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The Woman Taken in Adultery (Part 2)



The Life and Teachings of Christ - Steve Gregg

In this talk, Steve Gregg discusses the story of the woman taken in adultery from the Bible. He argues that the Pharisees' attempt to trap Jesus with a moral quandary fails because their own hypocrisy is exposed. While Jesus doesn't condone the woman's actions, He shows her mercy, saying "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her." This story demonstrates the importance of acknowledging immoral behavior while also showing forgiveness and love.

Transcript

And to these Jews, Paul says, do you steal? Do you commit adultery? And obviously his argument would lose all force if they could answer honestly, no, I don't. The whole point that Paul is making is, you do, don't you? You condemn Gentiles for stealing, but you steal too, don't you? You condemn Gentiles for committing adultery, but you commit it too, don't you? Now, if that's not what he's saying, then his argument is meaningless. He's obviously trying to instill conviction in his readers over the fact that they do the same things.

In fact, he says that in the opening verse of Romans 2. Therefore you are inexcusable, O man, whoever you are who judge. For in whatever you judge another, you condemn yourself, for you who judge practice the same things. He just gets more explicit in verses 21 and 22.

He says, you who say that people shouldn't steal, do you steal? You who say that people shouldn't commit adultery, do you commit adultery? And the reason this often bothers me is that, well, certainly most Jews in Paul's day didn't commit adultery and didn't steal. They lived by the law, did they not? However, who would know that better, Paul or me? Paul lived at that time. He had been a Pharisee himself.

He knew intimately the moral character of the men of that class and of the Jews in general. And if he, with that intimate knowledge of the moral lives and character of his fellow Jews, could say, do you steal? Do you commit adultery? And know in his heart that most of them would have to answer, yes, I do. Then Paul is really telling us a great deal

that we might not otherwise know about the moral character of the Jews of that time.

They did commit adultery, apparently a great deal, and steal and do things like that. And they knew it if you would press them about it. If you confront them about it, they couldn't deny it.

That being the case, it is possible that every scribe and Pharisee, possibly most Jews, most Jewish men at least, may have in fact been guilty of adultery. Now you might say, well, if these men who brought the woman had actually committed adultery, how could they even be so hypocritical as to bring a woman with that charge? Remember, they didn't bring a man. They brought the woman, but not the man.

The Jews thought that the male could get away with things the woman could not. And they were all males. So they may have allowed themselves indulgences which they would stone a woman for doing.

We know, for example, in Jewish thinking, a man could have several wives, but a woman couldn't have more than one husband. That a man could divorce his wife, but a woman couldn't divorce her husband no matter what. No matter what he did.

It's quite clear that in their thinking there was a definite double standard with reference to the sexual rights of men and the sexual rights of women. And that seems to be evidence in the fact that they could bring a woman whom they allegedly caught in the act of adultery, which means there was a man present, but they didn't bring him. They let the man off.

They showed no interest in punishing the man. But they were interested in punishing the woman. Therefore, it is entirely possible, and Jesus knew their hearts, and Paul certainly knew the heart of the Jew as well, and both Jesus and Paul may well be giving us a clue here that most Jewish men did overstep the law against adultery, but in their own hearts they vindicated themselves, they justified themselves, perhaps by some of the traditions of the elders that allowed for sexual misconduct in certain cases, perhaps by appeal to the fact that they could have more than one wife, therefore they should be able to have more than one woman, you know, whatever.

I don't know how they would have justified it. We don't have information about that here in the Bible, but there certainly is an indicator in Paul's writing to them in Romans 2 to the Jews that they did in fact commit adultery often enough to be convicted when he asked them, do you commit adultery? And likewise, Jesus may have been asking anyone here who has not himself committed adultery, let him stone this woman for the act of adultery. That could only convict them in their hearts if in fact they had committed adultery, but it would be a perfectly reasonable thing for him to say, and while it hadn't come to their minds on their own, once mentioned it would certainly commend itself as a reasonable criticism of them, you know, that they were in fact asking this woman to be

stoned for something that they themselves do.

In fact, for all we know, maybe one of themselves had even been the man who had done it with her when they caught her. We don't know. I don't want to read too much into it, but that is a possibility.

Now, if on the other hand we want to allow, that Jesus is saying, let him who has not committed adultery throw the first stone at this adulteress, but we don't want to believe that every one of those Jews had in fact been guilty of the physical act of adultery, there's another way that he could have meant this to them, let him that is without this sin. He could mean this actual instance. Let everyone who is not an accomplice in this sin that this woman has committed on this occasion be the first to cast a stone at her.

Now, this would imply what I suggested earlier, that they had staged the whole thing. Sure, she was guilty of adultery, but so were they, even if they hadn't physically committed adultery, in staging this whole thing, in being complicit in this whole, this sin, they were as guilty as she was. And therefore, if they thought she should be stoned for this sin, well, their own complicity in this same matter should condemn them as well, enough that they couldn't stone her.

And that is a possibility. He that is without this sin could possibly imply this, not the general category of adultery, but this case of adultery, this one case that they were accusing this woman of. They could have been co-conspirators in bringing this whole sin about, and therefore they were a whole part of the complex of this sin's guilt, and it fell on them as well as her.

That's another possible meaning. In any case, whatever his meaning was, and however they understood it, they knew themselves to be disqualified by it. So whatever he said struck the heart.

It pierced them at the heart. They knew that his words were directed and rightly directed toward them, that they were not without sin. They were not without this sin or without sin or whatever.

They were truly unqualified to condemn her when they were as guilty as she. Now, if that is Jesus' meaning, then his statement would not forbid all capital punishment today. There are Christians who believe that capital punishment is wrong.

I'm not one of them. I believe capital punishment is right. I believe it is just.

I believe it's holy. I believe that God's law never gave any unjust commands and so forth. And since God commanded that certain people be put to death, it must be righteous.

It must be a right thing to do in many cases. But that doesn't mean we are to execute people. The question is, can anyone do it? It's one thing to say that capital punishment is

a just penalty for certain crimes.

It's another question, is anyone alive, qualified to be an executioner? And I've read a book by a person who didn't believe in capital punishment, and he quoted Jesus here. Let him that is without sin cast the first stone. And he said what Jesus was essentially saying is that even though people do things worthy of death, everybody has done things worthy of death in God's sight, and therefore no one can righteously condemn them.

But you see, I don't think that could be correct. I don't think that could be what Jesus is saying. Because if that's what he meant, then he'd be eliminating all magistrates, all law enforcement, all criminal penalties.

Because essentially he'd be saying, listen, you're a criminal in the sight of God too, so who are you to punish a criminal? The fact is everyone is a criminal in the sight of God, but still there are people ordained of God, Paul said, in Romans 13, they are ordained of God to be executioners of God's wrath on those who do wickedness. And they do not bear the sword in vain, Paul said. The sword was used for executing people.

Paul himself was executed by the Roman sword at a time later than that, probably about ten years after he wrote those words. So, certainly Paul didn't understand that Jesus had eliminated all civil penalties for criminal action, and that Jesus swept away the authority of governments to enforce laws and to punish criminals. And if someone would say, well, okay, but we need to enforce the laws and not punish criminals, but capital punishment is what Jesus ruled out here, because he talked about stoning her, putting her to death.

However, to say that capital punishment is less just than some other kind of punishment would be a hard thing to prove. If a person has done things worthy of having his hand slapped, then his hand should be slapped. If he's done things worthy of having his eye put out, then his eye should be put out, according to the law.

If he's done things worthy of him having to make restitution, then he should make restitution. But if he's done things worthy of death, then death is the just thing, the just penalty, and anything less than that is not just. And if God says that certain crimes are worthy of death, the reason for it is because if persons who do them are allowed to live, they will continue doing them and victimizing people in a big way.

The crimes that God forbade are crimes that, when left unchecked, corrupt and destroy society and eventually bring society into gross abominations and so forth. And God never imposed capital punishment on any crime that was not worthy of death. And for that reason, if somebody has done something worthy of death, and God says, these people deserve to die, it's because if they don't die, it's unmerciful to the rest of society.

You're being merciful to the criminal, but unmerciful to the innocent, to the victim. Now, some might say, well, you don't have to turn the person loose again. I mean, you could

give them life imprisonment.

Yeah, but who's going to pay for that? Again, the citizens, the victims, the innocent. The innocent are going to feed and house this guy at their expense. That's making perpetual victims of them.

He not only is now a guy who's committed murder, he's now robbing. He's taking from their pockets a free meal and a free house in jail from them. All of this, I think, I mean, when things are thought through, we have to assume that if people do things worthy of death, the right thing for government to do is kill them.

If they do things worthy of lesser crimes, lesser penalties, I should say, then the right thing for government to do is to dish out those lesser penalties. And some people say, well, the Bible says do unto others as you'd have them do unto you. Would you want people to kill you? Well, that's a little beside the point.

A criminal usually does want to get away with his crimes. But that doesn't mean that it's a loving thing to let him do so. If it was, God would have let us all get away with our sins.

I mean, God always does the loving thing. And if it was loving to let every sinner go unpunished for his sins, then there'd never be a hell. There'd never be a judgment day.

God would just let everybody go free because that's what they want. But the loving thing is to maintain justice and righteousness not just for the criminal but for humanity at large. And after all, if we don't like to execute criminals because that's not nice, they don't want to be executed, well, do they want to go to jail? I'll bet they don't want to do that either.

I'll bet they don't want to pay fines either. In fact, I'll bet they don't want to pay any penalty for their crimes. And any penalty for any crime then would be an unloving thing to impose because after all, they don't want to do that.

They don't want to go to jail. They don't want to pay a fine. Therefore, penalties shouldn't exist because it's unloving.

It's not nice. But when it comes to love, of course, the teaching of the Bible about love is more complex than just sort of have a sentimental good vibes feeling toward everybody. Love has got to be of sterner stuff than that.

Love has got to take into consideration the well-being of more people than just the one person. And it is not unloving to do justice to someone. And if someone invites the death penalty by doing something that they know deserves it, then to give them what they deserve may not be the most merciful thing you can do to them, but it's not an unjust thing either.

And the government is not there to extend mercy. The church is there to extend mercy. The government is there to be an executioner of God's wrath on those who do evil.

Now, I therefore do not believe that Jesus' words here condemn capital punishment any more than they condemn any criminal penalties of any kind. I mean, in a sense, if these people came and accused this woman of having ripped someone off and said that the law of Moses said she should pay back fivefold, and Jesus pointed out that the person that was ripped off had first ripped her off and should pay her back fivefold, and therefore the deal is square, and the thing should be thrown out of court, as it were, that doesn't mean that courts have no use. It just means that this is a big sham.

That this is, you know, the people making the accusation are just as guilty as the person they're accusing, and this thing should be thrown out of court, and that's what Jesus was basically doing. He's throwing this out of court. He wasn't saying courts have no use.

He's saying that this is a travesty of justice. You bring a woman who deserves to die, and you want to kill her, but you deserve to die as much as she does because you've done the same crime. I'm throwing this out of court.

You brought it to me, I'm the judge. You want a judgment from me? I'm saying it's contempt of court. It's irreverency toward the whole idea of justice.

So I think that's what he's doing. You people, you don't have the first right to bring such charges against a woman like this, and they realized it, and therefore they all kind of shrunk away like dogs with their tails between their legs and their heads down, and after they were gone, Jesus was left alone. The woman was still standing there, and when Jesus raised himself up and saw that no one was there but the woman... Oh, by the way, I didn't point this out.

It says so in the text, but I kind of skipped over it. When they first asked Jesus the question, he stooped down and wrote on the ground in the dust with his finger. Then when they kept pressing him, he stood up, faced them, answered them.

He that is about to be the first to cast stone at her. Then he stooped down again, and he was writing in the dust, paying no attention to them as they all kind of skulked away. I mean, he was just kind of acting like they weren't there, and before long, they weren't.

And then he looked up, it says, and that's what we see here in verse 10. When Jesus had raised himself up and saw no one but the woman, he said to her, Woman, where are those accusers of yours? Has no one condemned you? And she said, No one, Lord. And Jesus said to her, Neither do I condemn you.

Go and sin no more. Now, why didn't he condemn her? We don't know. We know that the Bible says in the book of Revelation, when God judges the people that are there described, that he judges them for their fornications and their idolatries and their

sorceries and their thefts and so forth.

And certainly adultery is part of fornication. I mean, God does judge sinners. On the day of judgment, I don't think every adulterer can confidently walk up before the throne of God even though they've never repented and say, Well, I read a story in the Bible that Jesus said he didn't condemn that woman who committed adultery, so he can't condemn me either.

I think there must be some special circumstance here, although we're not told what it is. And I don't know what it is. But I guess I'm inclined to assume that Jesus saw that she was repentant of her sin.

We know that that's the only basis upon which God or Jesus today forgives sins is if people repent and believe in him. Now, she, of course, was not able to believe in his death and resurrection because she didn't know anything about it yet. It hadn't happened yet.

She couldn't plead the blood, as it were, because she didn't know anything about that yet. She couldn't do some of the things we can do. She didn't have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, as we do.

She didn't have a great high priest up there. I mean, some of the things, if we sin, we can look back on the cross and the blood and the ascension of Christ and his intercession for us, and we can plead all those things. But she didn't know any of those things and hadn't done anything.

She did refer to him as Lord, although it's possible that that had no more meaning than Sir, because the word Lord, curiosity, can mean something like that. It can mean Master or it can mean Sir. In this case, though, she may have been professing his Lordship in the more important sense.

But one thing is common to all forgiveness, and that is a person humbly repenting of their sins. We don't read of her repenting, but that doesn't mean it didn't happen. Jesus certainly knew whether she did or not.

Now, it's also possible that in saying, I don't condemn you, he might not have been saying she was forgiven. That is, if she had not repented, he might not be saying, well, that's okay, you're on the road to heaven. He might have just been saying, I'm the only one here who's never sinned and therefore can throw the stones at you, but I don't choose to do so.

I'll leave you to your fate on the judgment day. If you repent between now and then, good for you. If you don't, then you'll have to answer for this later, but I'm not going to stone you now.

It's possible that his words had that meaning, conceivably. And when he said, go and sin no more, he'd just be saying, but you may not get off as easy next time, so you might want to reform your ways. I mean, it's hard to say.

We always picture him as just kind of forgiving her her sin, and she's on the road to heaven, she's a Christian now, and so forth. And I suppose that's probably how we should understand it. I believe she probably was repentant.

She probably, in calling him Lord, meant that in the truest sense of the word. And when he says, I don't condemn you, that he would be saying something like, to the man who was lowered through the roof, your sins are forgiven you. Though I do say that we don't read of her repenting, and it is possible for his words simply to mean, well, you know, they aren't stoning you, that leaves only me to stone you, and I'm not going to stone you either.

But that doesn't mean I think you're okay. That doesn't mean I think you did the right thing. And, you know, you better be more careful.

Don't do that again, you may have to get stoned next time. I got you off this time, you know, but don't do it again. I could see it either way, to tell you the truth.

I guess my preference is probably like most people's, to see this as a case where she actually was forgiven of her sin, and kind of came to be a Christian, and saved, and all that. And that certainly is probably more popular, and a very real possible way to understand that. One thing that's important to note is that Jesus can acknowledge sin to be sin, and acknowledge sin to be worthy of death, but still choose not to condemn.

That's his prerogative as God. Now, I believe it's his prerogative mainly because of his death, although he had not died yet. When he forgave people of their sins prior to his death, I believe it was probably based on the fact that he was going to die for their sins.

I mean, even in the Old Testament, Abraham was imputed righteous by his faith, therefore he was of necessity forgiven of whatever sins he had committed, even though Jesus hadn't died yet, but in all likelihood, he was forgiven on the basis of God's anticipating what Jesus would do for him. Here also, Jesus may have forgiven on that basis. But it's possible for Jesus to forgive sin without lessening in one degree the magnitude of sin.

I mean, he had indicated that for her to be stoned was reasonable. You know, I mean, let him live without sin, go ahead and stone her, she deserves it. Her sin was that bad, and he did not give her any leniency to keep it up.

You know, go and sin no more. He forbade her to sin anymore like this. So he wasn't just saying, hey, I'm on your side in this deal.

At one level he was, he wasn't condemning her, but he certainly condemned her action. He certainly indicated that what she did was sin, and he forbade her to do it anymore, and he had indicated earlier that it was just as bad as Moses said it is. It's worthy of being stoned to death.

He just chose not to condemn her. And it's important for, I think, us in having the mind of Christ to be able to acknowledge that people do things which we will in no way endorse and which as Christians we have to speak up for God's values on these things, but without condemning people. Obviously abortion and homosexuality are a couple of issues that are large on people's minds these days.

I mean, Christians have been pretty good in some quarters about condemning these things without condemning people. I've known some Christians who can condemn homosexuality but are still very open to homosexual people and willing to associate with them and witness to them and serve them and so forth. Likewise, people at crisis pregnancy centers and stuff, they obviously condemn abortion, but they don't condemn unwed mothers and they try to help them out.

I think that's a very Christ-like approach. Unfortunately, there are some Christians who, they not only condemn those sins, but they see themselves as the enemies of those who commit them, people who shoot abortion doctors, for example. Now, does an abortion doctor deserve to die? I think so.

I think he does. I mean, if abortion is murder, and I believe it is, then a murderer deserves to die. An abortion doctor deserves to die.

And I think Christians have often not been very consistent in the way they argue. You know, the whole pro-life community has, although they hate abortion, they have come out with one voice to condemn these men who shoot abortion doctors. And I also believe it's wrong to shoot abortion doctors, but I think the pro-life community has found themselves in a hard spot because they have not understood that the role of government and the role of the church are two different things, because they will approve, for example, of, well, for example, I heard a discourse on a Christian station when one of these abortion doctors was shot, and a caller was saying, yeah, Christians shouldn't shoot abortionists.

And the host said, well, why not? And they said, well, you know, it's not our place to take the law into our hands. And the host said, well, what if you were walking down the street and you saw a child being beaten nearly to death? Would you intervene? Even though it's the law, it's the police, you know, you should do that, but if they're not there and if they're not doing it, would you intervene? He said, yeah. He said, well, why wouldn't you do that for an unborn child, too? And the caller didn't have an answer.

But, of course, the answer certainly must be that even though we admit that there are

times when the government should intervene and does not, it's not our place to take lethal force into our hands and to ultimately condemn a person to death. I do think we should intervene. I would do so short of using lethal force, for example, if I saw someone being mugged or whatever, I feel like I should intervene.

I don't feel I should just stand by and pray. I think I should get involved and do what I can to rescue somebody who's in danger. But that's a different thing than saying I would shoot the mugger or something.

Now, of course, in the case of shooting abortion doctors, they do deserve to die. But really, for a person to shoot the abortion doctor isn't really redressing the injustice. The real murderer is the mother who's going to get the abortion.

The doctor's just a hit man. He's just being paid to do the hit. But the mother is the murderer.

She's the one who's deciding to kill the baby, and the abortion doctor couldn't touch it if the mother didn't ask him to, didn't pay him to. The real culprit there is the mother, but to shoot the mother would be stupid because you don't save the baby that way, you kill the baby with the mother. This situation is such that God has certainly arranged it in such a way that we cannot redress the injustice by killing people.

The person who deserves it most would be the mother who wants to murder her baby, but you can't kill her without killing the baby too, which obviously we wouldn't want to do either. So in our frustration, we kill the abortion doctor, but the mother would just go to another abortion doctor and kill the baby. You don't rescue a baby that way.

You just vent your wrath. And many Christians have a lot of wrath because they're so frustrated that there's so little justice being done in this area. But you see, we can admit that abortion doctors doing things worthy of death without saying, I condemn you, I shoot you.

I mean, you deserve to die, the government should do it, if they're not going to do it, I'm going to do it, is simply not the role of the Christian. And to condemn homosexuals. Now, to condemn their behavior is truly correct.

Homosexuality is an abomination to God. It's worthy of death. And we can admit all those things and still realize that we've all done things worthy of death too.

I mean, if the truth were known, maybe we haven't done some of the things that we would have been put to death for under the law of Moses. Maybe you've never cursed your parents or struck your parents or committed adultery or murder or blasphemed or some of the other things that people could be kidnapped. Those are some of the things that people could be put to death for under the law.

Maybe you've never done those things, but you and I know that all of our sins are worthy of death. And for that reason, we're no better than others. And it's not our place, I feel, it's not our place to go out and to be the executioners of wrath against those who do wrong.

There are some for whom it is their place, however, and that is the government. It's not the government's place to do something other than that. The government has one role, we have another.

But we are to be like Jesus saying, I can say what you're doing is wrong. I can tell you to sin no more. I can even say your sin is worthy of death, but I don't condemn you.

That's not my role to do. There is one, however, who will if you don't repent. It's God's role to condemn.

And that's the attitude that we have to have like that of Jesus. Jesus said then in verse 12, He spoke to them again saying, I am the light of the world. He who follows me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.

Indicating that as He had this attitude, so to follow Him and to imitate Him, to walk in the light of His teaching and His behavior, is to come out of darkness and to walk in light. A person who walks in darkness quite obviously doesn't see the obstacles before him and is likely to fall. Jesus in another place said, the Pharisees are blind leaders of the blind, He said.

He said if the blind lead the blind, they're both going to fall in the ditch. The reason is because if you're walking in darkness or blind, you can't see what dangers there are in front of you. That passage is Matthew 15 and 14.

Let them alone, speaking of the scribes and Pharisees. They are blind leaders of the blind, and if the blind leads the blind, both will fall into the ditch. Matthew 15 and 14 Jesus said.

But that same thing happens when people walk in darkness. If people walk in darkness, they don't see where they're going and they stumble. Over in 1 John, this is brought out also.

In 1 John chapter 2, it says, verse 8, Again a new commandment I write unto you, which thing is true in him and in you, that is in Jesus and in you, because you're imitating Him, that new commandment is to love. Because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. He who says he is in the light and hates his brothers in darkness until now, he who loves his brother abides in the light, and there is no cause for stumbling in him.

But he who hates his brother is in darkness and walks in darkness and does not know

where he is going, because darkness has blinded his eyes. The person who is walking in the light won't have any occasion to stumble, because they can see the obstacles. They won't stumble.

The person in darkness will stumble, and they also won't even know where they're going. And John equates that with loving and hating. John says, if you love your brother, you walk in the light.

If you hate your brother, you're walking in darkness. Jesus' reaction to this woman was just the opposite of that of the Pharisees. They hated her.

They wanted to kill her. Jesus loved her. He forgave her.

He didn't condemn her. He walked in the light. They walked in darkness.

And Jesus said, I am the light of the world. He who follows me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life, stating that His example in this case is to be followed by those who would be followers of Him. He that follows me will walk in the light like I have, and will not walk in darkness.

They'll not stumble. They will love their neighbor as Jesus exhibited love toward this person. Love, of course, doesn't condemn, but love forgives as much as love can.

Well, we're going to stop there.