

That's a Good Question – 23
John 8:3-11
“The Scarlet Letter and the Crimson Flow”

1. “Could it be true? She clutched the child so fiercely to her breast that it sent forth a cry; she turned her eyes downward at the scarlet letter, and even touched it with her finger, to assure herself that the infant and the shame were real. Yes, these were her realities – all else had vanished.”ⁱ

2. Those lines are taken from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s 1850 novel, *The Scarlet Letter*. The story centers on a woman named Hester Prynne, living in 17th century Boston.

3. Prynne is forced to live everyday under a cloud of disgrace and shame, after giving birth to an illegitimate child. The laws of the Puritan society in which she lived required her to wear a scarlet-colored “A” upon all her garments as a constant reminder that she was an adulteress.

4. The sin of adultery is certainly not a new one, and in John chapter 8, the Scribes and the Pharisees, in an effort to trap Jesus with His words, brought to Him a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery, and could have worn the scarlet letter as well.

5. Those self-righteous religious leaders did not care about this woman, and had no real concern for what would happen to her. To them she was only a pawn; a weapon they could use against Jesus of Nazareth.

6. Little did they know, however, that by bringing this sin-wrecked and shame-ridden woman to Christ, they were actually doing her a favor.

7. You see; those whose lives are branded by the shameful marks of sin will only find the mercy and grace they need when they find themselves at the feet of Jesus.

8. This story speaks to us today, and reminds us that when the scarlet letter of sin is plunged beneath the crimson flow of Christ’s redeeming blood the vilest sinners “lose all their guilty stains.”

9. Jesus looked at the adulterous woman and asked her, “Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee?” That’s a good question, and a good reason for us to examine this passage more closely.

10. There are three things I want you to notice with me from the story of this woman, and her encounter with Christ. Notice first of all:

I. THE SIN THAT TAINTED HER LIFE

1. We know virtually nothing about this woman and what had led her to this fateful day that is recorded in John chapter eight.
2. Ivor Powell says, “Somewhere in her unrevealed past, she began losing her grip upon everything decent.”ⁱⁱ
3. We don’t know the circumstances that led her into the arms of a strange man, nor how she was discovered and exposed. But when we meet her in John 8, she is the humiliated subject of public scrutiny after being arrested by the Jewish authorities.
4. The roads to sin’s ruin may be many, but they all channel into the same dead end. Notice with me a couple of things about the sin that tainted this woman’s life. Notice first of all:

A. The seriousness of her sin

1. Look again at the text, and notice with me verse 4. The Scribes and the Pharisees burst into an assembly where Jesus was teaching. They shoved this woman in front of Him, and said, “Master, this woman was taken in adultery, in the very act.”
2. Again, the exact circumstances of how and where they found this woman are not clear. However, there was no denying her guilt, because as they said, they had caught her *in flagrante* – in the very act of committing adultery.
3. It is interesting that they did not present Him with an idolater, a thief, a drunkard, or a blasphemer. They brought an adulterer, no doubt, because they felt like her sin was unusually heinous and despicable.
4. While sexual sin does carry a particular stigma, in reality all sin is an offense to a holy God, and all sin is a condemnation to the sinner.
5. In his monumental *Systematic Theology*, Lewis Sperry Chafer says this about sin. He writes, “Sin is what God says it is, and here human opinion and philosophy must bend to the testimony of the Word of God in which He declares the true nature of sin.”ⁱⁱⁱ
6. In the Word of God, *all* sins are a rebellion against the holiness and righteousness of God. While the Scriptures condemn the adulterer and the fornicator, they also condemn the gossip, the jealous, and the liar.
7. I have a book in my library that was written many years ago by a preacher named John Watson. The book has an intriguing title. It is called *Respectable Sins*.

8. We may see some sins as being more “respectable” than others, but in reality, all sin is deathly serious. As we consider the sin that tainted this woman’s life, notice not only the seriousness of her sin, but notice also further:

B. The shame of her sin

1. In your mind, try to picture this woman as she is pushed in front of this crowd, and her crime is publicly and loudly announced. Can you see her in your mind?

2. Her head is down, her cheeks flushed with embarrassment, and her eyes blurred with hot tears of anger and shame. One moment she had been experiencing the rush of sinful pleasure; the next she was weakened by the nauseous feeling of being exposed. Her shame is palpable.

3. In this age of sexual liberation, where Americans watch the sordid affairs of desperate housewives for entertainment, and no one’s hiding in any closets, it seems as if the shackles of shame are not as heavy as they used to be.

4. However, the Bible reveals that one of the basic side-effects of sin is the sting of shame. After Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, one of their first reactions was that of shame.

5. Genesis 3:7 says, “And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons.” There is a natural shame that always accompanies sin.

6. In Great Britain, authorities are trying to figure out a way to combat a growing problem of binge-drinking among young people. One of the strategies that is being considered is to use shame as a tactic to keep young people from buying so much alcohol.

7. According to an online article that I read recently, the plan is to make people buying alcohol at the grocery store go to a special checkout lane that is only for those buying alcohol. The article states that shoppers would face a “walk of shame”, and that this would, “...hopefully deter shoppers from making excessive purchases by putting them under the scrutiny of fellow customers...”^{iv}

8. Though the world may seek to ignore it, there is an undeniable shame that is attached to sin. This woman in John 8 was tainted by the reproach of her sin.

9. There is a second truth we see about this woman in this story. Think with me not only about *the sin that tainted her life*, but notice also further:

II. THE SENTENCE THAT THREATENED HER LIFE

1. As you read on in John 8, you find that public humiliation was not the only problem that this woman faced as a result of her sin. This woman's sin was a matter of life and death.
2. Though we rarely see it as such, all sin is a matter of life and death. Like this woman, whether we share in her particular crime, or some other violation of God's law, our sin places our lives in danger of death.
3. The Scribes and the Pharisees brought this woman to Jesus with a question of what her sentence and punishment should be. Notice a couple of things about the sentence that threatened her life. Notice first of all:

A. What was demanded

1. Look at the text, and notice verse 5. After exposing the woman for adultery, the religious leaders said to Jesus, "Now Moses in the law commanded us, that such should be stoned: but what sayest thou?"
2. These men were referring to the law of God that was given through Moses in Leviticus 20:10. Though they failed to remember that the law was addressed primarily to the man involved in the adultery, it does in fact say that, "...the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death."
3. While these men's motives were corrupt, their claim was correct. If you will notice, Jesus does not dispute what the Law of God says.
4. Though the Law may seem harsh and rigid, we should not be surprised by the sentence that the Law demands for sin.
5. In the Garden of Eden, God told Adam and Eve that if they disobeyed His command regarding the tree they would "surely die." Ezekiel 18:20 says, "The soul that sinneth, it shall die."
6. In the New Testament, in Romans 3, Paul says that, "...the wages of sin is death..." James 1:15 says, "...sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death."
7. Like this woman in John 8, all of us, when we are born into this sinful race stand condemned by the Law of God, which demands that we pay for our sins by death.
8. One of the subjects that is continually controversial in America and around the world is that of the death penalty. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, in 2007, 42 people in 10 states were executed for their crimes. At the end of 2006, there were over 3,000 people on death row, awaiting their execution.^v

9. Regardless of how you may feel about capital punishment, there is a sense in which all of us as sinners, and violators of God's law are under the sentence of death. That is what the Law demands.

10. As we look at the sentence that threatened this woman's life, notice not only what the law demanded, but notice also further:

B. What was deserved

1. It is very easy to view this woman in this story as a sympathetic figure. Against the backdrop of the arrogant and conniving Jewish religious leaders, it is easy to feel sorry for this woman.

2. However, you must not forget that she was "caught in the act." Before she was publicly humiliated, she was privately sleeping with someone other than her husband.

3. No where in this text does Jesus indicate that this woman's sin was "no big deal", or that it was not worthy of punishment. Though in the end He did not condemn her, He in no way condoned her either.

4. In a society and a culture in which guilt is a bad word and hell and judgment are dusty, archaic truths, we have forgotten what we as sinners truly deserve.

5. The God of the Bible is revealed as an impeccably holy, completely righteous, and totally sinless being. Anything that is sinful is an assault on His name and His nature, and therefore deserves His justified wrath and punishment.

6. We as sinners deserve nothing but eternal punishment and banishment in a literal hell. The Law of God demands our punishment, and our sinful rebellion deserves it.

7. The songwriter was correct when he wrote:

*If we had gotten justice,
We would surely be lost*

8. This woman stood in front of her accusers under the sentence of death. The law demanded it, and her sin deserved it.

9. Thankfully, that is not where the story ends. Notice with me a third and final truth we draw from the story of this woman. Notice not only *the sin that tainted her life*, and *the sentence that threatened her life*, but notice also lastly:

III. THE SAVIOR THAT TRANSFORMED HER LIFE

1. In the text, Jesus dealt wisely with the accusing Scribes and Pharisees. He sent them all slinking away when He said to them in verse 7, "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her."

2. One by one they each realized that they too were in some degree guilty. Rather than an execution, there was only an exit. All the plaintiff's left, and the Bible says, "...and Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst."

3. Did you catch that? The accusers walked away, but the accused remained in the presence of Jesus. She could have slipped off as well, as the last of the men walked away, but she chose to stay with Jesus.

4. I believe that is important to understanding this text, and to seeing the work that Christ did in this woman's life. I believe a transformation took place in those moments when this woman met Jesus. Notice a couple of things that I believe happened. Notice first of all:

A. What she recognized about Him

1. Instead of carrying this adulteress to the authorities to judge her, these religious leaders had brought her to Jesus. In reality, he no legal authority to pronounce any sort of judgment on this woman. He was a preacher and a teacher, not a civil judge.

2. Yet, after the Scribes and Pharisees walked away, this woman waited to see what Jesus would do with her. It was as if she was waiting for His judgment. It was as if she had recognized Him as some sort of authority.

3. Notice carefully how she addressed Jesus in verse 11. "She said, No man, Lord." Look at that again. She called him "Lord."

4. In I Corinthians 12:3, the Apostle Paul writes and says, "...no man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost." It appears that the Holy Spirit had begun to work in the woman's heart in the few moments in which she had been with Jesus.

5. One writer said, "While the convicting power of God drove the accusers away, the woman came closer."^{vi} Though she was guilty, and condemned, she recognized something in the person of Jesus.

6. Can you remember when in your guilt and shame your eyes were opened to see and recognize hope in the person of Jesus Christ? Do you remember when you first saw in Him compassion for your sin-sick soul?

7. Standing before the one man who had no sin, and could have justifiably thrown that first stone, this woman stood still, "and there by faith, she received

her sight”, and saw in Jesus someone who could do something about her sin and her sentence.

8. In this transforming meeting with the Savior, notice not only what she recognized about Him, but notice also further:

B. What she received from Him

1. Look again at our text, and notice verses 10 and 11. It says, “When Jesus had lifted up himself, and saw none but the woman, he said unto her, Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee? She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more.”

2. This woman had been thrust before Jesus as a guilty, condemned adulteress. She walked away from Jesus forgiven and freed from her condemnation.

3. Jesus gave her two life-changing things – a pardon, and a plan. Notice, He said to her, “Neither do I condemn thee...” Though He could have justifiably called for her death, and as the sinless Son of God, could have taken her life Himself, Jesus spared her from punishment.

4. In John 3:17, Jesus told Nicodemus, “For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.” Sin condemns us; but the Savior gives pardon to those who trust in Him.

5. Notice the plan He gave her. He said, “...go, and sin no more.” Jesus offered her a new life, and a new road. He gave her a plan for holiness.

6. Not long after this encounter, Jesus would hang on criminal’s cross on Calvary’s hill, and there He would shed His own blood. The crimson flow that He willingly offered would wash away the scarlet letter of this woman’s sin, and our sins as well.

7. The only way any of us can “go and sin no more” is because Christ came and never sinned. He then died as the innocent for the guilty so that those who are condemned can be justified by His righteousness.

8. That is what this woman received from Jesus, and that is what you and I can receive from His well.

1. In Hawthorne’s novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester Prynne’s daughter, Pearl, says to her at one point, “Mother, the sunshine does not love you. It runs away and hides itself because of something on your bosom.” That something was the scarlet letter.

2. There are some who live their life in the shadows of guilt and shame. They feel as if the sunshine of God's love hides itself from them because of the marks of their sin.

3. For those people, this story in John 8 serves as an encouragement. Jesus is not interested in condemning you any further. If you feel the burning shame and guilt of your sin, then He is ready to forgive you if you will just look to Him.

4. The old accuser may say you are guilty, and you are. But Jesus knows how to answer the accuser. The crimson flow can cover the scarlet letter of your sin, and you can be forgiven forever.

ⁱ Hawthorne, Nathaniel, The Scarlet Letter, *Online-literature*, 11/26/08, <http://www.online-literature.com/hawthorne/scarletletter/2/>

ⁱⁱ Powell, Ivor, John's Wonderful Gospel, (Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids, MI, 1983), p. 181

ⁱⁱⁱ Chafer, Lewis Sperry, Systematic Theology – Vol. II, (Dallas Seminary Press, Dallas, 1950), p. 224

^{iv} Alcohol buyers may face in store 'walk of shame', 11/25/08, *thisisswansea.co.uk*, accessed 11/26/08, <http://www.thisissouthwales.co.uk/news/Alcohol-buyers-face-instore-walk-shame/article-496989-detail/article.html>

^v Capitol Punishment Statistics, *Bureau of Justice Statistics Website*, accessed 11/26/08, <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/cp.htm>

^{vi} Powell, Ivor, p. 180