

## The Authorities and the Woman Caught in Adultery

45 The officers then went back to the chief priests and Pharisees, who said to them, "Why did you not bring him?" 46 The officers answered, "No man ever spoke like this man!" 47 The Pharisees answered them, "Are you led astray, you also?"

48 Have any of the authorities or of the Pharisees believed in him? 49 But this crowd, who do not know the law, are accursed." 50 Nicodemus, who had gone to him before, and who was one of them, said to them, 51 "Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?" 52 They replied, "Are you from Galilee too? Search and you will see that no prophet is to rise from Galilee." 53 They went each to his own house, but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. 54 Early in the morning he came again to the temple; all the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them. 55 The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in their midst 56 they said to him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such. What do you say about her?" 57 This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. 58 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." 59 And once more he bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. 60 But when they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the eldest, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. 61 Jesus looked up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" 62 She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again."

7:51 a hearing: Nicodemus pleads for due process and legal justice, only to be ridiculed by the Pharisees, just as the officers (7:47) and the people were (7:49).

7:53-8:11 Some ancient manuscripts of the Fourth Gospel omit this episode entirely. Other manuscripts place it elsewhere in John or even in the Gospel of Luke. According to the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century, the official canon of the Scriptures corresponds to everything included in the Latin Vulgate

edition (Sess. 4, Dec. 1). This translation includes the episode as canonical.

8:6 to test him: The Pharisees are not seeking legal advice from Jesus. Their question in 8:5 is a trap designed to incriminate or discredit him. (1) If Jesus *authorizes* the stoning, the Pharisees will report him to the Romans for criminal wrongdoing, for the Jews were not permitted to administer capital punishment under Roman rule (18:31). (2) If Jesus *forbids* the stoning, the Pharisees will discredit him as a false messiah who contradicts Moses, for the Torah classifies adultery as a capital crime (Lev 20:10; Deut 22:22).

8:7 Let him who is without sin: Many popular interpretations of this verse are unworkable because they lead Jesus straight into the trap set by the Pharisees in 8:4-5. (1) Some argue that Jesus is overturning the death penalty for adultery prescribed in the Torah. This could not have been so because the Pharisees would have immediately discredited him for contradicting Moses. In fact, Jesus is not addressing the status or legality of the death penalty at all; he is simply dodging the Pharisees' trap. (2) Others argue that Jesus permits the adulteress to walk free because no witnesses are present to testify against her. This could not have been so, first, because it wrongly implies that Jesus would have been caught off guard if the witnesses who caught the adulteress in the act did come forward and, second, because it wrongly implies that Jesus would then have authorized the stoning. (3) Others argue that Jesus brings the examination to a halt because the woman's partner is absent and so the process of incrimination cannot proceed. This could not have been so, first, because of a clear precedent in the OT where Susanna is falsely condemned for adultery without first establishing who and where her partner was (Dan 13:34-41) and, second, because it wrongly implies that Jesus would have authorized the stoning if the woman's partner had eventually been found. Against these views, it must be stressed that Jesus eludes the trap entirely—he neither authorizes the stoning (incriminating himself) nor contradicts Moses (compromising his teaching). The genius of his response is that it turns the tables on the Pharisees and forces them into their own trap. Although the Pharisees probably considered themselves sinless (like Saul, Phil 3:5-6), and thus qualified to

administer the stoning, they realize that executing the adulteress will bring Rome's reprisal on *them* instead of Jesus, who is not truly authorizing the stoning because he does not truly think the Pharisees are without sin (9:40-41). On the other hand, by restraining themselves and walking away, the Pharisees are made to look like *sinner*s and *compromiser*s in the eyes of the crowd.

 8:8 wrote . . . on the ground: What Jesus inscribes in the dirt is unknown but probably symbolic. • The gesture may recall Jer 17:13, a warning that those who forsake the Lord "shall be written in the earth" because they have rejected the "fountain of living water". The Pharisees fall into this category for rejecting Jesus, who has just been identified as the source of "living water" (7:38). • *Morally* (St. Bede, *Hom. in Evan.*), Christ, who twice bends down to write on the ground, teaches us to bend low in humility to examine ourselves both before and after addressing the faults of our neighbor. If his example becomes our practice, we will avoid as he did the extremes of being unjust and unmerciful toward others.

8:9 the eldest: i.e., the wisest, who were the first to detect the brilliance of Jesus' reply (8:7).

8:11 do not sin again: Jesus neither condemns the woman nor condones her sins. He rather forgives her past and challenges her to live a life of purity in the future (see also 5:14).

7:46: Mt 7:28. 7:50: Jn 3:1; 19:39. 7:51: Deut 17:6; Ex 23:1. 7:52: 2 Kings 14:25.

source: The Gospel of John  
(Ignatius Catholic Study Bible)  
pp. 33-34