruin. Jesus didn’t offer the woman cheap grace. He gave her costly grace, the kind that calls for repentance, renewal and a new way of life.

We often think of God as either just or merciful. In truth, he is both. His justice demands sin be paid for. His mercy offers that payment in the person of Jesus. This is the core of the gospel: sin is real, judgment is deserved, but forgiveness is freely offered.

Living the message

1. Choose forgiveness over judgment.

We all have been wronged in some way. Forgiveness doesn’t mean we condone sin, nor does it erase the pain we’ve experienced. But it does mean we release others in certain situations from the penalty we believe they owe us.

In some cases, the penalty is still due, and it's not necessarily unforgiving to require it. Forgiving some egregious violations is not releasing from penalty, but is acknowledging the humanity in the one who has caused the harm and letting go of hate or vengeance toward that person.

Jesus told parables about this very principle. In Matthew 18, a servant forgiven of a massive debt turns around and demands repayment from someone who owes him a small amount. The king is furious. Why? Because mercy demands we show mercy in return.

If we've been forgiven much—and we have—then we also must forgive much.

2. Commit to righteous living.

Jesus didn't say, "Go and sin whenever you feel like it." He said, "Go and sin no more."

True forgiveness leads to changed behavior. It doesn't produce perfection overnight, but it does point us in a new direction. Living righteously is not how we earn forgiveness. It's how we express gratitude for it. When we ignore righteous living after receiving grace, we devalue that grace.

3. Honestly evaluate your own life.

We are quick to spot the speck in our neighbor's eye while ignoring the plank in our own. Before we pick up a stone, we need to examine our motives. Are we acting in truth and love? Or are we justifying our own superiority?

This passage in John is a challenge to religious people—those of us who think we know better. The Pharisees knew the law better than anyone. But they used it to condemn, not to restore. Jesus didn't dismiss the law; he

fulfilled it with love and truth.

4. Be a community of mercy.

Too many people have walked away from churches not because they rejected Jesus, but because they never encountered his mercy in his people. We cannot afford to be known as stone-throwers. We must be known as grace-givers. That doesn't mean we ignore sin. We deal with it in love, pointing people to the One who forgives and transforms.

James 2:13 says: "Judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment." That's not just a biblical truth. It's a call to action.

Drop the stones

As we reflect on this powerful scene, we are left with a personal question:
Are we ready to drop our stones?

Are we willing to stop condemning and start forgiving? Are we ready to let grace do its work in our lives and in the lives of others?

Take a moment. Reflect. Confess. Let go. Drop your stones—and walk forward in grace.

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