

He Who Is Without Sin, Cast The First Taken-Out-Of-Context Stone

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If you get caught exposing any kind of sin, hypocrisy, or inconsistency in the life of someone, the drive-by commenters and the amateur pundits will often remark, *“He who is without sin, cast the first stone.”* They are, of course, abusing quoting the supposed words of Jesus in the story of the woman caught in adultery, found in John 7:53-8:11. In this story, the scribes and Pharisees brought a woman caught in the act of adultery to Jesus to test Him, asking if they should stone her for her sin. Jesus responded, *“He who is without sin, cast the first stone”* (John 8:7).

This comeback is so popular these days that it comes second only to Matthew 7:1, which says, *“Judge not, that you be not judged.”* And while it may be a cute phrase that is sure to add fuel to any fire and vindicate the perception of injustice, it - much like Matthew 7:1 - is usually taken dreadfully out of context. When we take the words of Scripture out of context and misapply them so that they will support our personal agenda, we are abusing the very words of the Holy Spirit (cf. 2 Pet. 1:21).

Jesus Had To Choose His Words Very Carefully

Note the scene in John 7:53-8:11: Jesus is teaching in the temple (v. 2) when He is rudely interrupted by the scribes and Pharisees (v. 3) who present Him with a woman who had been caught committing adultery (v. 4). They test Him by asking, *“The Law of Moses commanded us to stone such a woman. So what do you say?”* (v. 5). If Jesus had said, “Stone her,” then He would be violating Roman law (which prohibited the Jews from exercising capital punishment). If He said, “Let her go,” then he would *appear* to be setting Himself against the Law of Moses (which commanded that adulterers be stoned, Deut. 22:23-24). Instead of answering their question, Jesus bent down and wrote with His finger on the ground (v. 6). When they continued to press Him, He supposedly made the famous statement, *“He who is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her”* (v. 7, NASB).

The scene is suspicious from the start. **Where is this woman’s partner in sin?** If they had caught the woman *“in the act of adultery,”* they would have also known the identity of the woman’s male counterpart. The Law of Moses commanded both the adulterer and the adulteress be put to death (Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:23-24). This is a kangaroo court!

It is clear that the motives of these Jews were less than righteous. They were not interested in humbly following the Law of Moses. **They simply wanted to falsely indict Jesus, and in so doing, were guilty of violating the Law themselves.** It is in this context that Jesus said, *“He who is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her”* (v. 7). Ben Witherington III writes,

Jewish law required that the witnesses to a crime be the first to throw the stones against the guilty party, and they must not have any guilt in or legal responsibility for this particular crime themselves. Jesus then is questioning the motives of these men, for as leaders of Jewish society they had a moral responsibility to uphold the moral integrity of their community. In this case, neither the scribes nor the Pharisees are morally free from blame, for they are trying to use this woman as a tool to trap Jesus (365)

Jesus is not teaching that one must be perfect in order to judge sin. Otherwise, how could justice ever be enforced? What Jesus did in John 8:7 was expose the sin of the Jewish leaders and charge them with being inconsistent in their judgment. **The scribes and Pharisees were not without sin in this particular matter.** We must remember not to “judge by appearances,” but to judge “with righteous judgment” (John 7:24).

When we divorce Jesus' statement from its immediate context in an effort to undermine a legitimate condemnation of sin, we are just as guilty as the scribes and Pharisees who were abusing the Law themselves. How cowardly it is to defend something the Bible calls sin by twisting the very words of the Son of God. This is the mark of a false teacher (2 Pet. 3:16).

Jesus Did Not Refrain From Judgment

By implication, Jesus judged both the woman and her accusers when He said, "If anyone is without sin..." (v. 7). He observed that neither the woman nor her accusers were guiltless in this crime! Jesus Himself recognized sin, and told the woman to stop sinning (v. 11). **Likewise, Christians today are to expose sin for what it is (Eph. 5:11).**

We again need to remember the context when Jesus said to the woman, "*Neither do I condemn you*" (v. 11). Jesus was rejecting an unlawful procedure that was prejudicial against this woman from the start. This was a matter that should have been handled by a legitimate court of law, not a renegade mob of apostate Jewish leaders. Additionally, Jesus did not come to this earth to affect change in the legal system (cf. Luke 12:13-14); He came to save people from their sin (Luke 19:10). He did not pronounce her sins forgiven (it is not said that she repented), but He charged her to "sin no more."

Never, Ever Base An Argument From John 7:53-8:11

There is considerable doubt as to whether John 7:53-8:11 should even be included in the New Testament, since the external evidence is overwhelming that John did not write this passage. The American Standard Bible 1901, English Standard Version, Holman Christian Standard Bible, New American Standard Bible, New Century Version, New English Translation, New Living Translation, and New Revised Standard Version all put this passage in brackets. Even the Revised Standard Version, Contemporary English Version, and the New King James Version put a note next to this passage. And the New International Version removes this passage entirely from the rest of the text, relegating it to the footnotes.

Note the reasons why:

- This passage is absent from almost all of our earliest New Testament manuscripts (with the exception of the eccentric Codex Bezae, known for its strange wording).
- This passage is missing from the earliest Syriac and Coptic gospels and from numerous Latin, Armenian, and Georgian manuscripts (Witherington 362).

- None of the patristic writers reference this passage until the 12th century (Wallace). The early Christian writers pass directly from John 7:52 to 8:12, omitting this passage as if it were not ever present.
- Many of the later manuscripts that do include this passage mark them off with asterisks or obelisks, indicating strong doubt about its authenticity. Additionally, it is not always found after John 7:52; sometimes it is included after Luke 21:38, John 7:36, John 7:44, and even at the end of John at 21:25.
- This passage interrupts the narrative flow from 7:52 to 8:12. The text flows quite nicely if you leave out this story.
- Virtually every verse from 8:1-11, with the exception of verse 5, contains words that are not found anywhere else in John's gospel (e.g. "scribes" in verse 3 is not found anywhere else in the book). The style and vocabulary make this passage more unlike the rest of John's Gospel than any other paragraph in the book.

Most conservative New Testament scholars do not think this story was originally part of the Gospel of John. Andreas Köstenberger writes,

The fact remains that the account almost certainly was not part of the original Gospel and therefore should not be regarded as part of the Christian canon. Nor does inspiration extend to it. In principle, the pericope is no different from other possibly authentic sayings of Jesus that may be found in New Testament apocryphal literature. Thus, though it may be possible to derive a certain degree of edification from the study of this pericope, proper conservatism and caution suggest that the passage be omitted from preaching in the churches. (248)

Ben Witherington III writes, "If original text should determine what should be in the canon, then these verses do not belong in the canon" (362). Leon Morris says, "The textual evidence makes it impossible to hold that this section is an authentic part of the Gospel" (882). Bruce Metzger observed, "The evidence for the non-Johannine origin of the pericope of the adulteress is overwhelming" (219). These men are among the most conservative of textual critics in the scholarly world.

We can quite reasonably conclude that this text was not originally part of the Gospel of John, though it may be an historical account of what actually happened. Wayne Jackson admits that "all the best Greek manuscripts [...] omit it." He goes on to state that he is not "uncomfortable in accepting the record as actual history." I agree with brother Jackson, and I have no reason to doubt the historicity of the events in John 7:53-8:11. At the same time we must realize **there is a vast difference between a text that could be regarded as historically accurate and a text that is inspired by the Holy Spirit.** Even many of the events in the Catholic Apocrypha are historically accurate, but that does not mean

we view those works as being inspired. And when the most conservative of textual critics reject the Johannine authorship of John 7:53-8:11, I believe it is reckless to esteem this passage with Divine inspiration. [The spirit of restoring New Testament Christianity demands no less.](#)

Because the inspiration of this story is questionable, we should never base any doctrine or theory from John 7:53-8:11. I cannot in good conscience treat this account as I would the rest of New Testament Scripture. Of course this is no cause for concern. Daniel B. Wallace affirms, “No cardinal truth is lost if these verses go bye-bye; no essential doctrine is disturbed if they are cut from the pages of the Word of God.” It is precisely because I have such a high standard of ascertaining Divine inspiration that I call this specific text into question.

With this in mind, you should never use this text to argue (1) that it is wrong to expose sin, (2) that it is wrong to punish sin, (3) that Jesus did not have a problem with adultery, and (4) that Jesus did not condemn people who were guilty of sin. Doing so, especially without the support of other passages from the New Testament, is dishonest and wrong.

Conclusion

One of the most foolish things a student of God’s Word can do is criticize someone for honestly rebuking sin and basing that argument on John 8:7. If God calls something sin in His Word, so should we. We must find delight in God’s Law (Psa. 1:2).

While the story of the woman caught in adultery in John 7:53-8:11 captivates our emotions and gives us encouragement by illustrating the Biblical account of Jesus, it should never be used as the basis for any form of Christian doctrine.

(Your comments are welcome and encouraged, even if they are in disagreement. However, please keep your comments relevant to the article. For my full comment policy, [click here.](#))

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