

Part 4: Jesus and Shaming Sinners

Victory Life Church, Central — Sunday, March 15, 2026

Summary

In the account of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:2–11), Jesus confronts both public sin and hidden self-righteousness, revealing the heart of God’s mercy. The religious leaders bring the woman before Him not out of a passion for justice but as a trap, selectively applying the Law while ignoring its full demands and exploiting the woman’s shame to accuse Jesus. In doing so, they expose a deeper human tendency: projecting our own guilt and shame onto others through public outrage, gossip, comparison, or self-righteous judgment. Jesus responds by exposing the hypocrisy at the heart of their accusation—calling for the one without sin to cast the first stone—causing the accusers to leave one by one as their own consciences convict them. Standing alone before the only truly sinless judge, the woman encounters something unexpected: neither condemnation nor approval of her sin, but mercy joined with truth. Jesus refuses to shame her, yet He does not minimize the seriousness of sin; instead, He offers grace and commands transformation: “Neither do I condemn you...go, and from now on sin no more.” In this moment, the character of Christ is revealed—the author of the Law who has authority to judge chooses mercy, foreshadowing the cross where He will bear the judgment our sins deserve. The story ultimately exposes humanity’s shared bondage to sin and shame while inviting us to stop projecting our guilt onto others, receive the mercy of Christ, and walk in the freedom and new life that His grace makes possible.

Scripture Reading

John 8:2–11 (NIV)² At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. ³ The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group ⁴ and said to Jesus, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. ⁵ In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” ⁶ They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. ⁷ When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” ⁸ Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” ¹¹ “No one, sir,” she said. “Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.”

Introduction

This text is not without controversy. John 7:53-8:11 is a story absent from all major Greek manuscripts that bear the strongest, earliest witness to the Gospel of John’s original form. It is in some early Latin forms, yet it bounces around in different parts of John’s gospel, and even shows up in one version of Luke’s gospel. By the 4th Century, it does appear in the writings of some church fathers in the Western church. What there is consensus on is that this is an

authentic Jesus story and is worth us considering and seeing the picture of Jesus that is being painted for us here.¹

Frame the Story:

Jesus, in this story, demonstrates the same over-the-top forgiveness associated with *khesed*.

Khesed: “When the one from whom I have a right to expect nothing gives me everything.”

Textual Breakdown

► **John 8:3-5 (NIV)**³ The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group ⁴ and said to Jesus, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. ⁵ In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?”

[Verse 3]

The “scribes” (NIV, “teachers of the law”) mentioned here had come to fulfill the roles in first-century Judaism of “lawyer, ethicist, theologian, catechist, and jurist.”² They were considered the experts on Mosaic Law and were seen in a judicial capacity. “Their presence makes formal the legal proceedings about to take place.”³ This woman is being accused of adultery, but the situation makes clear that they are not interested in earnestly discerning the Law; they are interested in trapping Jesus.

“Whatever the evidence was against the woman, the judgment has not yet been given. And the need *for* and expectation *of* judgment has been laid literally at the feet of Jesus.”⁴ The woman is made to stand *in the middle* of everyone. There is no guarantee that she is fully clothed if she was “caught in the act.”

[Verse 4]

The narrator says, “caught in adultery,” the scribes and Pharisees added, “caught in *the act of* adultery.” This is an inferred quote of Deuteronomy 22:22, “Be found in adultery.”

Deuteronomy 22:22 (NIV)²² *If a man is found sleeping with another man’s wife, both the man who slept with her and the woman must die. You must purge the evil from Israel.*

They use the title “Teacher” of Jesus, or “Rabbi,”⁵ which was connected to honorific flattery preceding formal challenge. Its use is politically loaded, revealing their true intention.

¹ A good scholarly summary on why this text is included in the Gospel of John and still matters is D.A. Carson’s *The Gospel According to John*, pp. 333-334 and Gary Burge’s *John*, pp. 237-241.

² D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, p. 334.

³ Edward W. Klink III, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, p. 391.

⁴ Edward W. Klink III, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, p. 392.

⁵ Cross reference with Nicodemus’ honorific introduction to Jesus, using “Rabbi.” (John 3:2)

[Verse 5]

Though her personal identity is unnamed, their description, “such women...,” reflects her identity as representative of a notorious group: adulterers. Yet, according to the Law they are referencing, there is a serious omission: ***the man in this situation is also conspicuously absent*** (Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22). If the two were “caught in the act,” why not both of them present for the public trial, humiliation, and judgment?

Leviticus 20:10 (NIV)¹⁰ “If a man commits adultery with another man’s wife—with the wife of his neighbor—**both the adulterer and the adulteress** are to be put to death.

Deuteronomy 22:22 (NIV)²² If a man is found sleeping with another man’s wife, **both the man who slept with her and the woman** must die. You must purge the evil from Israel.

Also, technically, stoning is only prescribed for the guilty pair when the woman is “a virgin pledged to be married” (Deut. 22:23-24).

Deuteronomy 22:23–24 (NIV)²³ If a man happens to meet in a town a virgin pledged to be married and he sleeps with her, ²⁴ you shall take both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death—the young woman because she was in a town and did not scream for help, and the man because he violated another man’s wife. You must purge the evil from among you.

[Pastoral Reflection]

Justice and judgment: There are moments in time and society that call for the people of God to stand for justice, and in some cases, that means publicly calling out public sin by public figures.⁶ There are many times the people of God should not be silent in the face of injustice, especially in the realm of sexual perversion. The judicial court systems play an important role in society, serving as a “sword” against evil. There are numerous commands against allowing justice to become corrupted by bribery or favoritism.⁷ This story is not primarily about the judicial system (though there could be some lessons and principles to take away for the sake of the legal system). This story has more relevance to what we may call “the court of public opinion.”

Scandal and Shame: What happens in us when we see sin being publicly exposed? Is it truly a passion for justice if there is selective outrage in us? Let’s face it, sin being exposed is entertainment for our culture. Scandals sell because we feed on them. When someone else gets shamed publicly, we may not be the Pharisees and scribes, but we are the crowds encouraged to pick up rocks. On every public scandal (whether the accused party is guilty or not), there is always a “take” on TikTok or YouTube. There is always someone giving their opinion, and then many more heaping it up in the comments. Maybe we don’t lash out with our opinions about the latest scandal, but how much do we click on those posts or watch those videos that amplify it?

Subtle Shaming: Maybe we don’t heap onto the pile of public scandal, but that doesn’t mean we do not act like the Pharisees and scribes. Have we ever griped about someone else on social media? You might even be so skillful as not to call someone's name, but you

⁶ John the Baptist calls out Herod for his sin (Matthew 14:3-4). False prophets were to be called out in Israel (Deut. 13:1-5).

⁷ Romans 13:1-7; Exodus 23:1-8; Deut. 16:18-20; Prov. 20:10; Isaiah 1:23; Micah 3:11

ambiguously gripe about “those people” as you sarcastically dismantle those annoying people who belong to “that group” that is so much worse than you? What about when you are with friends, and you bring up someone else’s sin (or even just your annoyance with them) to see what others think about them? In men, we bring up someone’s weaknesses so we can feel superior to them, propping ourselves up by pushing someone else down. In women, you are enjoying the company of your friends around coffee, then you bring up that other person (mom, girl, sister), who is “just so annoying” to you, and your friends pile on their own annoyances about them as well. Or even worse, you bring up other people’s sins in your prayer circles in order to “pray for them.” At one level, this is gossip and slander, and *that* is clearly sin.⁸ What’s more, how is this not the same thing as the Pharisees and scribes putting this woman in the midst of others to expose and shame her before the crowds? While you may not be trying to trap Jesus, it is the very same thing.

Quiet Comparison: We like the idea of someone else being shamed publicly. We like the feelings of superiority we feel when someone else’s sin is being publicly exposed and shamed. We may not heap our opinions about them out publicly, we may not even participate in gossiping or slandering them, but that doesn’t mean we don’t compare ourselves to them. When we become aware of someone else’s sin, we may have the thought, “I know I’m not perfect, but at least I’m not like *them*...” Fill in that blank for yourselves (Legalists, woke activists, atheists, liberals, progressives, conservatives, Christian Nationalists, etc.) This quiet comparison does something to the heart, even if it is not spoken aloud.

In all of these scenarios, we are creating a ladder in our heart, placing “those people” one rung below ourselves. This is the subtle creep of self-righteousness that pursues us. “Sin is crouching at the door...” It may not be sexual perversion, but self-righteousness is just as sinful.

► **John 8:6-8 (NIV)**⁶ They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. ⁷ When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” ⁸ Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.

[Verse 6a]

It’s a trick question being asked of him, a trap. When they framed this as an either/or, he could say “stone her” and be guilty of violating the Roman Empire’s prohibition on capital punishment outside its court system. But if he says not to stone her, he would be going against the Mosaic Law and could be accused of forsaking the Law. They have set him up with the woman as the scapegoat to put Jesus on trial.

But Jesus is the *actual* Judge here (John 5:22).

John 5:22 (NIV)²² *Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son,*

⁸ Ephesians 4:29-32; Colossians 3:8-9. The New Testament calls gossip “slander.”

[Verse 6b]

Jesus writing something in the dirt: the truth is, we do not know, and anyone who says otherwise is just guessing. No one knows for certain what he is writing in the dirt. The Biblical writer did not find that detail critical to understanding this story.

Some have proposed that Jesus was writing their sins on the ground, or the names of those among them who had committed adultery. The most prominent idea is that Jesus quotes Jeremiah 17:13:

Jeremiah 17:13 (NIV)¹³ Lord, you are the hope of Israel; all who forsake you will be put to shame. Those who turn away from you *will be written in the dust* because they have forsaken the Lord, the spring of living water.⁹

This would make sense in light of John 7:37-38.

John 7:37–38 (NIV)³⁷ *On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. ³⁸ Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.”*

Some have proposed he was writing the Tenth Commandment; the obvious implication is that coveting another man’s wife is still a sin alongside adultery.

Exodus 20:17 (NIV)¹⁷ *“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife...”*

Whatever he is writing in the dirt, the narrator makes it clear that it doesn’t have much of an impact on the accusers at this juncture. They keep questioning him.

[Verse 7]

His statement, “If anyone is without sin, then by all means, cast the first stone,” echoes Proverbs 20:9...¹⁰

Proverbs 20:9 (NIV)⁹ Who can say, “I have kept my heart pure; I am clean and without sin”?

Jesus statement to them is not a request; it is a *forceful command*. Who is qualified to throw a stone at this woman, that is, to judge her? The one is characterized as being “without sin.” “Jesus is commanding judgment to take place by a sinless one—literally, one who is entirely without sin. This is not a denial or rejection of the law, for the statement only demands that this single qualification be met ‘first.’ It is, rather, a demand for the right—even perfect—execution

⁹ Jeremiah 17:5-13 is the context for this verse and discusses the difference between those who trust in man and those who trust in the Lord. The implication is that the heart is deceitful and can be rooted in things other than God. If connected to the John 8 story, it would be an indication that Jesus is revealing where there trust really lies and it does not lie in God himself and that their hearts have wickedly betrayed the Lord.

¹⁰ **Study note:** Read the larger grouping of Proverbs in 20:5-10 and see how these relate to hidden things in the heart coming out, making decisions and judgments, and showing love to one another.

of the law.”¹¹ The absence of the man alone is reason to be *suspicious* and bring the trial and execution to a halt.

“Be the first to throw a stone at her...” a quote from Deuteronomy 13:9; 17:7.

Deuteronomy 13:9 (NIV)⁹ *You must certainly put them to death. Your hand must be the first in putting them to death, and then the hands of all the people.*

Deuteronomy 17:7 (NIV)⁷ *The hands of the witnesses must be the first in putting that person to death, and then the hands of all the people. You must purge the evil from among you.*

The initial witnesses of the crime “must be the first” to throw stones, and they must not be participants in the crime itself...they must not be guilty of this particular sin. “Jesus’ simple condition, without calling into question the Mosaic code, cuts through *the double standard* and drives hard to reach the conscience.”¹²

[Verse 8]

This is not detectable in English translations, but the words for “writing” in 6b and 8 are slightly different, with a prefix added in 6b. Though these words are functionally synonymous, there is a symbolic connection being communicated by Jesus’ finger “writing.”

Exodus 31:18 (NIV)¹⁸ When the Lord finished speaking to Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two tablets of the covenant law, the tablets of stone *inscribed by the finger of God.*

Deuteronomy 9:10 (NIV)¹⁰ The Lord gave me two stone tablets *inscribed by the finger of God.* On them were all the commandments the Lord proclaimed to you on the mountain out of the fire, on the day of the assembly.

First, Jesus is being challenged to stand against Moses in assessing the required punishment for one of the Ten Commandments, placing Jesus in Moses’ position. Second, the two varied forms of the word “writing” in Greek are a perfect match for the Septuagint’s¹³ translation of Exodus 32:15.

Exodus 32:15 (ESV)¹⁵ Then Moses turned and went down from the mountain with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand, tablets that were *written* on both sides; on the front and on the back they were *written*.

This is the author trying to show us a powerful connection: the symbolic significance of Jesus *writing* with his *finger* is that he himself is the author of the law, and his finger is the very “finger of God.” In essence, “when the scribes and Pharisees challenge Jesus with the legality of the law of God, they are speaking directly to its author.”¹⁴

► **John 8:9 (NIV)**⁹ 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.

¹¹ Edward W. Klink III, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, p. 394.

¹² D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, p. 336.

¹³ The Greek translation of the Old Testament, often abbreviated “LXX.”

¹⁴ Edward W. Klink III, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, p. 395.

[Verse 9]

Those who had come to shame Jesus now leave in shame; the dramatic departure of those whose conscience convicted them of their own sin, from the oldest to the youngest; “the accusers arrayed against the woman crumble bit by bit.”¹⁵ The woman is still “standing there,” she had not moved an inch, standing alone before the only one who was “without sin,” yet everything around her had changed.

[Pastoral Point/Takeaway]

Suppressing or Projecting Shame: We all have a tendency to *project* our shame onto others. We have all felt shame internally when we have done something wrong. Let me be clear: *shame* is not a bad thing. Only narcissists do not feel shame. There is a difference between helpful shame (“I have *done* something wrong, a mistake.”) and destructive shame (“I *am* a mistake.”). When you sin, it is a good thing to feel a sense of the consequences of how your sin has affected yourself, others, and God. But the intention of that feeling is to call you *back* into restoring the relationship. It becomes destructive when the feeling of shame makes you self-destruct in isolation and self-pity. Because no one wants to feel shame, we tend to *suppress* it or *project* it. Suppressing it can turn us into narcissists, projecting it turns us into self-righteous Pharisees.

Sin and Shame: How do we deal with our shame then? Let me be clear on a second element: the woman is not innocent. She may be a victim of public shaming by self-righteous scribes and Pharisees, but she is not innocent in this. It’s not right what the Pharisees did to her in exposing her, but nor was it right for her to commit adultery. Putting this sham trial intended to trap Jesus, adultery destroys marriages and families. Sexual sin does significant damage to people, their bodies, relationships, families, and societies. Any sexual activity outside the covenant relationship of marriage between a man and a woman is defined as sexual sin, and it carries consequences in the body, mind, soul, heart, and relationships.¹⁶ It is serious and underestimated. Jesus increases the seriousness of this by stating that lusting sexually for another festers in the heart the same way adultery does. Culturally, we have “lowered the standard” of what it means to live sexually pure, but Jesus did not. He raised the bar. If we are serious about following Jesus, then we must be serious to deal with sexual sin. We cannot suppress this sin just because we may feel a little bad about it. It needs to be confessed and dealt with.

However, projecting shame is equally as destructive and has consequences. By projecting shame onto others, Jesus turns it right back on them. Yet to the woman who is being shamed, he does not heap shame upon her. What do we do with our shame then? We must first refuse to project it onto others. This is one of our greatest temptations: projecting our shame to hide it. When we gossip about other people, we are projecting shame onto them.

Parenting: Let’s go one step further. How much of our parenting is done through projecting our shame onto our kids? There are things in us, as parents, that we are ashamed of. It could be our past experiences, sins, or our present struggles. We don’t want those things in our

¹⁵ Gary M. Burge, *John*, p. 243.

¹⁶ Colossians 3:5-6; Ephesians 5:3-5; 1 Corinthians 6:12-20; Romans 1:22-32; Hebrews 13:4; Revelation 2:19-29.

children, of course, so we see our children through the filter of our shame rather than the filter of God's image in them. We are afraid of what may happen to them or how they may turn out, so we parent out of fear, trying to control the outcome of their decisions and character.

Worse yet, we often are frustrated or upset at our children for what they say or do, yet also know that often those are reflections of what they have seen in us. We may realize we have been unwitting examples of negative behaviors that they have adopted. Now we are disciplining them for the things we are also guilty of. On top of this, we know that our children are seen as a reflection of our parenting. So our parenting is filtered through the lens of our own reputations; we are thinking more about how we look to others than about recognizing what God is doing in each of our children, what their struggles and experiences are. They can do things that bring us shame, so we lash out at them because of the shame we feel because of their mistake—we are then *projecting* our shame onto our children.

This story, and all the ways we live it out, is the textbook example of hypocrisy: wearing the mask. Shame says, "If you see who I really am, you will leave me too," so we craft masks to hide ourselves. Then, we project that hidden shame onto others who have been exposed.

What we need is mercy. (Matthew 5:7, James 2:8-13)

James 2:12–13 (NIV)¹² Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, ¹³ because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

James's invitation is to see others as whole persons made in God's image, not through the lens of their flesh (wealth, poverty, or sinful actions). When we look at people only through the lens of their flesh, all we have is judgment; we will play favorites, hide weaknesses, and shame those who do not belong. When we see each other as whole persons, people who have histories, experiences, hurts, wounds, personality quirks, failures, successes, trials, and sufferings, we can show mercy. Mercy is what we want from others, but we must choose to go first by being merciful.

Matthew 5:7 (NIV)⁷ Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

We may never have stood in a crowd holding stones, but we have participated in conversations where someone else's failure quietly reassured us that we are better. Mercy should be our natural response.

► **John 8:10-11 (NIV)**¹⁰ Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" ¹¹ "No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

[Verse 10]

Jesus has a way of embracing us in our sinfulness without condoning the sin. He stands alone as the perfect Judge. His following statement makes it clear that the woman is not innocent.

The one who wrote the law is also the Judge who presides over it, and “everything in between—freedom and condemnation, life and death—is under his authority.”¹⁷

John 5:26–27 (NIV)²⁶ For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. ²⁷ And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man.¹⁸

[Verse 11]

What does it say of Jesus’ reflexes when being confronted with someone’s sexual sin? Our reflexes to such scandals are often exaggerated. Sexual scandals make big headlines; they are quite sensational. They sell; they go viral; we get sucked into the drama of a scandal. But Jesus? He seemed rather calm and precise. Sin is sin. He does not compromise, but he does extend grace.

“Jesus’ final words to her are his words to us as we stand condemned and guilty before him. He has not come to judge but to save. He has absorbed the punishment for our sins as surely as he would’ve stood between the woman that morning and any stone that might’ve been thrown at her.”¹⁹

John 3:17–19 (NIV)¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. ¹⁹ This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.

Pastoral Reflections

Jesus’ response to the woman, and the response of the cross to us, does not take away from the reality and power of sin. As I said in the first message, sin is a ravenous tyrant enslaving humanity.

John 8:34–36 (NIV)³⁴ Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. ³⁵ Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. ³⁶ So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

Jesus didn’t say, “Go and try to sin less,” or “Go and keep your sin to a respectable level.” He said, “Sin no more.” Jesus may not condemn us, but he does warn us as he warned this woman. The “steadfast love” of God is poured out for us, but we must receive it and live in it. You may not stand condemned, but are you free?

John 8:11 (ESV)¹¹ She said, “No one, **Lord**.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.”

¹⁷ Edward W. Klink III, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, p. 396.

¹⁸ Cross-reference with Luke 4:18-19; 5:24; Acts 10:42; 2 Tim. 4:1.

¹⁹ Michael Card, *John: The Gospel of Wisdom*, p. 106.

Romans 8:1 (NIV)¹ Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are *in Christ* Jesus,

“The gospel of Jesus Christ is not self-help instruction but the good news about real sin, the sin for which only God can help.”²⁰

1 Peter 2:24–25 (NIV)²⁴ “He himself bore our sins” in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; “by his wounds you have been healed.”²⁵ For “you were like sheep going astray,” but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

In receiving what Jesus has done for us, we also should submit to him. “The proper response to mercy received on account of past sins is purity in the future.”²¹

Conclusion

No matter what we have done, no matter what shame has tried to do to us or how much we have tried to project our shame onto others, because of what Jesus has done for us, we can come boldly to the throne of grace to receive mercy and find grace.

Hebrews 4:15–16 (ESV)¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶ Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

²⁰ Edward W. Klink III, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, p. 396.

²¹ D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, p. 337.