

## CASE NO. J81-11

John 8:1-11

Ladies and Gentlemen of the Jury:

The case before us today was not based on hearsay or circumstantial evidence; rather on eyewitness testimony. The defendant was ἐν μοιχείᾳ κατειλημμένην; a Greek phrase meaning “caught in adultery.” Caught in the very act. Not before. Not after. But during. And to satisfy the evidentiary requirements of the Mosaic Law, this act of adultery had to be personally observed by at least two credible witnesses. As mandated in Deuteronomy 19:15, **“A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.”**

Under the Mosaic Law, the consequences of adultery were severe; in fact, the punishment was death. According to Leviticus 20:10, **“If a man commits adultery with another man’s wife—with the wife of his neighbor—both the adulterer and the adulteress must be put to death.”** And the plaintiffs in this case, the scribes and Pharisees, demanded the death-penalty. Rushing the woman from the bedroom to the courtroom, they reminded Jesus: **“In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women,”** John 8:5.

Such women. What kind of woman was the defendant? Little is known of her personal life: her name, appearance, address, social and financial conditions, marital status; whether she was being unfaithful to her own husband or unfaithful with another woman’s husband or doing both. Nor do we know the woman’s age. Yet, given that Israelite women often married as young as twelve or thirteen, the defendant may have been a teenager.

And what of the woman’s past? Was this her first offense or was she a repeat offender, perhaps even a local prostitute? The Greek words in John 8:11, καὶ μηκέτι ἀμάρτανε, literally mean “and no longer go on sinning.” Said differently, “Stop sinning”—or as rightly translated by the NIV: **“Leave your life of sin.”** So, the defendant may have committed adultery many times. Only this time, she was caught. Caught in the act.

Indeed, throughout the temple-court proceedings, no one denied the existence of the crime or the reality of the woman’s guilt. Not her accusers, the scribes and Pharisees. Not the crowd. Not the woman herself. Not Jesus. Based on the evidence, the defendant was guilty as charged; and as such, subject to capital punishment. No excuses. No delays. No leniency. No lengthy appeals to higher courts. No last-minute stays of execution. Sentencing was to be carried out swiftly. And the sentence was death by stoning.

Imagine how this woman felt, especially if young; how ashamed, embarrassed, helpless, hopeless, and desperate; how frightened for her life, as anyone would be when facing death by stoning; how she may have been scantily dressed when dragged into the temple-courts

by religious authorities; and then quickly surrounded by hostile onlookers, who were undoubtedly whispering and pointing and condemning and already searching for stones to throw. Large stones. Sharp stones. Stones ideal for inflicting pain and dispensing justice.

And suddenly, directly in front of the woman, Jesus of Nazareth. Surely she had heard of Him. This miracle-worker. This Man whom some called the Christ. This great Prophet from Galilee who had changed water into wine, John 2; who had healed a cripple at the Pool of Bethesda, John 5; who had fed thousands from mere scraps of food, John 6; and who had only recently at the Feast of Tabernacles, in these same temple-courts, loudly proclaimed: **“If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water,”** John 7. Yes, this Jesus. What would He say of the defendant; a woman not merely accused of adultery but caught in the very act?

And if the woman wondered what Jesus would say and do, the scribes and Pharisees wondered even more. They said to Jesus, **“In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do You say?”** But as John explained, **“They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing Him,”** John 8:5-6. In other words, though the adulteress woman was the one on trial, she was merely incidental to the case. The real target was Jesus. The real motive of the accusers was to set a trap for Jesus; to put an end to the pesky Rabbi from Galilee who challenged their actions and beliefs and faulty interpretations of Scripture; and who dared to call them “whitewashed sepulchers” and “blind guides” and “fools” and “hypocrites” and “broods of vipers” and men who “strained out gnats while swallowing camels.”

To the scribes and Pharisees, their trap must have seemed inescapable. If Jesus opposed the death-sentence demanded by the Mosaic Law, they would condemn Him as a religious lawbreaker. And if He consented to the death-sentence, in essence authorizing it, they would condemn Him as a civil lawbreaker. In the Judea of the First Century A.D., only the Roman government was able to sanction executions.

But even more so, if Jesus condemned this woman to death, how could others like her continue to approach Him for mercy and forgiveness—the tax collectors, prostitutes, outcasts, misfits, nobodies, and notorious sinners? How could Jesus remain true to His own words and His own ministry: **“The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost,”** Luke 19:10?

And notice something even more sinister about this case. Amid all the commotion and condemnation that day, who was conspicuously absent from the court proceedings? The adulteress was present. But where was the adulterer, that is, the man with whom she had committed adultery. According to the Mosaic Law, both the adulteress and the adulterer were to be put to death. Yet, how could this woman be caught in the act of adultery, while the man

with her in the same act escaped?

For this reason, many have alleged that the man caught with the defendant was part of the plot to trap Jesus; that once the man's part was done, the scribes and Pharisees orchestrated his escape. And if this is true, consider the implications. Consider that the smug, holier-than-thou religious leaders of Israel may have actually arranged an act of adultery. They may have used a prostitute, with no regard for her life or safety, knowledge or consent, and for the sole purpose of discrediting Jesus and ending His ministry. And they dared to call her the lawbreaker?

How did Jesus respond? He ignored them. Stooping down, Jesus began to write on the ground with a finger. What did He write? Theologians and commentators have puzzled over this question for centuries. However, Scripture does not provide the answer. Perhaps Jesus wrote the word "forgiveness". Perhaps He wrote "God so loved the world". Perhaps He drew the shape of a cross.

Regardless, picture this dramatic scene. A large, murmuring crowd in the temple courts. Religious leaders dressed in fine flowing robes and self-righteous attitudes. And in the center of everything, a woman caught in the act of adultery, weeping, terrified; and near her, Jesus Christ, kneeling down, writing on the ground with His finger.

And when the scribes and Pharisees continued to press Jesus for an answer—"What do You say, Jesus?—the Savior stood, straightened, looked from one man to the next, spoke a single sentence, then stooped down to write on the ground again. And this is what Jesus said: **"If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her,"** John 8:7. And 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,"** John 8:9. Jesus and the woman. God and the sinner.

And then, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, the most touching scene of all. A scene I can barely read without feeling a swell of emotion—joy, wonder, humility, praise: Jesus Christ, the sinless Son of God, the Creator of the universe, the only One in court that day who had a right to throw a stone; instead offered mercy and forgiveness to a woman who had been crushed by the reality of her sin and the enormity of her guilt. **"Woman,"** said Jesus, **"where are they? Has no one condemned you?"** She answered, no doubt with tears spilling down her cheeks, **"No one, sir."** And Jesus replied, **"Then neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin,"** John 8:10-12.

Why does this text, John 8:1-11—or as I've come to think of it, Case No. J81-11—so move us? Is it simply that the scribes and Pharisees failed in their attempt to entrap Jesus? Is it simply that the accusers dropped the case and dropped the stones and walked away? Is it simply the heartrending image of that woman caught in the act of adultery; bereft of all dignity

and hope; face to face with the consequences of her sin, and then face to face with Jesus Christ, the Son of God? These are all important aspects of Case No. J81-11, but they are not the most important aspects for our identification with it. There are other reasons, more personal reasons, why we so readily identify with this text and this defendant. What are they?

**First, like the defendant in Case No. J81-11, we have all been caught in the act of sinning against God.** All of us. Perhaps not in the physical act of adultery; though sadly this has happened to people of God too. Remember King David, the author of Psalm 32; a psalm almost certainly based on David's adultery with Bathsheba. David loved the Lord and sought to do His will. Yet, one evening, as David stood on a balcony of his palace, he saw a beautiful woman bathing on a veranda. Rather than turning from this temptation, David indulged himself in it. Looking became lusting. Lusting became acting. Acting became adultery. Adultery became murder; the murder of Bathsheba's husband, Uriah the Hittite.

For nearly a year, David stubbornly refused to repent of his sin or to seek God's forgiveness, all while being tormented by guilt. Listen to the anguish in his words: **"When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer,"** Psalm 32:3-4. If you have ever struggled with guilt, then you know how unbearable the weight of even one sin can be. Just one sin. Imagine then the weight of the world's sin that Jesus Christ carried to the cross: unfathomable weight that only God's shoulders could carry; innumerable sins for which only the blood of God could atone.

It's relatively easy for us to accuse, judge, and condemn that defendant in Case No. J81-11. And let's be clear, what she did was sinful and wrong. Likewise, it's relatively easy for us to conclude: "I'm nothing like that woman." How many people in the temple courts that day, especially the ones holding stones, felt exactly the same? Yet, the clear testimony of Scripture concerning all people as they are by nature is that **"all have turned aside, they have together become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one,"** Psalm 14:3. Or in the clear words of Romans 3:23, **"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."**

"Really, God? You must have me confused with someone else. I mean, I've never stolen a wallet. I've never even cheated on my income tax. I've certainly never committed adultery." No, perhaps not. But have I ever thought about it? Even once? For in God's courtroom, there is no difference between a sinful thought and a sinful deed.

In 1991, TV evangelist Jimmy Swaggart was "caught in the act" with a prostitute. Afterwards, on live TV, he confessed his sin before eight thousand churchgoers and millions of TV viewers. Hands raised, tears pouring down his cheeks, he said, "O God, I have sinned against you." Similar words to those David wrote in Psalm 51: **"Against You, You only, have I sinned and done what is evil in Your sight."** I'm not doubting the sincerity of Swaggart's

confession. I think he was sincere. And it is neither my place nor within my ability to judge human hearts. Only God can do that. Yet, this much is true: Before being caught, Swaggart often pointed a self-righteous finger at others. And then one day, God pointed a finger at him, as God always does when one denounces the sin of others while refusing to acknowledge sin in self. **“If we claim to be without sin,”** wrote John, **“we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us,”** 1 John 1:8.

As a practical joke, Noel Coward, an English playwright, once sent an anonymous note to twenty prominent Londoners. The note read: “Your secret is out. Everyone knows what you did. If I were you, I’d leave town.” And the outcome? Reportedly, all twenty men left London in a hurry. Imagine receiving a similar note. “Your secret is out.” How would we react? Daily, willingly, humbly, and contritely, should we not all say with David, **“I will confess my transgressions to the LORD”**?

**But second, like the defendant in Case No. J81-11, we have all received undeserved love, mercy, and forgiveness through our Lord Jesus Christ.** Consider the imagery in this text, or even as depicted on the bulletin cover: that adulteress woman, condemned, sentenced to death; sitting on the ground, covering her face in shame and distress, weeping; surrounded by a crowd of hostile onlookers, yet feeling so terribly alone. Consider that moment when the reality of the woman’s sin and guilt overwhelmed her; the moment when she stood condemned by God’s Law. Caught. Caught in the act. No where to run. No where to hide. No reason for hope.

You and I can identify with that moment, because we have so often experienced it. Something we did. Something we said. Something we simply cannot forget. Something we promised we would never do again, then did. Something we promised we would always do, but didn’t. The moments we too, like the defendant in Case No. J81-11, have slumped to the ground, covered our face in shame, and wept at the blatant evidence of our sins and failings. The moments when we cry out with David in Psalm 51, **“Against You, You only have I sinned and done what is evil in Your sight.”** The moments when we lament with Paul in Romans 7: **“For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing...What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?”**

Praise God for the answer: **“Jesus Christ our Lord,”** Romans 7:25. Praise God that no matter who we are, no matter what we’ve done, no matter where we’ve been, no matter how long we’ve been away; each time we say with David, **“I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,”** we never fail to hear the reality: **“And You forgave the iniquity of my sin.”** We never fail to hear Jesus say—say what? “I’ll have to think about it.” Or, “I’ll let you know tomorrow.” Or, “Say ten Hail Mary’s and twenty Our Father’s; and if you’re sincere enough

and don't forget or mispronounce the words, then I'll forgive you." Is this what Jesus says?

No. Jesus says, **"Then neither do I condemn you."** Why? Paul provided the plain answer in Romans 8:1, **"Therefore, there is now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus."** Though we were guilty, He took our guilt. Though we were condemned, He suffered our condemnation. Though we are sinful, He paid for our sins. Every one of them—indeed, every sin of every sinner in this fallen world. As John wrote in his First Epistle: **"My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one to speak to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world."**

The Bible constantly reminds us that God is a merciful, loving God who graciously, undeservedly, richly, and daily forgives all our sins in Christ. In a real sense, this is why the Bible was written—to declare the forgiveness of our sins in Jesus. Psalm 103:2, **"Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits: Who forgives all your iniquities."** Or Psalm 103:11-12, **"For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His mercy toward those who fear Him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us."** Psalm 130:4, **"If You, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with You there is forgiveness; therefore You are feared."** Or Ephesians 1:7, **"In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins."** Or 1 John 1:7, **"The blood of Jesus, His Son, cleanses us from all sin."**

The reality of Case Number J81-11 is this: If you and I do not view ourselves as sinful, then we do not understand the Law of God any better than the scribes and Pharisees; and they were the experts. And if you and I still want to throw stones at contrite sinners, though they have repented of their sins and have asked for forgiveness; then we do not understand the Gospel of God either; or how much we ourselves have been forgiven.

**"Neither do I condemn you,"** said Jesus. **"Go now, and leave your life of sin."**