

Russell Kelfer

The First to Throw a Stone

1311-A

Series: The Mind of Christ

dtm DISCIPLESHIP TAPE MINISTRIES, INC.
INTO HIS LIKENESS RADIO

10602 Mossbank, San Antonio, TX 78230 • (210) 226-0000 / 1-800-375-7778 • www.dtm.org • dtm@dtm.org

The First to Throw a Stone

They wanted to entrap Him. That's what they were after. It was a Pharisee "sting" operation. They wanted to create a scenario that would force Him to violate His own words, so they could discredit Him and have a basis for rejecting His claims that He was God.

The easiest thing they could do, or so they thought, was to force Him to choose between judgment and grace. If they could make Him violate the Old Testament law, *He couldn't be Messiah*, or so they insisted. On the other hand, if He upheld the law, *His message of love and grace would be null and void*. Either way, they thought, they had Him. That is the background for today's study.

What led up to this incident was a classic portrait of the sovereignty of God. The temple version of the CIA had orders to bring Jesus in. So they went to where He was teaching, in the outer court during the latter part of the feast, and they purposed to arrest Him. But they couldn't. *His time had not yet come*. And until His Father released the cord that bound Him to this earth, nothing Satan or those under his evil influence could do, would matter. The Master was invincible, *until His time had come*.

Wouldn't you like to have been a fly on the wall when the temple guards who had been charged with the responsibility of arresting Jesus, returned empty-handed? *In case you want to know what happened*, John ends with this play-by-play account:

Finally the temple guards went back to the chief priests and Pharisees, who asked them, "Why didn't you bring him in?"

"No one ever spoke the way this man does," the guards declared.

"You mean he has deceived you also?" the Pharisees retorted.

"Has any of the rulers of the Pharisees believed in him?"

No! But this mob that knows nothing of the law—there is a curse on them."

The First to Throw a Stone

Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus earlier and who was one of their own number, asked,

“Does our law condemn anyone without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?”

They replied, “Are you from Galilee too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee.”

(John 7:45-52 NIV)

The police didn't have a real good story to explain why they came back without their prisoner. Had they come back with knife wounds and argued that this preaching carpenter's entourage had rebelled and put up a fight, that might have been tolerated. But they didn't have an excuse. They just *couldn't lay a hand on him*. Besides, once they heard Him speak, they weren't sure why anyone would arrest the likes of Him. He was saying things they'd never heard before, and everything He was saying made sense.

“No one ever spoke the way this man does,” they responded. Think about that. That would be like going to a seminary or to a convention of preachers or to the head of a denomination and saying, “I couldn't believe it. I heard this carpenter who hasn't studied like you guys, and I've never heard preaching like this.”

The Pharisees were livid. These guards weren't supposed to listen to Jesus, they were supposed to arrest Him. The religious leaders responded by doing the only thing they knew to do. They put their agents on the defensive by implying that they had bought His “lies” and become one of His disciples. This was tantamount to treason: to be sent to arrest a criminal and become one of His followers instead. The Pharisees argued that not one of the religious authorities believed in Him, *and that in itself ought to guarantee that He was a fraud*.

It was about that time that a man named Nick spoke up. You remember Nick. It was he who had come to Jesus by night and asked the \$64 question that led to the million-dollar answer concerning the new birth. At great personal risk to his own reputation and standing, Nicodemus asked:

“Does our law condemn anyone without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?”

(John 7:51 NIV)

Good point.

He who answers a matter before he hears it is folly and shame to him.

(Proverbs 18:13 NKJV)

The First to Throw a Stone

This was a trial by default. It violated every basic right of Jewish law. But to these Pharisees, *they had become the law*. Once that happens, *there ceases to be a law*.

The passage concludes:

“And every man went to his own house.” (John 7:53 NIV)

Meeting adjourned. They had no answers, no arguments, no prisoner. All they had was a bunch of policemen turned cowards and one of their own members questioning their legal right to do what they were planning to do. It was time to go home and get a good night’s sleep and start over tomorrow to find a way to put away this itinerant preacher who was so stirring up the masses with His message of love and forgiveness. They all went home. All, that is, but Jesus. The Son of God had no place to lay His head. He went up to the Mount of Olives, and early in the morning went back to the temple where His Sunday School class got together again and He began to teach.

It is here that we find today’s incident in the life of Christ. It is a story that touches the very fiber of God’s mercy, yet it deals with such a delicate issue, that the early church avoided reading it for fear it would be misinterpreted. Outlined, it would take this form:

- I- The Occasion (verses 1-2)
- II- The Intrusion (verse 3)
- III- The Accusation (verses 4-5)
- IV- The Intention (verse 6a)
- V- The Confrontation (verses 6b-9)
- VI- The Conclusion (verses 10-11)

I- THE OCCASION

It all began like this:

But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.

At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. (John 8:1,2 NIV)

At dawn, the Master arose and went once again into the temple courts. It was the day after the feast had ended. Everyone was tired. Many were leaving to start the long journey back to their homes. Still, a large number could not resist staying to hear this incredible man whose words touched the very core of

The First to Throw a Stone

their being. The phrase, “all the people gathered,” indicates that everyone within hearing distance stopped what they were doing and gathered at the feet of the Master. He sat, indicating He was taking on the role of a teacher. Once again, the Son of God was breaking the bread of life to all who had ears to hear. Wonderful words of wisdom poured from his lips. *No one spoke like this man did.* The people hung on every word.

II- THE INTRUSION

Suddenly, a loud noise disrupted his teaching. From way in the back, a crowd of self-righteous Pharisees moved toward the front, ignoring the fact that Jesus was in the middle of His message. They were literally dragging a woman along with them. Here’s the story:

The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group
(John 8:3 NIV)

This was a deceitfully-planned intrusion of the Master’s ministry. It would be much the same as someone in the church interrupting a worship service where thousands were being taught because he knew of someone in the congregation who had committed a sin. It was even more ridiculous because just a few yards away, the courts of the Sanhedrin met, whose purpose it was to deal with such issues. The insensitivity of these men towards Jesus, His congregation of hearers, and the woman herself stands as a condemnation for all time to Pharisaical, self-righteous religionists who are more interested in proving their point than solving real problems. They were not interested in her, her problem, or Jesus’ problems. They wanted to prove a point, and their basic objectives were self-centered.

III- THE ACCUSATION

The passage continues:

They made her stand before the group
and said to Jesus, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery.

In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women.
Now what do you say?”
(John 8:3b-5 NIV)

Why did they bring this woman to Jesus? He was not even pretending to be the judge and jury over matters religious. In fact, they were not only *not* respecting His authority, they were

The First to Throw a Stone

planning to kill him. Now, in an act of supreme pretense, they drag this woman in front of this entire crowd, and act as though Jesus was their authority. In direct violation of Leviticus 20 and Deuteronomy 22, they brought *only the woman*. Jewish law required that both the man and the woman suffer like punishment.

Guilt or innocence was never the issue here. There was no need for judge or jury to determine whether or not she had committed adultery. The words used here literally mean: “*to be found out beyond a doubt*.” She had been caught committing adultery. It wasn’t an idle charge. If that is true *the man she was with had been caught, as well*. His absence from the scene was a violation of Jewish law. If one was guilty, both were. The death sentence *was* appropriate according to Old Testament law. Stoning, however, was reserved for a woman who was betrothed to another, or for the daughter of a priest. Whether such conditions applied to this woman, we do not know. In other cases, however, death was still mandated. The *Talmud* prescribes strangulation.

IV- THE INTENTION

“Now what do *you* say?” That was the key phrase. They were not concerned about the woman, nor were they concerned about justice. They only wanted to entrap the Master. We know that because the Scripture clearly goes on:

They were using this questions as a trap, in order to have
a basis for accusing him. (John 8:6a NIV)

The present active infinitive of the verb *katergoreo* literally means “*to go on accusing*”. It was simply another chapter in a seemingly endless ocean of spiritual warfare for Jesus. If you think you have opposition to your ministry, and it’s unfair, think again. This was the sinless Son of God, whose life and whose teachings were without flaw, and yet *at every turn*, He met with opposition. It was sometimes subtle opposition in the form of questions that appeared to have no answers. It was sometimes overt opposition, in the form of temple guards who literally came to arrest Him.

It this case, it was both. Their behavior was open and disruptive, but their objectives were subtly subversive. They pretended to want justice, but what they were seeking was revenge. And they were using a woman, who was indeed a

The First to Throw a Stone

sinner, as a pawn in their chess game of spiritual treachery. They wanted to put Jesus away for good, but unless they could embarrass Him in front of His admirers, they would invoke an uprising. So they continually set up traps for Him, hoping to catch Him in a Catch-22, and prove Him to be fallible.

V- THE CONFRONTATION

Can't you just imagine, once again, the tension that must have filled the air as these religious leaders paraded this woman to the front of the gathering? On one hand, the crowd was in awe of this carpenter-turned-teacher whose every word startled their spirits. On the other hand, their religious leaders had come to Him with a seemingly important issue, and had appeared to be asking Him for His solution, giving outward credibility to His ministry, while in reality, attempting to undermine it. Picture the astonishment of the crowd as Jesus did what he did. Listen:

But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger.

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."

Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.

At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. (John 8:6b-9 NIV)

Jesus got up from where He was sitting, and stooped to the ground. I imagine the crowd must have stood to its feet to see what was happening. Here were these Pharisees holding this frightened woman by the arm while Jesus knelt down and began writing something on the dirt floor. It says, "*He bent down*". The verb *kupsas*, "to bend forward", is only used twice in the New Testament. Here the word *kato*, meaning "down", is added to give the incident further emphasis. "He bent over until He was down on the ground" would be the literal translation.

And God began to write. This is the only time in Scripture where Jesus ever wrote anything. Interestingly, there is more written about this man who wrote nothing than of anyone else who ever lived. The word used could mean write, draw, or explain. Oh, that we could know for sure what the Master wrote! Were we supposed to know, however, we would. Nothing has been left out of Scripture that we are supposed to have. Some

The First to Throw a Stone

feel that perhaps He wrote the specific sins and the names of those who were the woman's accusers. That is not likely. Their sins, as we shall see, had already been written on their own hearts. Whatever He wrote, It was quite legible to those who were there pretending to seek justice.

Apparently, they didn't get it at first. We usually don't. The Scripture says, "They kept on questioning Him." What He wrote, He could have said, but then it would have been known to the whole of the congregation and to us, as well. So he wrote where only the accusers and the accused could see. Whatever He wrote at first, didn't satisfy the Pharisees. They kept on pressuring Him to say more. So He did. What He wrote the second time, we don't know either. But it did the trick. Before He bent down to the ground for round two, however, He made this incredible statement:

"If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her."

(John 8:7b NIV)

He didn't dispute her guilt. He didn't even question their recommended form of punishment. He just decided to make them the executioners. And in order to find one who was qualified, He made a very simple stipulation. Anyone who was perfectly innocent could have the job. He hadn't come to condemn, but to save. These who had come to condemn needed saving, as well, but they didn't know it. He all but handed them the stones to throw, but gave them a one-line qualifier.

How would you have felt about then, if you were that woman? You had been dragged before a band of religious students and condemned by their authorities to death. They, in turn, turn to this newfound hero of the masses, and put your fate in His hands. Now He turns back to those who brought you and says, "Okay, stone her. Here's how we will choose her executioner." She probably closed her eyes and waited for the death knell to sound.

Perhaps she heard the sound of movement and opened her eyes. We don't know. We *do know*, however, that one by one her accusers disappeared. Strangely enough, they did it in order: the oldest went first, then the next oldest, until the youngest exited last. Why? We don't know. Some suggest that the older were more easily convicted. They had less pride and more knowledge of their own sins. Possibly. Others suggest that the older ones

The First to Throw a Stone

had more sense, and came to their senses more quickly. Again, it is only speculation. What isn't speculation, however, is that they departed in that order. That much God wanted us to know.

Now imagine being in the congregation. This scenario has left you breathless. Jesus was teaching you about the Scriptures when these Pharisees interrupted Him and asked Him to condemn a woman who was obviously guilty of adultery. Jesus stooped down, wrote something, they kept pressing. He wrote again, and one by one in order by age, the accusers vanished. What would you be thinking about now? One thing is for sure. You would be anxiously awaiting the next words to fall from the Master's lips. So was the woman.

VI- THE CONCLUSION

I imagine you could have heard a pin drop. Now no one was at the front of the room but Jesus and this accused woman. With those penetrating eyes, so bright with wisdom, yet so warm with compassion, Jesus turned to this adulterous woman. Here is what He said:

Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"

"No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

(John 8:10,11 NIV)

"Woman, where are they?" What an incredible question. Jesus used questions more effectively than anyone else who has ever lived. He did not ask questions because He did not know the answers. He asked questions because He wanted others to *think*. So, instead of telling them what they needed to know, He often framed questions to make them come up with the answer themselves. Then it was their answer, and thus a part of their lives. "Where are they?" Jesus asked. Where are your accusers? "Has no one condemned you?"

"No one, Sir," she answered. Incidentally, there was one there who was without sin. Had He *chosen* to condemn her, *He met the qualifications*. No one else on earth did. He alone, the sinless one, was equipped to wear the robes of a judge. But Jesus had not "come to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved"¹. He will come one day as the judge. Not this time. This time He came as the suffering

¹ John 3:17

The First to Throw a Stone

servant, to lay down His life for the sheep. And He left us with an identical calling. “Let this mind be in you”, is our pattern. This mind is not the mind of condemnation, but rather the mind of reconciliation.

Jesus refused to condemn her, although He could have. He said, rather, “Then neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin.” He did not pardon her to excuse her. He pardoned her to give her another chance to live life as it was meant to be lived. Life was meant to be lived on a holy plane. Adultery was not to be an option. It wasn’t then. It isn’t now.

Under the law, adultery was to be punished by death. The reasons were simply: marriage was a picture of man’s relationship with God, and the physical act of adultery indicates in spiritual terms that man can have fellowship with more than one god. That’s blasphemy. We are the body of Christ. We are meant to have a physical relationship with only our spouse as a living portrait of the spiritual relationship we are to have with only our God. The early church, we are told, avoided teaching this story because they thought it condoned immorality. Quite the opposite is true. The law, remember, was a schoolmaster to bring us to Christ. Under the law, “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” was clear. Likewise, the penalty was clear. Death for both parties, by stoning, if the woman was betrothed or a priest’s daughter, by strangulation in other cases. No exceptions.

This woman deserved death. She had been caught. So far as we know, she made no defense for herself, gave no excuses. She deserved to die. When the church ignored the intensity of the consequences of adultery, it screams a message of blasphemy to the world. And if you are involved in an immoral relationship, God’s heart has not changed. *He hates it*. If you are a Christian, and have been cleansed by His blood, forgiveness is yours, but the consequences will not necessarily be circumvented.

If you are *not* a believer, or are not sure, and you are involved in impurity, or you have been, *let the law of God be a schoolmaster to bring you to Christ*. Except you repent, you will perish. Except you come to Christ, you will die in your sins, and you will never taste the mercy of God. This woman’s life stands as an invitation to you. She did not know God personally. She came in her sin with only two possibilities:

- 1- She could die for her sins.

The First to Throw a Stone

2- She could receive forgiveness and mercy. Those are the same two choices facing you.

God's invitation is as clear today as it was then. "Neither do I condemn you." He came to save you. Trust Him right now. Ask Him to forgive your sins. He will. Jesus told her, "Go in peace". He will say the same to you.

3- If you are a Christian and have received the forgiveness of God, but are still punishing yourself for immorality or other sins of the past, *stop it*. Jesus said, "Go in peace." You may be saying, "But I'm still suffering the consequences of that sin. It cost me my marriage, my reputation, my family." That may be true. But your fellowship with God has been restored. In God's eyes, you are justified. It's "Just as if I'd never sinned". Go in peace, Beloved, and live in the freedom of God's mercy.

4- "Sin no more." The NIV translation says, "Leave your life of sin." Stop it. You say, "But I'm a believer. I am covered by the grace of God." Indeed you are.

What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?

Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?
(Romans 6:1,2 NKJV)

Stop it means stop it. Every time God forgives us and we willfully return to that sin we are crucifying Christ anew. We are taking lightly the blood He shed for us. Get help. Get accountability. Get counseling. But get away from that sin that so easily besets you. Otherwise you will come to the end of your journey to the Bema seat of Christ and find an ocean of wood, hay, and stubble to show for your days.

5- Finally, don't wear the robes of a judge. It's unbecoming to the Christian to assume the rights that only belong to Christ. "*Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.*" That isn't you. That isn't me. Hate the sin. But don't let your hatred for the sin turn into hatred for the sinner. If you know someone who is living in sin, remember God has a plan to turn that life around. You are to be an instrument towards that end.

First of all, pray for them. Pray that the God of all grace would touch them in their rebellion and bring them to themselves.

Secondly, appeal to them. "Exhort, rebuke, encourage", says Paul. Tell them what Jesus told this woman. Tell them to stop

The First to Throw a Stone

it. But do not go condescendingly. Go humbly. Remember what God said?

Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted.

Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

(Galatians 6:1,2 NKJV)

If they are not believers, use this as a way to lead them to the one who died to take away their condemnation. But let them know that apart from Him they have been already sentenced to death. If they are believers, and they will not hear or repent, separate yourself from them, not to condemn them, but to bring them to repentance. Judgment is not ours; it is God's. Our task is the ministry of reconciliation. We must hate the sin. But ever we must love the sinner.

This woman was literally dragged into the presence of God by arrogant, self-righteous religious leaders. They wanted to trick Him. They wanted to force Him to either abandon the righteousness of the law or else defy this message of mercy He had been proclaiming. Either way, they assumed they would win.

The trouble is, they were arguing with God. He did not set the law aside. She was guilty. She deserved death. The law was her schoolmaster. Jesus agreed. But the grace of God had appeared to man. It would not be "by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy that He saved us."²

So this woman, considered guilty as charged, received the gospel in a moment of time. It was engraved on the particles of a dirt floor in front of her accusers. We don't know what it said, but we do know it spelled "m-e-r-c-y". She was forgiven. Her sin was grievous. That made her forgiveness even more beautiful.

Now she had a fresh start. So do we.

She also had a fresh challenge: stop living in sin.

So do we.

² Titus 3:5

dtm DISCIPLESHIP TAPE MINISTRIES, INC.

10602 Mossbank, San Antonio, TX 78230

210-226-0000 or 1-800-375-7778

www.dtm.org • dtm@dtm.org • © Russell Kelfer