Original Text

FEW PASSAGES IN the New Testament bring to the interpreter the bewildering variety of problems found in the story of the woman caught in adultery. Most translations either footnote the textual questions or render the passage in a smaller typeface in order to indicate some irregularity. Commentaries either ignore the passage completely by assuming its inauthenticity or discuss it in an appendix. Still others will try to integrate it into the text of the Gospel. There is considerable scholarly literature that has weighed the merits of the text and its textual tradition.

The dilemma we face has two dimensions. On the one hand it seems clear that the weight of evidence mitigates against the originality of the story. That is, this brief account is probably not original to the Fourth Gospel. On the other hand, the story has every suggestion of historical veracity, suggesting that it was indeed an event that occurred in the life of Jesus and was a story worthy of collection and recitation. These two factors give the interpreter an interesting problem of canon: Should a beloved story with weak manuscript attestation and a doubtful setting in John's Gospel be the subject of sermons today?

Authenticity of This Passage

THE MANUSCRIPT EVIDENCE. This story is absent from all of major Greek manuscripts that bear the strongest, earliest witness to John's original form. In these texts, John 7:52 is followed by 8:12. Even the early versions (Syriac and the Coptic dialects Sahidic and Bahairic) fail to record it. Byzantine manuscripts begin showing the text in the ninth century but even there, scribes expressed reservations about it by making editorial marks in the margin of the text.

The early patristic writers are the same. With one exception, in the East no Greek Father mentions the passage for one thousand years. Lectionaries and commentaries alike fail to mention it. Origen's commentary on John moves from 7:52 to 8:12. Even where Tertullian gives judicial directions for cases of adultery, he makes no reference to this most obvious passage from John.

However, the story was alive and well in the West. It appears in the writings of Ambrose (d. 397), Ambrosiaster (d. 350), and Augustine (d. 430). When Jerome began working on the Latin Vulgate in the fourth century, he says he found the story in many Greek and Latin codices (*Against Pelagius*, 2:17). He included it in the Vulgate and so it entered into the mainstream Latin text tradition and the Western church canon.

But hints of the story's existence abound in early years. Eusebius (the church's first historian) says he learned a story coming from Papias (c. A.D. 60–130) about a woman who was maliciously accused before Jesus concerning her sins, and he recorded it in the *Gospel of the Hebrews*. In the Syriac *Didascalia Apostolorum* (2:24) bishops are exhorted to receive mercifully those who repent, whereupon an illustrative story is mentioned about a woman deposited before Jesus by her accusers and his refusal to condemn her.

To sum up, despite these hints of the story in Eusebius and *The Didascalia*, the absence of the account from the earliest Greek manuscript tradition is important. The whole range of Greek patristic literature virtually ignores it while it seems to have a strong currency only in the West.

Internal evidence. The story also seems artificial to the narrative of John 7 and 8. This account appears in some manuscripts in different places: Some place it after John 7:36, after 7:44, or at the end of the Gospel. One group of manuscripts places it after Luke 21:38, another after Luke 24:53. Some scholars think it may have originated from the pen of Luke.

A simple glance at its literary setting in the Fourth Gospel makes its awkwardness more clear. Jesus is speaking to a crowd in 7:37–39, and when 8:12 resumes, a crowd is still before him. But in 7:53–8:11 Jesus is left alone (8:9). Without the story, the Tabernacles narrative flows smoothly from 7:1 to 8:59. This must explain the numerous textual variants in the story as scribes tried to smooth over this awkwardness.

Scholars also point to numerous words and grammatical forms that are not Johannine. Sentences, for instance, are connected with the Greek word *de* (“and, but,” which John uses less than half the number of times as, say, Matthew). Moreover, the vocabulary of 8:2 contains several expressions that appear elsewhere only in Luke-Acts or in Matthew.

In other words, this story was likely an independent account that circulated freely for some time and was only later attached to John. But why was it placed here? The answer is that the theme of 8:14ff. turns on judgment: Jesus judges no one (8:15). The story illustrates this well. Not only have the woman’s judges disappeared, but Jesus himself will not join their ranks. Derrett, by contrast, thinks that the story turns on the idea of evidence. At Tabernacles the authorities are trying to weigh the admissibility of Jesus’ claims about himself. This leads to a rabbinic debate about the character of evidence, which our story illustrates. Scholarly opinions are almost unified that the passage is foreign to the Gospel of John, interrupts the flow of thought in chapters 7–8, and is likely not from the pen of the fourth evangelist.

Historical authenticity. While scholars are reasonably convinced that this story does not belong to the Fourth Gospel, many are confident that it is an ancient narrative that stems from the same pool of stories that contributed to the Synoptic Gospels. This is a typical Synoptic “conflict” story in which Jesus is placed on the horns of a dilemma. He chooses to stand against the representatives of the law in favor of the needs of the woman. We also have evidence that in the first century there was an ongoing debate about the death penalty (stoning or strangling) and here, typically, Jesus refuses to get embroiled in the legalism of sinners who want to judge sin.

However, there is good reason why the text was either ignored or suppressed in the early church for a long time, only to be discovered in the West in the fourth century and in the East centuries later. Ethical perfection and penance were hallmarks of teaching in the patristic period (*Didache* 15:3; *1 Clem.* 48:1). But certain sins demanded more severe warnings. In Paul’s lists of sins, adultery and immorality appear repeatedly (1 Cor 6:9ff.; Gal. 5:19ff.; Eph. 5:3ff.; Col. 3:5), and these warnings are no doubt tied to the frightful immorality that pervaded the Roman empire. For Paul, this moral chaos pointed to the godlessness of the pagan world (Rom. 1:26), and so he calls for immorality not to be even named among Christians (Eph. 5:3) and in one case calls for a man’s removal from a church because of it (1 Cor. 5:5).

The postapostolic writers emphasize this concern about sexual sin. In the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, we have a story of a woman who converts to Christianity and becomes a model of chastity and holiness. When it comes to sexual sins, writers such as the person who wrote *The Shepherd of Hermas*, Clement of Alexandria, and Cyprian indicate lengthy, severe penance for readmission to the church. Adultery is listed along with homicide and apostasy, and at least for Tertullian, Origen, and Cyprian, sexual sins were especially heinous and *without* forgiveness.

It is against this background in the second, third, and fourth centuries that the story of the woman caught in adultery is struggling for recognition. Jesus’ refusal to condemn her was at odds with the outlook of the day. How could a lengthy penance be reconciled with such immediate forgiveness? How could a sexual sin be excused so readily? The story was not removed from the New Testament, but rather it never gained access to the manuscript tradition once the story competed for credibility.

It was not until the fourth century that the church was firmly established in society through the efforts of Constantine. Its care of souls and disciplines had stabilized and bishops were admonished to demonstrate mercy. Thus Basil of Caesarea could set the penance for an adulteress at fifteen years. John Chrysostom tells of the conversion of a notoriously sinful actress in Antioch who turned from her adulterous ways to holiness through penance. She traveled to Jerusalem in men’s clothes and lived as a recluse in a grotto on the Mount of Olives for the rest of her life. In this era our text emerges as a model for the penitent adulteress and is embraced by the leading theologians. On St. Pelagia’s Day (October 8) our story became the Gospel text in most fifth-century Western lectionaries, honoring a seeming variety of women martyrs who either preserved their virginity through martyrdom or repented and led a life of chastity.

The Woman Caught in Adultery (7:53–8:11)

THIS STORY HAS numerous arresting details that richly repay careful study and provide excellent insight into the thought and ministry of Jesus. The setting of the story must have been typical of Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem, particularly during his final visits there (from Tabernacles to Passover in his final year). He taught regularly in the temple courts in the early mornings (8:2), and many people crowded around to hear him. In the evenings he retired east of the city to the Mount of Olives (8:1). Luke presents this picture in Luke 21:37: "Each day Jesus was teaching at the temple, and each evening he went out to spend the night on the hill called the Mount of Olives." Mark says that Jesus stayed in Bethany (Mark 11:12), where we know that Jesus had three good friends, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus (John 11). Since Bethany is simply on the east slope of the Mount of Olives, this is likely his destination every night.

On this particular day, the group with Jesus is joined by Pharisees and teachers of the law (Gk. *grammateus*, sometimes trans. scribes). These two groups had many mutual interests. Scribes were a valued profession in a world with limited literacy, and since biblical law was one of the chief subjects of theological discussion, the Pharisees (who were completely committed to the law) made good use of scribal skills.

The most important cultural element within the story is the nature of the accusation against the woman. The religious leaders make their charge explicit, "Teacher, this woman was *caught in the act* of adultery" (italics added). The Greek construction of the sentence makes it clear that these men are making a legal claim: They possess the evidence the law requires to convict the woman.

What evidence do they need? So that suspicious husbands could not accuse their wives unnecessarily, the law required strong testimony from two witnesses who saw the couple in a sexual context: lying in the same bed, unmistakable body movements, and positive identities. The two witnesses had to see these things at the same time and place so that their testimonies would be identical. Such evidence virtually required the witnesses to set a trap.

Numerous problems, however, accompany their charge this day in the temple. (1) The law also expected that if a person witnessed another about to commit a sin, compassion required them to speak up. These witnesses stand silently, neglecting their moral obligation to give guidance to the woman. They want to catch her and use her.

(2) We must ask if the woman is married or betrothed to another man. A woman who is sexually unfaithful to her fiancé was to be stoned to death along with her lover (John 8:5; cf. Deut. 22:23–24). Unfaithful wives were likewise killed (Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22), but the law did not indicate the method of death. The *Mishnah* (which was oral law in Jesus' day) specified that unfaithful fiancés should be stoned, but wives strangled (*Sanhedrin* 7:2). In the present passage, the woman therefore must be engaged. But if so, where is her lover? If they were caught in the act, he was caught too. The accusers have permitted him to get away clean.

(3) These witnesses bring the woman to Jesus before a crowd and heap public shame on her. They could have kept her to one side and brought her case to Jesus privately. But their approach to the problem indicates that they wish to trap Jesus, and her personal life is incidental (8:6). They have no interest in a trial. They are thinking about a public lynching, and they want Jesus to make a judgment.

It is impossible to know what Jesus wrote in the dust (8:6). For some interpreters, Jesus was simply drawing to give himself added time. More likely, however, a detail like this had some importance. Most believe that he began to write in Hebrew some verse from the law that would shape his response to the dilemma. The traditional view is that Jesus wrote Jeremiah 17:13: "Those who turn away from you will be written in the dust because they have forsaken the LORD, the spring of living water." Derrett thinks Jesus began to write Exodus 23:1, "Do not help a wicked man by being a malicious witness." This is a test of law, and certainly whatever Jesus wrote alluded to the law and demonstrated his displeasure with how these men were applying it.

If his writing seemed to stall things, 8:7 indicates that these men persist to force the question of judgment on him before the crowd. Jesus responds with his often-quoted statement, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." This does not mean that this woman's accusers must be sinless or

morally perfect in order to bring charges against the woman. In such a case, accusations would be impossible at any time. This is simply a direct reference to Deuteronomy 13:9 or 17:7, which says that those who witness a crime and bring home a successful accusation must be the first to stone the victim.

But then the accusers must engage in self-examination. The world of antiquity was little different from our own when it came to sexual sins. Women who transgressed social mores could find themselves in legal jeopardy much more quickly than their partners. Jesus may thus be cutting through the double standard in order to force the men to reflect on their own hypocrisy.

Jesus resumes his writing (8:8), and the religious leaders begin departing one by one (8:9). John uses an imperfect verb here (conveying continuous action) to build a picture of one teacher departing, who is then followed by a succession of people eventually walking away, so that the accusers arrayed against the woman crumble bit by bit. No doubt they are stunned, and perhaps the audience is embarrassed. But in the end, Jesus and the woman are left alone.

Because Jesus must have been sitting and the woman standing, he now straightens up (8:10) and speaks to her for the first time. His use of the title "woman" is not harsh, but a typical sign of respect that Jesus uses even with his mother (cf. 2:4; 4:21; 19:26; 20:13, 15; also Matt. 15:28; Luke 13:12; 22:57). His questions do not imply that the woman is innocent since in 8:11 he warns her to cease a sinful life that has been her habit. He simply points to the absence of accusers. They have disappeared. Her response shows considerable respect for Jesus.

Jesus' final words ("Then neither do I condemn you") again do not imply innocence, but reflect his sovereignty to forgive sin (Mark 2:5ff.). Borchert writes, "Sin was not treated lightly by Jesus, but sinners were offered the opportunity to start life anew." The story's crisp ending captures the seriousness with which Jesus views sin and judgment—even the sin of those who accuse the woman—and his gracious, forgiving outlook on those who are caught in its grip.

Bridging Contexts

THE FIRST QUESTION any interpreter must answer is whether to teach and preach from this passage at all. Should I even carry this text into my church context today? When Erasmus developed his famous Greek text in 1516, he doubted the origin of the story, but because of its popularity included it anyway, leading to its incorporation into the *Textus Receptus* (and the King James tradition). Augustine felt the same dilemma in 397. He knew the story but suspected that anxious husbands had removed it from the Bible so that it could not be abused by their wives! We share a similar dilemma. The popularity of the story is beyond question, and to announce from the pulpit that this story ought to be excised from the Bible would bring strong reactions. I imagine that early Christians teachers felt the same. This was a free-floating story that everyone loved, but it had no home. That home was eventually found in John (and Luke).

For Roman Catholics, the issue is quickly decided. Once the story was admitted into the Vulgate by Jerome in 382, it received universal recognition. When the Council of Trent pronounced the Vulgate to be the authoritative Scripture of the church in 1546, the matter was settled. But for Protestants, it is less easy. While we respect (and defend) the earlier councils of the church (such as Nicea), we are less sure about the later decisions of medieval Catholicism. Protestants are fond of pointing to the earliest canonical list penned by Athanasius in 367 in his Easter Letter. However, we have no idea what text of John Athanasius was promoting or whether that text carried this story.

If our notion of canonical authority rests in the books of the Bible themselves—that is, those literary units called Gospels and letters penned by inspired authors—then our passage cannot be a part of the canon. Textual evidence confirms what a literary study only suggests: The story is a later insertion. Nevertheless, scholarly research points to its antiquity and authenticity, and a cursory study of patristic history provides a good explanation for our story's disappearance.

Furthermore, the story edifies the church and has been a vehicle through which the Spirit has worked. Are these the grounds of the Protestant canon? If so, the passage should remain firmly anchored in the New Testament. The evangelical Gerald Borchert thus writes: "This little story captures magnificently both the gracious, forgiving spirit of Jesus and his firm call to the transformation of life. I consider this text to be divinely inspired and fully authoritative for life." But if the criterion of text criticism is upheld, the story should slip into the margin as an edifying extrabiblical story about Jesus.

Thus Christians must make a theological (canonical) decision whether or not to use this story. If I choose to preach on it, no doubt the themes of unyielding judgment (which lacks compassion) and unmerited mercy (which is overwhelmed by God's love) should be placed center stage. This is a powerful story because it paints a strong picture of harsh judges who have neglected their responsibility to care for the soul of the woman. She is disposable. Their aim is to corner Jesus, and her life is a tool in their theological gambit to make him either condemn her (thus sacrificing his commitment to grace) or forgive her (thus sacrificing his commitment to God's law).

The portrait of the woman is equally powerful. As a woman *caught in the act* of adultery, she is completely vulnerable, completely at risk. She is encircled by hostile men willing to sacrifice her through their unyielding commitment to the law. Certainly, she must have thought, this man named Jesus, this man known as a rabbi, would know the law and uphold it. *That is what it means to be a rabbi.* His implied judgment on her accusers and his mercy mixed with exhortation sets her free in a manner she never expected.

Contemporary Significance

THIS IS A POWERFUL drama of sin and forgiveness and has always been one of the favorite stories of the church (which makes the question of canon and authority much more complicated). As I speak to an audience from this story, however, it is too easy to set my focus entirely on the woman, the depth of her sin, and the power of Jesus' forgiveness. That theme is important. But there are other subsidiary themes that also require reflection, and these can have an equally powerful message today. Here I am thinking about the position of the woman's accusers, their attitude, and their aims in making these charges. Thanks to research into the law in rabbinic Judaism, we can have a far more sophisticated look at what was occurring in these men's minds.

Moreover, it is interesting that the charges brought against the woman had to do with sex, not with theft or blasphemy or any other of the countless crimes listed in the Jewish law. Religious communities are often swift in their judgment on those whose unrighteousness includes problems with sexual rules (premarital sex, abortion, adultery, divorce, etc.).

There is a final level at which the story comes to life: It is terribly important that the "accused" in the story is a woman. In the first century, Judaism had stereotyped women as instigators whenever sexual sins were committed and labeled them as lacking the spiritual and moral fiber needed to uphold the law. The sexual passions of adolescence, for instance, were viewed as coming from the seductive attractions of females. The absence of the woman's lover in the story is crucial. Allowances may be made for men who experiment with sexual adventures, but this was forbidden to women. A woman who committed the sexual sin was "marked," but the man was not. This has been a continuous theme of women who interpret John, but it rarely shows up in contemporary commentaries.

The woman. In order to reset the stage of this drama, I must begin with potent images of men and women who have sinned and who have been forgiven. The tension in the drama centers on the gravity of the woman's sin and the shocking forgiveness she experiences in the words of Jesus. She does not have a minor problem. Her life is in jeopardy. She has broken the law. According to that law, it is fully appropriate for her to die. There is no quibbling about the evidence; the witnesses "have her." Through the story she moves with shocking speed from death to life.

The sort of profile I have in mind is like that of Karla Faye Tucker. Karla Faye was twenty-three years old in June, 1983, when she and her boyfriend (Daniel Garrett) broke into a Houston home in order to "case" the house for a robbery. High on drugs for days, Tucker and Garrett ran into a couple in the home and murdered them with a hammer and a pickax. Both bodies had more than twenty stab wounds. Following their trial and conviction (which was widely reported around the United States), each received the death sentence. Garrett died in prison in 1993, but Tucker remained on death row for many more years.

Karla Faye Tucker's story is more than one more senseless homicide because three months after her imprisonment, she became a Christian. A puppet ministry team came to her cell block, and since everyone else was going, she joined the crowd out of boredom. She stole a Bible at the meeting (not knowing they were free) and secreted it away that night in her cell. Later that night, she accepted Jesus into her heart. "When I did this," Karla wrote later, "the full and overwhelming weight and reality of what I had done hit me. I realized for the first time that night what I had done. I began crying that night for the first time in many years, and to this day, tears are a part of my life."

The transformation of Karla's life was tangible. Christ was alive in her. For over fourteen years she was a powerful Christian presence in the prison, in 1995 marrying the prison chaplain who worked with her (Dana Brown). Her life was gripped by the horror of what she had done. "I feel the pain of that night and I feel the pain that goes on every day with others because of what I did that night. I know the evil that was in me then, and I know that what took place that night was so horrible that only a monster could do it." Her life was hallmarked by the radiant joy of experiencing Jesus' forgiveness.

In 1997 a date was set for Karla Faye's execution: February 3, 1998. At once she was a media sensation. Was this conversion real? Would Texas execute its first woman since the Civil War? On January 14, 1998, Karla Faye was interviewed by Larry King on CNN. King tried to exploit the gruesome details of the 1983 murder (which Tucker resisted) and could not believe this was anything more than a "jailhouse conversion." Perplexed by her positive attitude weeks before her death, King asked, "Are you still up? You have to explain that to me a little more. It can't just be God." Karla Faye responded simply, "Yes, it can. It's called the joy of the Lord." Tough questions pressed Karla Faye to explain her feeling about the impending execution. She said she was calm and peaceful, and she hoped that the families of her victims would see her love and forgive her. Her only regret was that she could not continue a life of ministry within America's prison systems.

On February 3, 1998, in Gatesville, Texas, Karla Faye Tucker was executed by lethal injection. Her final words spoke of love and forgiveness. Final appeals to the governor of Texas, George W. Bush, were fruitless. Appeals from Christians around the world fell on deaf ears.

Karla Faye's conversion is poignant and helpful because the power of her Christian life was so directly tied to the power of her sin. She did not live a day without reflecting on her sin and on God's forgiveness. She did not deny the crime any more than the woman caught in adultery denied her wrongdoing. In each case the possibilities for freedom from sin were the result, not of threat and law, but of forgiveness and love. Karla Faye was a changed person, and she demonstrated that change for fourteen years. The woman caught in adultery would be changed too because Christ set her free. Sadly, the parallel stops there. Jesus understood the power of grace and released the woman; the state of Texas did not, and Karla Faye was killed.

Christ's forgiveness in each of our lives diminishes as we lose touch with the depth of our own sinfulness. When we no longer see ourselves in the drama of the woman, when we feel we are free from accusation and judgment, we lose sight of God's grace. Jesus is not simply committed to the requirements of the law, but to the care and transformation of the woman before him—and every person who likewise brings a debt of sin into the circle where he sits. This drama of Jesus and the woman gains power when I become that woman and reflect on the seriousness of my own jeopardy. Through this new vision, I gain a new glimpse of Jesus' love and mercy.

The judgment. There are other subsidiary issues that the drama raises, and we would do well to think about them today. Despite the woman's sin and the requirements of the law, Jesus does not permit the accusers to carry out the punishment. *The woman does not die.* The story forces us to ask troubling questions about what to do with convicted sinners in our own society. Evangelicals are comfortable finding in this story a spiritual message about the state of my sinful life and God's forgiveness (all in the abstract). But we rarely venture into the complex problem of what to do with people who have grievously sinned in society (thieves, murderers, etc.), who repent, and who discover a new life. The fact remains, Jesus did not punish the woman. As I argued above, this fact is precisely why the story was not appreciated in the church for three hundred years. There is no punishment, no penance, no restitution. Should not the woman do public service at an orphanage for a couple of years in Jerusalem?

Karla Faye's story similarly raises enormous questions about capital punishment and the purpose of the penal system in the United States. On the night of February 3, a phalanx of international reporters crowded the prison gate at Gatesville with opposing groups of Texans. Some held a silent prayer vigil for Karla Faye, while others yelled for her "to pay." The scene was surreal. The alignment of sides reminds me again of this story of Jesus and the woman.

I am not suggesting that our story teaches us to free all convicted criminals. But it does raise questions about the purpose of capital punishment. What is being satisfied when an inmate is executed? Is this revenge? Is it preventive? Is this about justice? Despite what we think about the function of the punishment itself, what happens when a person is truly transformed by the Spirit of God in the prison system? Through Chuck Colson's ministry, Prison Fellowship, I have had the opportunity to meet a number of former convicts who are now growing Christians. One meeting with them and suddenly we will carry the burden of new questions that did not trouble us before. If Jesus can forgive, transform, and set free in the temple, what happens if he does it in our prisons? Will we join him or those religious leaders who prefer to see one woman dead?

The accusers. Perhaps one of the most troubling aspects of the drama is the approach these men have toward this woman. These are religious men, leaders in their community, men known for upholding the law. If asked, they would say that they bring glory to God because they uphold his expectations for righteousness. Their attitudes remind us of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, with whom Jesus often debated. In Matthew 23:23, Jesus tells them how they pursue the fine details of religious obedience and miss important things: "But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former."

Of course the deeper motive among these men is to trap Jesus. Their strategy includes trapping the woman. Perhaps entrapment characterizes a good portion of their religious effort. They are religious police, and here in Jesus they seem to have found a man who bends the rules. Thus they find a woman who has broken a rule and demand to see if Jesus will bend one more. These teachers no doubt think that both the woman and Jesus are guilty and deserve discipline.

The Pharisees understood the mercy and grace of God, though they struggled with its application. They were not the religious henchmen we sometimes make them out to be. However, they expected that men and women once redeemed would obey God's law with passion. Religious obedience, they could argue, ought to be visible in external forms of righteousness. This was a "responsive legalism" that did not see righteous living as a prerequisite to grace, but as a necessary and enforceable feature of the godly person's life. These rules for living (illustrated amply in the *Mishnah*) could become a central concern—a preoccupation even—among the leadership.

People with religious obsessions like this rarely see themselves this way. Evangelicals who take godly righteousness seriously rarely see themselves this way either. The story of the woman probes our reflexes toward people who do not fit our religious expectations. Are we religious police? Does our healthy commitment to righteousness ever lapse into an obsessive preoccupation with the details of people's personal lives? Any newcomer to the evangelical world will at once tell us that the answer is "yes," but that we barely see it in ourselves.

Sex and sin. I am intrigued that the sin brought before Jesus has to do with a sexual crime. If the strategy of the Pharisees is to provoke a public response against Jesus, if they want to ignite an issue that will make the evening news, if they want to draw a crowd and arouse interest, sex works like magic. They assume no doubt that even though Jesus has a reputation for breaking a law or two on the Sabbath, he will not fail to enforce a law that has to do with sexual taboos. These leaders are guaranteed popular support. Folks who may be fatigued to hear about one more sinner will find energy to invest in a story of sex and scandal!

Jesus is not moved by any of it. Sin is sin, and sexual sin does not evoke a different response. Yet as I look at the contemporary church, I am fascinated to observe how we do not share the same impassive reaction of Jesus. There are certain sins for which we extend forgiveness. Then there are other sins (often sexual sins) for which the grace of Christ is not (apparently) sufficient. If a pastor is once divorced, what does that mean for his or her job prospects for ministry? There is an unwritten rule in many evangelical institutions that divorce is the unforgivable sin. In colleges and churches that have nothing about divorce in their statements of faith, candidates for the faculty or staff can be bypassed intentionally because of this personal disgrace. In some cases, people are victims of divorce. A friend of mine is a brilliant New Testament scholar whose wife left him and his two children. After she divorced him, he found employment impossible as a result of this history.

The church has a special category for sins linked to sexuality, and we have strong reactions for them: abortion, adultery, and premarital sex can easily be included. Imagine for a moment the status of a man who desires to join the church but admits he is gay, celibate, and desiring God's healing. Will he be treated the same as a man who claims he is prone to gossip, repentant, and likewise desiring God's healing? If an elder has an extramarital sexual affair, is our reflex to judge and expel or to forgive and heal?

I am not compromising the seriousness of sexual sin. Neither was Jesus. But Jesus had different reflexes. He could say to the sexual sinner: "Then neither do I condemn you.... Go now and leave your life of sin." The story before us forces me to check my reflexes because there are many, like the woman, who believe that because their sin is sexual, there is no room for them among God's people.

Women, sex, and sin. We should be deeply troubled that the Pharisees have decided not to drag a woman *and a man* before Jesus. If it is true that sexual sins evoke a strong public reaction (as I argued above), it is all the more true when the culprit is female. In this case, the man was as guilty as the woman, yet it did not seem necessary (or advisable?) to bring him into judgment. This is an important detail that we generally overlook. What does this mean?

Societies have a higher tolerance for male misconduct than female misconduct. "He's all boy" is a convenient label for a child who challenges the rules and tears his jeans. "He's out sowing his wild oats" is another convenient label for boys when they are much older. Throughout the centuries societies have indulged men as they experimented in the boundary waters of acceptable behavior. Sexual activity is no exception. The irony for women historically is that men have sinned *with them*—and then later accused them of sexual misconduct. It is like the picture of Jimmy Swaggert, the southern evangelist who ranted and raved against sexual promiscuity during the 1980s while all the while visiting prostitutes in cheap, local motels.

If it is true that gender plays a role in our perception of wrongdoing, what does it mean for women when they are unmasked in their sin? When men accuse them? Is there a different level of severity? Different levels of tolerance? Are the social ramifications different? Are signals sent and labels made that mark the woman permanently? These are troubling questions that require soul-searching honesty if we are to get to the heart of them. No doubt the place to begin is to ask *a woman* what it means when she *alone* is dragged before the religious authorities. Many of us men might hear some surprising answers.[1]

[1] Gary M. Burge, *NIV Application Commentary: John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), 237-51.