

A God of Justice and Mercy (John 7:53-8:11)

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The authority of the Bible is the foundation of the Christian faith. What we believe about Jesus and how we live as his followers is not rooted in our thoughts about God, but God's revelation of himself. This is the Word of God, not the musings of men. As the Apostle Paul says in 2 Tim 3:16, "All Scripture is breathed out by God."

Yes, the Bible was written by fallible men who broke God's laws just like we do. Yet the Holy Spirit so moved on their hearts and minds that the words they wrote were exactly the words God wanted them to write. 2 Pe 1:21, "For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." Thus to deny, ignore, and disobey God's Word is to deny, ignore, and disobey God himself.

All that is true of God, therefore, is true of his Word. Because he is true, wise, perfect, just, loving, good, and faithful, so are his words, preserved for us in the canon of Scripture. But that raises a critical question. How do we know that we have the right books – 39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New – out of all the ancient Christian writings out there? How do we know we're not missing parts of Scripture that were inspired by God and including parts that are not?

Wayne Grudem's answer is insightful. "The answer must ultimately be that our confidence is based on the faithfulness of God. We know that God loves his people, and it is supremely important that God's people have his own words, for they are our life. They are more precious, more important to us than anything else in this world. We also know that God our Father is in control of all history, and he is not the kind of Father who will trick us or fail to be faithful to us or keep from us something we absolutely need."

To believe as much is not a leap in the dark. It is the result of the Holy Spirit working through the self-attesting authority of Scripture, using the Word to nourish our souls with the promises of a faithful God such that we come to say with Peter, "You have the words of eternal life!" (Jn 6:68). We experience first-hand that the Word of God is indeed "living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb 4:12).

However, the Spirit also strengthens our faith in the trustworthiness of God's Word through historical data about God's Word. As Christians, we do not believe every copy

or translation of the Bible is inerrant or inspired. Only the original manuscripts are – what Moses wrote, what Isaiah wrote, what Paul wrote, what the Apostle John wrote in the gospel we’ve been studying. Since the papyrus scrolls on which they originally wrote are not available to us (they simply decay too quickly), how do we know what they contained with the kind of accuracy necessary for me to commend this book to you as the Word of God and charge you to obey it? The short answer is that God’s people made careful copies of his Word and passed them down to succeeding generations, including translations in new languages.

The process of sorting through all of those ancient copies or manuscripts and using them to determine what the original manuscripts contained is the work of a literary discipline called textual criticism. By textual criticism I do not mean adopting a critical stance where we exercise some kind of judgment over God’s Word. I mean the necessary and careful work of recovering the original wording of Scripture in the language in which it was written as closely as possible.

Most Bible translators use footnotes when there is a discrepancy that’s hard to resolve in the manuscript tradition. For example, in Jn 7:8, some manuscripts say (quoting Jesus), “I am not going up to this feast,” while other manuscripts say (quoting Jesus), “I am not yet going up to this feast.” Most variations are very minor, like that one. Some are more significant. All are attributed to either an accidental or intentional error on the part of a copyist.

F.F. Bruce observes, “When we have documents like our New Testament writings copied and recopied thousands of times, the scope for copyists’ errors is so enormously increased that it is surprising there are no more than there actually are. Fortunately, if the great number of [manuscripts] increases the number of scribal errors, it increases proportionately the means of correcting such errors, so that the margin of doubt left in the process of recovering the exact original wording is not so large as might be feared; it is in truth remarkably small. The variant readings about which any doubt remains among textual critics of the New Testament affect no material question of historic fact or of Christian faith and practice.”

Why not? As David Allen Black notes, “A doctrine that is affected by textual variation will always be adequately supported by other passages.” That’s a tremendous gift from God, my friends, and should strengthen your confidence in the trustworthiness of Scripture. To give you a sense of scale, we have some 5,000 manuscripts that contain all or part of the Greek New Testament, including two complete copies that date back to 350 A.D.

and papyrus fragments dating back to 125 A.D., which is just a few decades after the final books of the New Testament were written.

In contrast, we only have a few hundred ancient manuscripts of classical works of literature like Caesar's Gallic Wars and only 30 some for the Histories of Tacitus. In both cases, our earliest copies were created 800-900 years after both volumes were written. Yet textual critics are confident in their ability to confirm the original text. No one runs feature stories on National Geographic questioning their authenticity. How much more should we trust the authenticity of the New Testament when the historical evidence for the original manuscripts is vastly superior! The Lord has been so kind in preserving his Word for us!

Now, why am I bringing all of this up in a sermon? Because many of you, if you have a Bible, probably see something like "The earliest manuscripts do not include John 7:53-8:11" written in the margin. Or maybe you just see brackets around the verses we read this morning. Here's what's going on. There is strong historical evidence that these verses were not part of the original text of John's gospel, the text the Holy Spirit inspired the Apostle John to write.

For example, the passage is present in a few medieval manuscripts but is absent from nearly all the early Greek manuscripts. When it does show up in later manuscripts, it's found in no less than 10 different locations. It contains vocabulary found nowhere else in John. No pastor and or author quotes these verses until after the 4th century A.D., and no one comments on them in the Greek-speaking church until the 12th century A.D.

So why is it included in most of our Bible translation? There is a widespread consensus that the story describes something that actually happened during Jesus' ministry. It simply wasn't part of the original, inspired manuscript of John's gospel. Leon Morris's perspective is helpful. "The story is true to the character of Jesus. Throughout the history of the church, it has been held that, whoever wrote it, this little story is authentic. It rings true. It speaks to our condition...It is thus worth our while to study it."

Everything this passage teaches us about God and ourselves accords with sound doctrine. As such, it's a gripping example of truths that are repeatedly confirmed by other passages of Scripture and an exchange from which we have much to learn. The church has treasured this account from our Lord's ministry for good reason. Here's the main point. **Because Jesus is full of justice and mercy, we should walk humbly before God and men.** I say as much for two reasons.

1) THE JUSTICE OF GOD EXPOSES OUR SINFULNESS

In v. 2, Jesus arrives in the morning to teach in the temple. Crowds of people are gathered around him. And the “scribes and Pharisees” seize the moment to try and indict the Lord with his own words. They bring a woman “caught in adultery” to Jesus. Vv. 4-5 sets the trap. “Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?”

On the surface, their question might seem like a sincere desire for counsel in how to best honor the binding commands the Lord gave Israel under the Old Covenant. Lev 20:10, “If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death.” But it doesn’t take much examination to realize all is not on the up and up.

Case in point, if she was caught in the act, where’s the man? He’s just as guilty under the law as she is. Besides, there were important exceptions to the death penalty in places like Deut 22. The lack of detail in their accusation reveals their lack of concern for upholding the justice of God. Even the way they refer to her in v. 5 as one of “such women” drips with thinly veiled scorn.

Something’s terribly wrong. It feels more like a lynching than an honorable trial, which v. 6 confirms. “This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him.” D.A. Carson, “The authorities in this case are less interested in ensuring that even handed justice be meted out than in hoisting Jesus onto the horns of a dilemma.” How so? If Jesus says “yes” to her condemnation, he could be charged with treason because Rome prohibited the Jews from administering the death penalty. But if Jesus says “no,” he could be charged with heresy for rejecting the law of Moses. Heads I win. Tails you lose.

At first, Jesus doesn’t say anything. He simply bends down and starts writing with his finger on the ground. We don’t know what he wrote. But the fact Jesus does so twice – once in v. 6 and again in v. 8 – suggests it’s not a minor detail. I think the answer is found in Ex 31:18. Listen to how Moses first received the 10 commandments from the Lord. “And he gave to Moses, when he had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God.”

When questioned about upholding the law, Jesus’ first move was to symbolically identify himself with the Author and Giver of the law. The God who wrote with his finger on stone on Mt. Sinai was the same God writing on the temple ground in Jerusalem. His



action spoke volumes. The greatest injustice in the whole situation was the Jewish leaders' failure to recognize, honor, and submit to Jesus as eternal Son of God incarnate. Instead of submitting to him as their rightful Judge, they tried to trap him as if they were the judge.

The symbolic rebuke in Jesus' writing was indirect. His words in v. 7 were not. "And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, 'Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.'" Lest we misunderstand Jesus' words, let's start with what he wasn't saying.

Jesus wasn't saying the people of God, Christians included, are disqualified from judging someone else's actions unless they are morally perfect. The Lord honored Israel when she faithfully (albeit imperfectly) upheld the law under the Old Covenant, and he commands us to lovingly hold one another accountable for our actions today under the New Covenant as fellow members of the body of Christ. 1 Cor 5:12, "Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge?" Or 1 Cor 11:31, "But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged." Jesus wasn't saying you're perfect, you have no right to exercise judgment.

So what was he saying? He knew the scribes and pharisees. He knew the motives of their heart. He knew they didn't care about truth or justice at all. And he summoned their conscience to bear witness to the injustice of the entire proceeding, effectively exposing their hypocrisy.

You say you're concerned about upholding the judgment of God when what you're really trying to do is render your own judgment against God by prosecuting me. You're playing God under the guise of honoring God. You're using a pretense of justice to perpetuate a grave injustice. And even your pretense, hauling this woman whom you despise in front of me, is manifestly suspect according to the requirements of the law. You're just as if not more guilty in the matter at hand than she is, and you know it.

Jesus wasn't rejecting or deconstructing the law of Moses. He simply insisted it be executed with justice. He called their bluff and, in the process, reoriented the scribes and pharisees toward the justice of God. They approached him pretending to be the judge, so Jesus lovingly reminded them of their true position before the Judge of all the earth. V. 9, "But when they heard it, they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones."

Why? Because the longer you live, the harder it gets to maintain the illusion of self-righteousness, to deny the truth of Rom 3:23, "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God," or Jas 3:2, "For we all stumble in many ways." There are a lot of challenges to getting older, but there is one distinct advantage. The arrogant notion that you're a "good person" is harder to maintain, even in your own eyes.

That's a good thing, friends, because it's always been a lie. Not one of us is righteous. We're all sinners. We're all guilty in the sight of our Creator, a guilt to which he will not turn a blind eye. Matt 16:27, "For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done."

The real issue with the scribes and pharisees, prior to Jesus' piercing question, was their lack of humility before God and men. We easily fall into the same kind of self-righteous judgment. We do it with our friends. We do it with our spouses. We do it with our children. We do it in the quiet of our heart toward politicians in the other party. We say we're only concerned with upholding the truth. But the scorn in our hearts says we need to examine ourselves more closely.

The next time you're judging someone, whether in your words or in the quiet of your own heart, ask yourself two questions. First, are you thinking or speaking with a self-righteous arrogance or critical spirit as if you're a superior person or with the humility of a fellow sinner? Second, are you showing mercy as one who desperately needs the Lord's mercy just as much as they do? That doesn't mean ignoring sin or belittling sin. It does mean all our words of judgment and correction should be characterized by a profound gentleness and compassion, a heart that points out a brother or sister's weakness not because it bugs us, but because we long for them to experience the transforming mercy of God.

The justice of God rightly exposes our sinfulness. That's the first reason we should walk humbly before God and men. Here's the second.

2) THE MERCY OF GOD ENABLES OUR REPENTANCE

Look back at v. 9. They all went away, one by one, "and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him." Remember, why did they all leave? Because their own conscience condemned them. They knew they were guilty. They couldn't claim to be without sin. So everyone left. Except one. Jesus remained right where he was. Why? Because he was the only one who met the standard, the only one without sin.

Deut 32:4, "The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he." Acts 17:31, "[God] has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead." Matt 25:31–32, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats."

Whether she knew it or not, this woman caught in the act of adultery, a woman who according to the law of God very well deserved to die, was standing before the righteous judge of all the earth. How did Jesus respond? V. 10, "'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' She said, 'No one, Lord.' And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you...'"

How could Jesus say that and remain a righteous judge? V. 11 implicitly confirms her guilt. How could he say, "Neither do I condemn you"? Jn 3:17, "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." The dawn of the New Covenant did not break with an announcement of condemnation but a call to salvation, an invitation to come and find mercy.

Jesus holds out the same invitation to you today, friend. Come to me and find mercy. He knows what you've done. He knows what you're doing. You deserve his condemnation. Know that. Feel that. He owes you nothing but judgement and would be glorified through your judgment. But there is another way. Jesus made another way. He died on the cross, condemned by God as he bore the guilt of your sin, so that you could justly receive forgiveness and mercy. 2 Cor 5:21, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

Jesus' words, "Neither do I condemn you," could not have been more costly. They would cost him his very life. It's the good news of the gospel, friends. And it is the best news we could ever hear. As R.C. Sproul wonderfully said, "The glory of the gospel is that the one from whom we need to be saved is the one who saved us."

When you die, friend, it will be too late to ask Jesus for mercy. You must run to him right now by faith! You must trust in his death on the cross for the forgiveness of your sins in this life. What does that trust look like, you ask? It looks like walking the same road Jesus called the woman caught in adultery to walk. The assurance of God's mercy waits for us on the road of repentance.

Yes, Jesus refused to condemn her. But he did not say, "Don't worry about it! We all make mistakes. Just try and be the best person you can be." No! What did he say? V. 10, "Go, and from now on, sin no more." He beckoned her down the path of faith-fueled repentance. The only response to the mercy of God that guarantees your salvation on the final day, friend, is a path of transformation where you stop doing life on your terms and live to please the Lord.

It's not because God's mercy must be earned. It's because a life of repentance is the surest sign that we see our need for mercy, are looking to Jesus for mercy, and have had our hearts made new by the power of his mercy. Tit 2:11–14, "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works."

Friend, if you are hesitant to come to Jesus and follow him because you feel the depth of your sin and wickedness, wait no longer. The Lord longs to be gracious to you. He rises to show you compassion. At the cross, God paid the price to satisfy his own justice so that he could justly extend to you the wealth of his mercy. Stop waiting. Stop holding back. Exchange the arrogance of putting yourself on spiritual probation as if you were God for the humility of accepting his free offer of pardon in Christ Jesus.

And if you hear me declare the mercy of Jesus and say to yourself, "I completely agree. And that's exactly why I wish all these professing Christians would get off my case and quit judging me on account of the choice I'm making. Who do they think they are? Where's the mercy?" Well then, I warn you. Jn 8:11 doesn't tell us what the woman decided to do. It ends with the Savior giving her a choice. It's the same choice he sets before you, friend. Are you willing to repent or not?

God's mercy isn't a free pass. It's a kindness that leads to repentance. If the latter is absent, so is the former. Heb 10:26–27, "For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries." No one genuinely receives God's mercy and remains the same. For it is a mercy that changes us. It's a mercy that transforms us. It's a mercy that causes us to walk humbly before God and men.



And when you wander off the path of following Jesus and are tempted to give up because you've made the same mistake over and over again, remember this. Every time you turn back to Jesus, sincerely confessing your sin, freshly aware of your need for God's forgiveness, the Savior greets you with the same words he spoke to the woman. He does not tire of speaking them. And they don't come to you with a weary sigh after the 7th time. His mercies are new every morning. So is his life-giving word of purpose and mission, "Go, and from now on sin no more."

CONCLUSION

The justice of God exposes our sinfulness, and the mercy of God enables our repentance. It's the message of the entire Bible, really. Ex 34:6-7, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty..."

Jesus is the one who ultimately brings both of those actions to pass. He exercises the justice of God, exposing our sinfulness. And he holds out the mercy of God, enabling our repentance. He is full of justice and mercy. Therein lies the warning. And therein lies our hope. Hold fast to him, friends, and earnestly labor to show others the mercy you have received.