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The Gospel of John
XXV. Misera et Misericordia
John 7:53 – 8:11

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Relicti sunt duo, misera et misericordia.
(And two were left, misery and Mercy).
St. Augustine

It was a trap. From the very beginning it was a scheme to try to trick Jesus into saying or doing something that could be used against Him by the scribes and Pharisees. Our first clue to this comes from the fact that they only bring the woman before Jesus. It takes two to commit adultery, and the scribes and Pharisees are very clear that they caught the couple in the act. So where is the man? The Law of Moses they quote to Jesus is actually rather specific upon this point: that both the woman and the man caught in adultery are equally guilty and equally deserving of the punishment.[1] But the scribes and Pharisees only bring the woman to Jesus. Why? Perhaps because they thought He might be more likely to go easy on a woman – given all the reports circulating about how He treated women with respect, and not as second-class citizens. In any case, it is clear from the outset that the scribes and Pharisees are not really interested in upholding the Law of Moses, or else the man would be there also. What they are interested in doing is destroying Jesus.

The second clue as to the real intentions of the scribes and Pharisees comes from how carefully they construct their question to Jesus once they have brought the woman and thrown her down at His feet. *"Teacher,"* they say, *"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?"* The question they present to Jesus does not concern guilt or innocence or even the appropriate punishment for adultery. The question is presented in such a way that Jesus must either speak for or against the Law of Moses – the Bible. If Jesus upholds the Law and condemns this woman to death – well, a riot would likely ensue, causing the Romans to get involved and maybe even arrest Jesus. On the other hand, if He spares this woman, then He will be guilty of openly violating the Law of Moses; and the scribes and Pharisees will then have Him on charges of heresy and leading the people astray. So, to their credit, the scribes and Pharisees have concocted a rather clever trap – because either way the crowd would turn against Jesus.

The only hole in their clever trap is that they still have not yet come to appreciate who it is they are trying to catch. Having heard their question, Jesus does not answer them right away. Instead He bends down and begins writing with His finger on the ground. For generations Christians have longed to know just exactly what He was writing. Was He writing Bible verses, for example; or was He writing the individual sins of the scribes and Pharisees? The truth is that

we cannot know – and so it is useless to speculate. What we can and do know is that His delay frustrated the scribes and Pharisees. The whole time He is silently writing on the ground, they keep on pressing their question to Him – *"So what do you say, Teacher?"*

At last, as they rub their palms in gleeful anticipation of His impending downfall, at last Jesus stands up again. And He gives them His answer: *"Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her."* Suddenly you could hear the crickets chirping. Because this is not at all the answer they were hoping for, and nothing at all like what they were expecting. For, in the first place, Jesus has upheld the Law of Moses. He has identified this woman's sin as a sin. And He has upheld the teaching of the Law: that indeed, according to the Law, this woman does deserve to die for what she has done.

And yet it is the manner with which He has upheld the Law of Moses that has brought them up short: *"Let the one who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her."* He has said to them, in effect, *"The Law is indeed just and right. So then, if you wish to enforce the Law against this woman for her sin, then certainly you will also be willing to have your own violations of the Law enforced against you as well."* Fine, says Jesus, if you want the Law, have the Law – but have all of the Law; not just the parts that apply to this woman and to her sin, but also the parts that bring your own lives into accusation and condemnation. This woman is unrighteous, says Jesus, but so are all of you. *"Let the one who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her."*

"But when they heard it, they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones." Can you imagine how sobering these words of Jesus must have been to the scribes and Pharisees? They thought they had Him. Drunk with righteous religious indignation against both Jesus and this woman one minute; and then, in an instant, this sobering statement from the mouth of their enemy: *"Let the one who is without sin among you . . . "* And isn't it interesting that it was the older ones who walked away first? There is something about the passing of years that sharpens our powers of self-perception. When we are young, we are idealistic and inspired, easily able to believe in the pure righteousness of our causes and motives, and of our choices and deeds. But time passes, and while we eventually have to squint through reading glasses to read the fine print, our ability to see ourselves in a truer light only becomes sharper. We become able to look back, and even to look inward, in such a way that we see all too clearly the trailing legacy of our own imperfections and mistakes and misjudgments and failings, the wrongs we have done in our best deeds as well as in our worst. And also all the hurt we have caused to others, even when we didn't mean to. We see our sins. *"Let the one who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her."* Could Jesus have said anything more frustrating to the scribes and Pharisees than that? The Law of Moses is upheld before them, but upheld in such a way that the greater truth taught by the Law of Moses is upheld as well – that greater truth of the Law that all of us have sinned – all of us. And so one by one the scribes and the Pharisees step back and walk away, beginning with the oldest.

And now Jesus is left alone with the woman. *"And two were left,"* wrote Augustine in his sermon on this passage. *"And two were left, misery and Mercy."*[2] One whose heart was filled with guilt and shame (*misery)*; and One whose heart was filled with kindness and compassion (*mercy)*. And two were left – the sinner and the Savior.

And this, brothers and sisters in Christ, is the picture of us all before God. This is how it is for each and every one of us sinners.[3] We judge ourselves to be good people, especially when compared with others. But the only standard of judgment over our lives that really matters is the one by which we are judged by God – not the standards by which we judge ourselves and others. And God's standard of judgment is this: have we loved the loved the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength? And have we loved our neighbor as ourselves?[4] Who among us would ever dare answer "yes" to those questions? Who among us would ever be so self-deceived and wrongfully proud as to stand before the throne of God and say, *"Yes, Lord, I have loved you with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength. I have loved my neighbor as myself. And I have done both of these things all the days of my life and without ever once falling short of that standard"*?

Not one of us can say that, can we? Which means that what the scribes and Pharisees said about this woman is also true of us – that we are, indeed, sinners in the eyes of God, caught in the act again and again. Each and every one of us belong right where that woman was that day in Jerusalem – at the feet of Jesus, with nothing to show Him but our sin and shame. He has found us out. He has caught us in the act. He has seen all that we had hoped would never meet with the light of day![5] And there is nowhere to hide from His all-seeing gaze, no way to bargain with His justice, no possibility of softening His commands, and no escape from our own day of reckoning before the throne of His judgment. And there is no salvation in us until we honestly come to see and to admit how hopeless our situation really is. You and me and this adulterous woman all kneeling at Jesus' feet. All of us wretched and sinful and ashamed and guilty. Convicted. *Misera*! Misery.

And yet, *misericordia*, mercy. As the scribes and Pharisees walk away, Jesus stops writing on the ground, stands up, and looks upon this woman at His feet – this sinner caught in the act. Understand this: He has spoken His judgment upon her. He has condemned her sin and agreed that the proper punishment for her is death. Let us not mistake this. Jesus has agreed with the Pharisees that she is guilty and deserves to die, according to the Law of God. Jesus has confirmed that the wages of sin before God is and always will be death.[6] He has not said that her sin doesn't matter and can just simply be overlooked. Quite the contrary, He has said that her sin before God is indeed a matter of life and death, as is our sin.

And yet, what does Jesus then say to her? *"Neither do I condemn you; go . . ."* The wages of sin is death, and yet she does not die. Instead of receiving the rightful punishment for her sin before God, Jesus sets her free from that punishment. Sets her free from her guilt, sets her free from her shame. He forgives her, lifts her up, and sends her away in His mercy. And this, this moment of mercy, is the very heart of the Gospel:

All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned every one to his own way;
and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.[7]

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us,
who can be against us? . . . Who shall bring any charge against

> *God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died – more than that, who was raised – who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.*[8]
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> *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. 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. Whoever believes in him is not condemned . . .*[9]

"Woman," Jesus says to her, *"where are they? Has no one condemned you?" "No one, Lord." "Neither do I condemn you; go . . ."* Her sin was indeed a matter of life and death. But not her life and not her death – instead, His. For her and for us it is profoundly, undeservedly a matter of His life and His death. For on His cross, Jesus took upon His life all the sins of our lives. And on His cross, Jesus took upon His dying the death sentence that rightfully is ours. Our wretchedness is erased by His mercy. Our shame is overcome by His pronouncement of absolution. Our guilt is erased by His loving sacrifice. Our condemnation is ended by His unending love. Indeed, *"There is,"* writes the Apostle Paul, *"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Jesus Christ."*[10] No condemnation. Instead there is mercy, boundless mercy.

David Zahl, in his book, The Big Relief, tells a story about the late pastor and theologian Jim Nestingen. Jim, he says, was a large man of Nordic stock, six-five and – as Zahl puts it – a lifelong appreciation for the Nordic beer-brewing tradition having left its mark on his waistline. This is the story – I'll let Zahl tell it:

> *Because of his size, Jim was not a fan of planes, particularly not of coast-to-coast flights. After shoehorning himself into a window seat one day, a man of similar dimensions sat down next to him. "There we were," Jim says, "like two heads on a pimple."*
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> *Since they were practically on top of each other, the two men began talking. His seatmate asked what Jim did for a living, and Jim said he was a preacher of the gospel. "Almost as soon as I got the words out, he shouted back at me over the plane's take-off noise: 'I'm not a believer!'"*
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> *But the man was curious, so once they reached cruising altitude, he asked Jim what it was like being a preacher. "After a bit, he says to me again: 'I'm not a believer.' So I say to him: 'Okay, but it doesn't change anything – he's already gone and done it all for you whether you like it or not.'"*
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> *The man then went quiet for a bit. When he started talking again, in what felt apropos of nothing, he proceeded to tell Jim stories about the Vietnam War. He had served as an infantryman in some of that conflict's bloodiest battles – Khe Sanh, the Tet Offensive, Hamburger Hill. "I did terrible things for my country,"*

the man said. "And when I came home my country didn't want me to talk about it. I've had a terrible time living with it, living with myself."

This went on the whole flight, the man unloading all the awful things he'd seen and done. As they approached their destination, Jim asked, "Have you confessed all the sins now that have been troubling you?"

"What do you mean, confessed?! I've never confessed," the man replied.

"You've been confessing your sins to me this whole flight long," Jim said. "And I've been commanded by Christ Jesus that when I hear a confession like that to hand over the goods and speak a particular word to you. So, you have any more sins burdening you? If so, thrown them in there."

"I'm done now," the man said. "I'm finished."

At this point he grabbed Jim's hand as though he'd just had a second thought. "But I told you – I'm not a believer. I don't have any faith in me."

Jim, however, was unbuckling his seatbelt and in the process of squeezing himself out of the row. "Well, that's quite all right, brother," he said. "Nobody has faith inside of them. Jesus says that what's inside of you is what's wrong with the world. I'm going to speak faith into you."

He stood up. The seatbelt sign had already dinged, though, and the tray tables were secured in their upright positions. The flight attendant noticed what was going on and started objecting: "Sir – sir—you can't do that. You must be seated immediately. You can't do that."

"Can't do it?" said Jim. "Ma'am Christ our Lord commands me to do it."

She gave him a fearful look, worried that he might evangelize her next. The other passengers were going bananas. Jim ignored them all, turning to his neighbor and putting a hand on the man's head. "In the name of Jesus Christ and by his authority, I declare the entire forgiveness of all your sins."

"You – you can't do that," the man whispered.

"I <u>can</u> do it. I must. Christ compels me to do it. I just did it and I'll do it again."

He then did, loud enough for everyone on that plane to hear: "In the name of Jesus Christ and by his authority, I declare unto you the entire forgiveness of all your sins."

The man started sobbing uncontrollably, his shirt soon soaked from the tears. Jim sat down and put his arms around the man, the way one would around an inconsolable child. The flight attendant and all the rest who'd been fussing went silent. They

> *seemed to recognize that something holy was happening in front of them.*
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> *As the plan was landing, the man gathered himself enough to ask Jim to absolve him again, and Jim, obliged, repeating the same words. The man laughed and wiped his eyes and said, "Gosh, if that's true, it's the best news I've ever heard. I just can't believe it. It would take a miracle for me to believe something so crazy good."*
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> *Jim just chuckled, "Yep, it takes a miracle for all of us. It takes a miracle for every last one of us."*[11]

"And two were left, misery and mercy." "Jesus stood up and said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' She said, 'No one, Lord.' And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more."

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like her, like me, like us all! Brothers and sisters in Christ, I proclaim to you, by the authority of our Savior, the Good News of the Gospel: in the name of Jesus Christ – from out of His mercy, by His love, and through His cross and resurrection – I proclaim to you that, in the name of Jesus Christ, we are forgiven. We are forgiven. We are forgiven. Let us go and sin no more.

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[1] Deuteronomy 22:22, Leviticus 20:10.
[2] St. Augustine, "Homilies on the Gospel of John," Tractate XXXIII, Chapter 7 in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 7, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. John Gibb & James Innes (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1995), p. 198.
[3] Romans 14:10-12.
[4] Mark 12:28-34.
[5] Luke 8:17; John 3:19-21.
[6] Romans 6:23.
[7] Isaiah 53:6.
[8] Romans 8:31-34.
[9] John 3:16-17.
[10] Romans 8:1.
[11] David Zahl, The Big Relief: The Urgency of Grace for a Worn-Out World (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2025), pp. 40-42.