

Jesus returned to the Mount of Olives, but early the next morning he was back again at the Temple. A crowd soon gathered, and he sat down and taught them. As he was speaking, the teachers of religious law and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery. They put her in front of the crowd.

“Teacher,” they said to Jesus, “this woman was caught in the act of adultery. The law of Moses says to stone her. What do you say?”

They were trying to trap him into saying something they could use against him, but Jesus stooped down and wrote in the dust with his finger. They kept demanding an answer, so he stood up again and said, “All right, but let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone!” Then he stooped down again and wrote in the dust.

When the accusers heard this, they slipped away one by one, beginning with the oldest, until only Jesus was left in the middle of the crowd with the woman. Then Jesus stood up again and said to the woman, “Where are your accusers? Didn’t even one of them condemn you?”

“No, Lord,” she said.

And Jesus said, “Neither do I. Go and sin no more.”

*—John 8:1-11*



# BECAUSE HE FIRST LOVED ME

Being married has an uncanny way of challenging self-perceived perfection. I am learning this a little more each day. At the time of this writing, my husband and I have been married for thirteen months. If you had asked me several years ago how I would know that my husband loved me, I would have recited a list of characteristics such as a chemistry that was undeniable or that both our faces glowed in the sunshine because we had been kissed each day with the golden rays of our mutual affection. I would have talked about hands held and promises made. I would have even mentioned stolen moments away from the masses and sitting together to enjoy sunsets. When asked now, I tell the following story.

A few months ago, we had a deep and painful argument. I honestly do not remember how it began or what we were even arguing about, but I was very upset and so was he. While I don't remember what started the argument, I do remember that I wanted to have my way. I dug my heels in and made my points. I spoke a lot and listened very little. I am not sure when, but the Holy Spirit allowed me to hear myself as I spoke. I was cold and calculating. I spoke with no regard to my words and the potential damage they caused

as I made my argument. I felt right, and that colored everything I said. As I listened, I did not like what I heard. I was not really that person, was I?

We finished arguing, and I went to sit in another room. I was still upset about our exchange, but my anger was peppered with shame. I was passionate about my point of view but was not at all proud of how I had communicated it. *I was wrong*. My posture was wrong. I had been inconsiderate and un-Christlike in my approach and, no matter how passionate my stance, I had crossed some lines. I now needed to wrangle my emotions, gather my thoughts, and apologize.

As I prepared myself to take the long walk of shame upstairs, I saw my husband coming downstairs. You can imagine how my mental wheels began to turn. My defenses elevated with my blood pressure, but before I could say anything, I heard him begin:

“Lola, I know you’re upset right now. I’m still a little upset myself. But I want you to know that I still love you very much. I believe we will find our way through this.”

I wanted to stay upset, but that became very difficult. My heart melted after he took the risk to scale the emotional wall caused by our disagreement to let me know that even in the challenges I was still very much valued and loved. While I had felt loved before that moment, I now had a richer and fuller picture of the love my husband was offering.

He had seen me at my worst and loved me anyway.

As I tell the story, I am still moved that my husband loved me enough to look past my unkindness and initiate reconciliation between us. To witness this level of selflessness seems foreign and even otherworldly. I do not always know what to do with it, but I am exceedingly wonderfully blessed that someone thinks the best of me when seeing me at my worst.

I wonder whether that’s how she felt that day.

The Bible doesn’t provide details—no name or explanation of

how she found herself in that predicament. Hints in John's book suggest this woman is Mary Magdalene, our primary figure for this study, but I won't press that point since John didn't name her in his Gospel. We are not sure whether the person she'd spent the previous few hours with was a friend or someone she had just met. We do not know how old she was or whether she had a husband and children. We do know that she made a terrible decision and that the fallout could have proven to be fatal for her.

In a moment when she thought she was safe, when she had fully committed to her decision, a door flew open. Sheets were ripped away. Hands grabbed at her with no consideration for her decency, tore her away from the place of presumed safety, and yanked her out into the daylight.

Placing myself in her shoes, I would be mortified! I would do *anything* to get to a safe place, to cover my shame, to protect my reputation and my life. She was probably screaming, crying, begging. She knew very well what the penalty for her actions would be—embarrassment, ridicule, and death. The crowds would not care where she was from, where she had been, or what she had been through. They would ask no questions, seek no understanding. They would judge her based on their perception, and she would lose everything. If only someone would look a little deeper! If only someone wanted to understand.

The people arresting this woman did not care about her situation because to them she was a tool to trap Jesus. Scribes and Pharisees had been criticizing and taunting Him for weeks. They had tried to have Him arrested; they'd even tried to have Him killed. They were desperate to find a way to catch Him in some slipup that would cause the crowds to turn on Him and call for His execution. Somehow, these religious leaders decided that His decision for or against this woman would create a perfect backdrop for Jesus' death.

From a distance, her cries for help could be heard until she was

dumped, in her shame, right into the middle of Jesus' lesson study in the synagogue. Horror and curiosity filled the room. Men and women covered their eyes and the eyes of their children while still trying to see what was happening and how it would be resolved. Imagine the scene if, in the middle of a modern-day church service, a naked person were dragged right to the front of the sanctuary during the morning message.

Everyone was in shock, probably thinking of ways to neutralize the situation. Some thought a swift stoning would teach her a lesson. Some were embarrassed for Jesus—such an anointed teacher should not be exposed to this type of woman. This woman was embarrassed for many reasons as her nocturnal rendezvous as well as her nakedness were displayed for the entire city to see.

The words were hurled over her head without even the consideration of a glance in her direction. "This woman was caught in the act of adultery. The law of Moses says to stone her. What do you say?" (John 8:4). The accusation was true—she was guilty of adultery. She had been caught in the act. She was not consulted for an explanation, nor was she permitted to give a statement. There were no character witnesses or consideration of her backstory. Her family was not present to beg for mercy, and she could not find the words to plead for herself.

In most other circumstances this was all anyone needed to hear to convict this woman and sentence her to death. I believe she understood. Perhaps this is the reason she didn't cry out for mercy at this point. She knew the punishment to come was within the parameters of the law. Though afraid and ashamed, she was clear about what *should* happen next. She was in the worst possible scenario, and yet, by God's unimaginable grace, she found herself in the best possible position.

Everything that happened subsequently broke every expectation she had.

Jesus seemed to ignore the charge leveled against Mary. He

stooped down and wrote in the dirt with His finger. Scripture doesn't tell us what He wrote, but scholars and theologians have suggested that He recorded the sins of those who had accused her. Still others believe He was simply writing in the dirt as a disarming mechanism. Whatever He wrote, the scribes and Pharisees who had made the accusation wanted to ensure Jesus had heard them, so they repeated the charge.

“Teacher, this woman was caught in adultery, the very act! Now, Moses says such a woman should be stoned. But what do You say?” (see John 8: 4, 7).

Most people sitting in that audience thought they knew what Jesus' response would be. Of course she would be stoned. This was what the law allowed, and she had certainly been caught red-handed. Instead, Jesus took the liberty of being creative and further nuancing the sentence to be handed down. She had been judged guilty. Her appearance and helpless sobs testified that she had been judged fairly. In this instance, though, Jesus creatively showed His love to this woman in her sentencing.

“Let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone!” (verse 7).

This was their opportunity to carry out the sentence this woman was justified in receiving. But who would the executioner be? As the men examined their own hearts, they had to admit to themselves that they were unqualified for the task. All of them had sinned and forfeited the right to carry out her punishment. One by one, every man slipped away and dropped the stones to the ground. None of them had met the requirements that had been determined.

Rather than unleash the rage of the mob against this woman and satisfy their bloodlust by slaughtering one of God's children, Jesus turned the attention of these leaders to the adultery committed against God in their own hearts and lives. While they had not been publicly exposed in the same manner as this woman,

they recalled their own departures from God's law. Their pride deflated, one by one they admitted the truth to themselves—that before God they were all naked and ashamed, in need of mercy. Jesus had, in His own special way, leveled the field and brought each one in the group to the knowledge of their need for a Savior.

While the scribes and Pharisees were disqualified to judge, sentence, and carry out the punishment, certainly Jesus could do it. He had never sinned. He had the right to give this woman the punishment she had earned because of her adultery. Our sin is accurately identified as treachery against God's kingdom. God's love doesn't erase the nature of our sin and judge the bad decisions we make as good. God tells the truth about what we have done and how it causes separation between Him and us. As Paul would later say, "The wages of sin is death . . ." (Romans 6:23). This woman deserved to die, and Jesus alone was fit for the task. Surely He would do it!

But the scripture does not end there! Paul continues, ". . . but the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord." Hallelujah!

Jesus asked, "Woman, where are your accusers? Didn't even one of them condemn you?"

"No, Lord," she said.

And Jesus responded, "Neither do I. Go and sin no more" (see John 8:10, 11).

What an amazing picture of the incredible love of Jesus! A love that can acknowledge the truth of sin but exercise the right to withhold judgment. Jesus never condoned or encouraged her adultery; in fact, He told her not to do it again. Rather than end her story with her worst act, Jesus gave her a clean slate on which to write a new and improved story for herself. This is a picture of what God wants to share with us—a love that rightly identifies sin and provides the opportunity to walk in a new direction. This love is just as strong in the middle of our worst moments as it is when

we are stellar and praiseworthy. God's love does not flinch in the face of disappointment; it rallies to our defense and dusts us off so that we can have a fresh start.

Are there places in your life that you hope no one ever discovers? Have you found yourself wondering whether God could love and accept you, knowing your flaws and issues? Oftentimes our own guilt and shame drag us before the presence of Jesus, and in our own imaginations we play out scenarios in which we will be rejected or punished. This story is proof that Jesus can handle the details of your story—every turn and every embarrassing detail. He has seen and heard it *all!* Nothing you bring to God will surprise Him or run Him off. When given the opportunity, Jesus will be just as merciful with your issues as He was with the sin of this woman. And how relieved and blessed you'll feel knowing that instead of swift and certain punishment, His reply to your admission will be, "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more."

What would hearing these words from the lips of Jesus be like? "Neither do I condemn you, Lola. Go and sin no more." What a powerful beginning to a new life! A life free from caring what others think about whatever sordid information they have on me. A life free from my own guilt and the voices in my mind reminding me why I'm unworthy of love and forgiveness. Overriding all of those influences stands the clear and vivid picture of Jesus meeting me at my absolute worst moment with this assurance: "I do not condemn you."

To help with our understanding of Jesus' declaration, let's look at what the word *condemn* actually means. It can be defined as expressing complete disapproval of someone, typically in public, or censure. It can also mean to sentence someone to a particular punishment, especially death.

While the men who had dragged the woman from the place of her sin had openly gathered to express their own disapproval of her behavior and to invite the punishment of death for her

misdeeds, Jesus did nothing of the sort. He not only rejected the death penalty she could have easily warranted, but He also expressed His acceptance of her while rejecting her sin. He let her know that in His eyes she was not synonymous with her sin. Her value as a person and her behavior were not equal in His eyes. To Him, she was worthy of another chance.

The beginning of our love story with Christ shall always be, “He saw me at my worst and loved me anyway.” Scripture is clear that there is nothing good about any of us. The Bible reiterates our unworthiness repeatedly, yet in our folly and sin God still takes the initiative to show His unwavering love to us.

Jesus has the authority to condemn us all and chooses to waive that right. This is not a dismissal of our sins and shortcomings. Scripture says that “the wages of sin is death . . .” (Romans 6:23a). However, because of Jesus’ act of sacrifice for us, He can now offer the great exchange! He has taken on Himself the wage that we fully earned and offers to us the beautiful reward He earned: “but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Romans 6:23b). Because of His love for us, He takes the death that we earned and instead, gives us the chance to live a life far greater than we could ever deserve!

As I think about the woman in our story, I wonder what I would have done afterward. The woman was still naked. She was still exposed before a group of shocked pupils in Jesus’ Bible study. She still had to make her way back home and process the trauma of what had just happened, but something in her was different. She had to change. We can only imagine how she began because Scripture does not lay out these details. While I do not know exactly what she did, I can tell you the rest of my own story.

After my husband’s loving declaration, I was still upset with him. However, I could feel a warmth welling up in my heart. I pushed past my anger, took a deep breath, and we began a conversation. I made inner commitments to share my feelings with

as much kindness as I could muster. As the conversation went on, the amount of kindness grew. My husband's initiative began a loving reaction in me. He began a process that changed the way I saw him and the way I saw myself. It transformed the way we communicated in that tough situation. After a little time, we even smiled and hugged to mark the end of our argument. This was *totally* different from how we related at the beginning. His love reactivated my love.

Love transforms the recipient. It softens the hardened and calloused areas of the heart and causes new flesh and vessels to grow where the trials of life have left scars and seeming irrevocable damage. God uses His love to get the blood flowing again so that the lives we live after encountering Him are vastly better than anything we experienced beforehand. Consider these wonderful promises God gives us about His love for us, knowing that we are sinners.

“For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

“Now, most people would not be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good. But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners” (Romans 5:7, 8).

“God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it” (Ephesians 2:8, 9).

What an incredible invitation Jesus gives us by loving us first! Now the question becomes, how will we respond? He could have disowned and rejected us, but we find ourselves in a Heaven-sized hug, experiencing the undying love of God through Jesus. How will we respond? Jesus wants us to love Him in return.

When Jesus told the woman to “go and sin no more,” He knew she could not accomplish this by herself. She was still prone to repeating the same behavior. She had more than likely developed a routine that caused her to frequent the wrong places at the wrong times. After she had a loving encounter with Jesus, she had access to the Power that could help her make different decisions. Evidently, this woman decided she was too weak to change on her own, so she made a habit of spending time with Jesus. She knew that only in His presence could she maintain the desire to stay away from her old lifestyle and the power to resist temptation when confronted by it. That is our key to success as well.

As you receive God’s love for you, know for a certainty that the only way to live *for* Him is to live *with* Him. Jesus must become your constant companion and friend to “[work] in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him” (Philippians 2:13). Won’t you join me in receiving the initiative-taking and life-changing love of Jesus today?

### Questions for reflection

1. Can you recall an experience when you were accepted while at your worst?
2. Imagine yourself as part of the crowd listening to Jesus teach that day. What part of the exchange is most touching to you?