

March 7/8, 2020

Come to Jesus

These Things are Written that You May Believe Series

John 8:1-11

Pastor Bryan Clark

Victor Hugo's classic novel *Les Misérables* is the story of Jean Valjean who was thrown in prison for stealing a loaf of bread because his sister's daughter was starving to death. He serves his time, but by the time he is released, he is angry and bitter at the injustice of it all. His condition continues to worsen because no one will hire him because he's an ex-con. He's getting more and more desperate, when one evening a bishop invites him in, feeds him supper, and allows him a place to stay the night. Jean Valjean rewards his kindness the next morning by stealing the bishop's silver and making a run for it. The police quickly catch him, bring him back to the bishop and ask the bishop if he wants to press charges. Jean Valjean, based on what he's experienced, is certain he faces condemnation and a trip back to prison. In a very unexpected moment, what the bishop gives him is grace and forgiveness and mercy. He actually gives Jean Valjean the silver. He gives him a few more additional pieces. He releases the law enforcement. His only condition is that Jean Valjean go and sin no more.

It reminds me a lot of our story this morning. What the law could never do to change your life, grace and mercy and forgiveness does. If you have a Bible, turn with us to the Gospel of John, Chapter 8. If you're visiting with us, we're working our way through the Gospel of John. We find ourselves in chapter 8 this morning. All of your translations indicate in some way or another, that verses 1 through 11 of chapter 8 are questioned in terms of whether or not they were in the original document of John's Gospel. Some bracket it and some make it a footnote. So there's lots of discussion, which ranges from, "This is in John's Gospel right where it belongs," to, "Perhaps it was part of the gospel record, but in a different gospel." Some people put it in the Gospel of Luke, all the way to it wasn't part of original Scripture. So there's quite a range of opinions. I was amused a little bit this week when I read one commentary that said, "Almost all scholars agree that this is part of John's Gospel." And the very next commentary said, "Almost all scholars agree this is not part of John's Gospel." Their oldest manuscripts don't have it, so that's where the question comes. But pretty much all scholars agree that this is an accurate record of a real event in the life of Jesus. And so, it may be one of those stories that John refers to as, "*There's a whole list of stories of things that happen with Jesus that there's just not enough time to record.*" So we're going to just treat it right here in John's Gospel, and treat it as an accurate record of history in the life of Jesus. Technically, it begins in verse 53:

[And everyone went to his home. But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. Early in the morning, He came again into the temple, and all the people were coming to Him; and He sat down and *began* to teach them. (*NASB John 7:53-8:2)

So if this is where it fits in the story, the Sanhedrin was meeting in the end of chapter seven. At the end of the day they all go home. But Jesus doesn't have a home in Jerusalem because He lives up on the Sea of Galilee, and so He goes to the Mount of Olives. It's believed that was His practice when He was in Jerusalem. Many people think that when it refers to the Mount of Olives, it's referring to the town or village of Bethany, which is actually on the back—the east side of the Mount of Olives—where Mary and Martha and Lazarus, Jesus' dear friends live. So it's likely when He was in Jerusalem, that's where he stayed. That's probably what it's referring to. He gets up early in the morning, comes back to the temple to teach. Again, when it refers to the temple it's not talking about the temple proper.

It's talking about the temple area. There were huge courtyards around the temple area, and it was a common place for people to gather and to be taught.

The Scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery, and having set her in the center of the court, they said to Him, “Teacher, this woman has been caught in adultery, in the very act. Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such a woman; what then do You say?” They were saying this, testing Him, so that they might have grounds for accusing him. (Vs. 3-6a)

So **the Scribes and the Pharisees**; we talked about the Pharisees earlier. The Pharisees are one of two main groups that make up the Sanhedrin. The Pharisees were highly religious, and they were very zealous for the law. They were very conservative. The Scribes would have been considered the experts in the law, similar to today's lawyers. Their expertise was the law—kind of lawyers/ theologians. So, you have those that are experts in the law, together with those that were most zealous for the law, and they come before Jesus teaching in the temple area, and they bring with them a woman caught in adultery. They place this woman before Jesus, and they remind Jesus that the **Law of Moses** says that a woman caught in adultery should be stoned to death. So what does Jesus intend to do? John then helps us with an editorial comment by telling us their motive was to somehow entrap Jesus to make some sort of a decision by which they can accuse Him and arrest Him and take Him away.

So what's happening here? The first thing that I think is worth noting is these religious leaders are absolutely terrifying this woman, using her as a pawn in their scheme to entrap Jesus. Now most likely, sometime in the evening or early into the night she was caught. They have been holding her until the hour is right to bring her before the crowd, and then ask Jesus what He is going to do. Not only would this woman be filled with shame and guilt, but absolute terror, as she wondered if this mob would rally and stone her to death. You remember when Jesus healed the man who had been sick for thirty-eight years at the pool of Bethesda? There is an amazing moment where this man is finally healed and made whole, and the religious leaders cannot rejoice because they're so upset that Jesus broke the rule. Here you have these same religious leaders who have no issues, no conscience, about taking this woman and terrifying her, just to entrap Jesus. Religion condemns; Jesus forgives. The law did state that when a man and woman were caught in adultery, they were to be put to death. It was considered a capital offense.

Now that's quite striking to our sensibilities. But it's helpful to go back to Genesis 2 and 3, and to remind ourselves that actually the original agreement was that every single sin is a death sentence. The law actually restricted the list down to a few things that were capital offenses, and one of those was adultery. The law was very specific, that both the man and the woman were to be put to death. The man in this story is nowhere to be found, which gives us a clue that this is probably some sort of a setup that they had planned to entrap Jesus. The law required a death sentence, although it was rarely carried out. But there were some specifics with that. One of those specifics was that the couple had to be caught in the act. That's why the language that the Scribes and Pharisees use is very precise. If you think of it in modern terms, if you're a private detective and you're getting a picture of a couple going into a motel, you can assume the rest. The law did not allow that. You literally had to catch them in the act with multiple witnesses. So the odds of that happening we're very slim. It was extremely rare. So they're identifying multiple witnesses *caught in the very act*.

Jesus essentially has a couple of options. Jesus has become a friend of sinners; He's described that way. He spent a lot of time with sinners and misfits and losers. As a matter of fact, He was often criticized by the religious crowd for doing that. So if in this moment Jesus agrees to carry out the

letter of the law, it would do great damage to His ministry and reputation with those who loved Him the most. But probably more significantly is the fact that the Roman Empire did not allow the Jews to carry out a death sentence without their approval. So if Jesus said, “We must obey the law,” and she was stoned to death, it would have brought the wrath of Rome down on them. And that would not have been good for anyone. For that reason, most scholars believe that the Scribes and Pharisees were convinced Jesus would not do that. He had a clear track record of compassion and grace and mercy and forgiveness. Jesus would rather release this woman; therefore, they could accuse Him of again violating the law and add it to the list of accusations against Him.

Now this isn't the point of the text, but it is worth considering how often these religious leaders seek to provoke Jesus into doing something that would do damage to His message and reputation. And again and again and again, Jesus just won't bite. He is so skillful in His ability to handle these situations. I believe it's common in our culture today that skeptics, that unbelievers, that critics do things to provoke Christians to action—and Christians respond and react in ways that do great damage to the cause of the gospel. We've got to become more skillful in not reacting and overreacting and doing damage to the gospel of grace and mercy and forgiveness, Jesus is such a beautiful example of that. The second part of verse 6 says:

But Jesus stooped down and with His finger wrote on the ground.

There's endless commentary, trying to speculate about *what* Jesus wrote. The Greek word could either be *wrote* or *drew*, but the fact of the matter is, no one knows. I would go farther than that and say that John has concluded we don't need to know to understand the point of the text. It's surprising how much commentary is spent speculating about something we both don't know, and don't need to know. But what happens in the process of trying to figure that out, we often miss the detail that's actually in the text. So we would expect the second half of verse six to read something like this: “*But Jesus stooped down and wrote on the ground.*” The idea that He wrote with His finger is quite unusual. Why do we need that detail? Well, let's stop and think about this. There has been this consistent tension between Jesus and the religious leaders over the Law of Moses. Jesus has informed them that not only do they not keep the Law, they don't even get the Law. The Law was ultimately to reveal sin, and to picture the promise of a coming Savior. Jesus has identified that He is the fulfillment of the Law. He actually told them, “When Moses was writing the Law, he was writing about Me.” He's identified that He is the water of life, that He's the manna from heaven. He's the bread of life. He's the temple. He's the feast. He's the Passover. He's the Sabbath. He's the fulfillment of the Law, but they are so confused about the Law, rather than the Law leading them to Jesus, the Law has become a substitute for Jesus. Who needs a savior if you can be self-righteous?

So this has been the point of tension. They come to Jesus and say, “These are the experts in the Law. These are those that are zealous for the Law. But we remember that when God gave the Law to Moses, how did He do that? He wrote the Law on stone tablets. How? With His finger! Go back and look it up. Exodus 31, “God wrote with His finger on tablets of stone—the Law of Moses.” This is now that same God. Now in the flesh, essentially with the same finger writing or drawing in the dirt. The intent of the text is they think they're experts in the Law and cannot come to grips with the fact they're actually talking with the Author of the Law. If anybody understands the Law, it would be God Himself. He wrote the Law. And now with that same finger, essentially, He's drawing or writing in the dirt. Jesus wants them to understand the point of the Law was not to heartlessly condemn this woman to death, but to reveal her sin so she might see her need for a savior. She has now been brought to the feet of Jesus. These religious leaders have no idea what they've actually done. They've brought this sinful woman to the only place where she can experience true grace and mercy and forgiveness.

You'd have to believe when they initially brought this woman, there was a lot of noise and chaos in the crowd. If Jesus would have said anything, it would have been heard by few at best. Verse 7:

But when they persisted in asking Him, (So Jesus is now quietly stooped down. He's writing or drawing in the dirt. And you can just imagine now it is dead quiet, and they're persisting. They're saying, "Well? Well?" They didn't expect this. "Are you going to do something?")
He straightened up, and said to them, "He who is without sin among you, let him *be the first to throw a stone at her.*"

This is a familiar story and a familiar part of the story, but often misunderstood. We live in a culture where there's this idea that nobody can point out anyone else's sin, because that's judgmental, and we're all guilty. If that was true, there would be virtually no way to deal with sin. If what Jesus is saying is that no sinner can carry out the law, the law could never have been carried out. That's clearly not what He's saying. What He is saying is, "If you want to carry out the law, let's talk about the law." First of all, for these charges to be brought forth, the couple had to be caught in the act, which means both the man and the woman would be there. The law specifically stated both the man and the woman were to be put to death, so it raises the obvious question, "Where's the man?" But the law also required that these witnesses do everything in their power to stop this from happening. In other words, it was not permitted to hide in the bushes to see if you could catch them. It was required that you warn them, that you counsel them, that you stop them. You do everything in your power to make sure this act doesn't happen. I think the crowd was probably pretty clear that this was a setup, and the witnesses had violated the law by not stopping this from happening. The law also stated that those who appeared as the eyewitnesses to condemn the person, were required to throw the first stones. So essentially Jesus was saying, "If you want to talk law, let's talk law. We all know what it says in the law, so go ahead, throw the first stone." But what's implied in that is, "Okay, we're going to follow the law and you're in trouble too." Verse 8:

Again He stooped down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they *began to go out one by one, beginning with the older ones, and He was left alone, and the woman, where she was, in the center of the court.*

So at this point they know there's nothing they can do. Jesus has bested them again and exposed their hypocrisy. The idea of the *oldest or the elders* were clearly aware they could do nothing but walk away, and if the elders walked away, the rest of the Scribes and Pharisees would walk away. This is not to say that the only two left were Jesus and the woman. All of the Scribes and Pharisees walked away but the crowd is certainly still there. Verse 10:

Straightening up, Jesus said to her, "Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you?" She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "I do not condemn you, either. Go. From now on sin no more."] (Vs. 10-11)

Can you imagine this woman being utterly terrified, not just her shame and guilt, but terrified as to whether or not the religious leaders are going to stir up this mob to stone her to death, and yet in a matter of minutes, they have dispersed and she's left with Jesus. The word **condemn** there is not the typical word for condemn. It's a little bit more of an unusual term. It's a legal term and it carries the idea of "Condemn and carry out the sentence;" "Condemn and be punished." Jesus was not saying that her behavior was acceptable. He even says, "**Sin no more.**" What He was saying is, "In this moment, I have not come to condemn and to punish." Jesus said, "I've not come to condemn; I've come to seek and to save the lost." The whole purpose of the Law was to get people to Jesus. And

there they don't experience condemnation; they experience grace and mercy and forgiveness. The only basis by which Jesus Himself could send her away without carrying out the law was He extended her forgiveness and grace and mercy. When Jesus said, “**Go and sin no more,**” what's implied is she had encountered Jesus, and her life would never be the same again. You can't miss the fact that the religious leaders, once again, just walked away, but the woman caught in adultery, walked away forgiven. Why would you just walk away when you could walk away forgiven?

I can't help but think of the story of the prodigal son. Jesus was hanging out with sinners and tax collectors. And these same Scribes and Pharisees said to Jesus, “*Why do you hang out with these sinners and misfits and losers?*” So Jesus told them the story of the prodigal son to explain it. There's an older son; there's a younger son. The older son represents the Scribes and the Pharisees. The younger son represents the sinners and the misfits and the losers. The younger son goes out and sows his wild oats, hits bottom, and comes crawling back. He has no idea for sure how his father is going to respond, but he never expected what he received. He didn't get a lecture. He didn't get condemnation. He got grace and mercy and forgiveness as his father loved him and hugged him and welcomed him home. His father wasn't waiting to yell at him and whack him. He was waiting to welcome his son home; he just wanted him home. He was so excited that his son had come home he threw a party. But the older son, who represents the Scribes and the Pharisees, was very unhappy. The story ends with the father and the son—the younger son—enjoying a party and relationship together. But when the story ends, the older son remains on the outside and he won't come to the party. The older son walked away. The younger son walked away forgiven.

I don't know what your story is this morning, but I would ask the question, “Why, this morning, would you just walk away, when God gives you the opportunity to walk away forgiven?” Perhaps some of you have been convinced by religion that you could never stand right before God. Religion condemns; Jesus forgives. I don't know your story; I don't know what your past is; I don't know what your sins are. But no one is beyond the reach of God's grace and mercy. He's not waiting to give you a lecture. He's not waiting to whack you. He's not asking you to go out and get religious or to go out and get good. He's just asking you to believe that God Himself paid the penalty for your sin through His death, burial and resurrection and He offers this salvation, grace, mercy and forgiveness freely as a gift, if you're just willing to believe.

Maybe for some of you, you've trusted Jesus as Savior, but—I have this conversation with Christians all the time—you just can't get freedom from your past—your past sins, your past failures, your past regrets, all the ways in your past that you've blown it and made a mess of things. And even though you believe you've trusted Christ as Savior, your past is dragged into your present, and every day you feel the shame and the guilt and the regrets of that. You have to understand, “Your problem is not your past; your problem is you don't believe.” You don't believe that God tells the truth when He says that if you confess your sin, He's faithful and just to forgive you your sins and to cleanse you from all unrighteousness. There's no reason to live like that. There's no reason to live in the bondage of our past. We've all blown it. We've all messed up. At some point, you've got to settle this thing and realize God tells the truth. He longs for you to experience His forgiveness and grace and mercy. Let the past be in the past. Lay it down. You're done with that. Live in the freedom of God's grace and mercy and forgiveness. Come on! Why just walk away this morning when you can walk away free and forgiven?

In just a few moments we're going to give you an opportunity to settle this. If you've never experienced the grace and forgiveness of Jesus, why walk away from Him this morning? For those of you that are believers, you may have stuff from your past that just won't go away. It's time to settle it, to do your business with God, to lay it down, to leave it here—and to walk out these doors free and forgiven! In

just a few moments we'll give you an opportunity during the final song, to come and do that. Leave it here and walk out these doors, experiencing the freedom of God's forgiveness!

But just before we do that, I want to share with you another story of two brothers—an older brother and a younger brother, whose lives took very different paths. But they came back together around the grace and the mercy and forgiveness of Jesus. As you listen to the story of Dan and Steve, I pray that your hearts will be stirred to know the same forgiveness and freedom that they have experienced. Here's their story:

I was six years older than my younger brother, Steve. We grew up together in a religion that imposed a lot of do's and don'ts, and I took the path where I tried to follow the rules. I was hoping that God would grade on a curve, and that I would make the cut. Steve, on the other hand, threw in the towel, and went another way. And so, while we grew up together as kids, we really grew apart as adults.

So in 2011 I had an awakening. God reached down and rescued me, and I came to know Jesus. And it made a huge difference in my life. I know my family recognized that, and certainly Steve recognized that. I know that deep down he wanted that for himself, but the addictions were just too powerful. So last May I got a call from home that Steve was having problems with his health. He was getting infections in his hands and legs, and he was actually in the hospital.

The next morning I woke up to a text from Steve that said, "Dan, when you come down to see me, could you bring me a Bible?" He said, "I think there's a stack of them in the coat closet." I just had to smile at that because for once, on my trip home, I remembered to bring my Bible. And he took my Bible and he just held it to his heart and just started weeping. I sat down, and Steve said, "You know, Dan, I need to come clean with you. And he laid out his life of addictions. Starting in high school with marijuana, and then going to cocaine and then crack cocaine, then meth and then crystal meth, as late as just about a month before him going into the hospital.

I said, "Steve, you know I think that what may be happening here is that God's getting your attention. And now it's time for you to get to know Him. And this is what it took for Him to get your attention."

So through the course of that week in the hospital, when they were trying to diagnose what he had, I visited him regularly. And I was struck by what he was learning, what he was being taught, apparently on his own.

I had left my Bible with the highlights, but really didn't give him any direction on what to look for or where to go. And God was opening Steve's eyes up to the gospel. Steve would explain it to me. He'd say, "Danny, you know Christ died for my sins." And I'm sitting there in his hospital room, and I'm listening to him tell me about the gospel. And I'm just thinking to myself, "God, you are amazing. You are doing this. You're rescuing him!"

I think, like many of us, Steve felt that in order for him to approach God, he needed to clean up and get his act together first. I said, "Steve, you know I think that it sounds too good to be true, but it's true that God has saved you by grace, and you just need to believe, Steve, and accept it.

They did a bone-marrow biopsy, and the results came back that Steve had a very aggressive form of leukemia, acute myeloid leukemia. And Steve looked at me and he said, "Dan, take me home.

I'm ready to die." On our way home, Steve turned to me and said, "Dan," (You know, it was like, "Dan,) come clean with me. Do you really think, that after everything that I've done in my life, that I'm really saved?" And I said, "Steve, I think I've got something that you want to hear."

And I pulled up Bryan Clark's sermon on Ephesians 2: 1-10. It identifies what we were by nature, and what we have become by grace. And it starts out in verses 1 through 3, and it's pretty dire. (Bryan's voice): "We are dead in our sin, and we're just going along with the flow of the world, and we're destined for God's wrath." And then you get to verse four, and it's, "But God, rich in mercy and love for us, He reaches down and rescues us. Not only that, He sets us with Him in the heavenlies, to the praise of His grace," nothing that we've done.

There were times during this sermon that he was just weeping and breaking down. And when it was done, he turned to me and said, "That is everything that I've been hoping for!" I completely understood.

Two weeks and two days later, Steve passed away. But he was sure that he was saved. Steve and I had lived most of our lives with the wrong view of God—that we had to earn our salvation, that it was based on our performance. In both of our cases, it was God that did the rescuing. We just needed to believe it and accept it—that it was only by His grace.

(Bryan): So I ask you again this morning, "Why would you just walk away, when God gives you the opportunity to walk away forgiven, to experience His grace and His mercy?" It's like the father of the prodigal son. He's not waiting to give you a lecture or to whack you. He just wants you to come home. There are times in our lives where we need to just settle some of these issues. I don't know what your story is. I don't know what your past is. I don't know—but God knows—and He offers His grace and His forgiveness and His mercy. So during this last song, I want to give people an opportunity to get this settled—to get out of your seat, and come on down. There's plenty of room on the steps. Do your business with God. Think of it as bringing whatever it is, bringing it down and laying it at the foot of Jesus and *leaving* it here, and walking out those doors, free and forgiven. Why would we not do that? So I'm going to invite us to stand as we sing this final song. I invite you to come, do your business with God, and experience His grace and His mercy and His forgiveness. Let's pray together.

Our Father, we are so thankful this morning for Your grace and Your mercy and Your forgiveness. Lord, we've all been the woman caught in adultery. We all have our own stories. We all have our own sins. We're all equally, desperately in need of a savior. God, I pray for those that have responded this morning. Give them the faith and the courage to believe that You tell the truth when You say You have forgiven their sins. They don't need to walk out these doors carrying that burden. God, I ask that they might walk out these doors, that all of us might walk out these doors, forgiven and free. Lord, may we have the faith and courage to live in the freedom and the forgiveness that comes through Jesus and Jesus alone. Lord, this we pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

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That You May Believe
John 8:1-11
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Opening Discussion

1. Many people struggle to accept God's forgiveness. They keep beating themselves up for past failures and sins. Why do you think some people struggle to believe God has truly forgiven them?
2. Share your own story of forgiveness. Are you able to accept God's forgiveness and move forward in freedom or do you struggle with letting go of the past?

Bible Study

1. Read John 8:1-11. Compare John 8:1-6 with how the religious leaders responded when Jesus healed the man who had been sick for 38 years in John 5. What happens to highly religious people that causes them to be so much more passionate about the Law than about people? Have you experienced this?
2. Discuss how this woman must've felt when she was thrown down in front of Jesus. Does religious legalism give people hope or condemn them? What has been your experience with religion?
3. Compare John's text of Jesus writing on the ground with "His finger" and Exodus 31:18. Rather than speculating what Jesus wrote, maybe the focus needs to be on the detail John does give us. What might John be focusing on by recording Jesus writing with His finger?
4. What did Jesus mean in John 8:7? If someone had to be sinless to throw the first stone no one could ever carry out the law (Deut. 17:7). So what did Jesus mean?
5. The religious leaders were trying to get Jesus to react in some way to lose credibility with the people. Jesus skillfully avoided their trap. How do people and the media today try to lure Christians into reactions that compromise our witness? How do we avoid falling into these traps?
6. Jesus did not excuse her sin. He forgave her sin. The law did require death for adultery but Jesus gave her mercy. The idea of "sin no more" carries the idea that the mercy and forgiveness of Jesus is lifechanging. Has that been your experience?

