

Caught in the Act

John 7:53-8:11

How do you treat someone when they are caught in the act of doing something wrong? Do you condemn them or condone their actions? Do you throw the book at them or do you let them off the hook?

That is the situation facing Jesus in the opening verses of John 8. The passage is one of the most dramatic displays of grace in the Bible. On the one hand, it demonstrates that we need to act like forgiven people as none of us has the right to throw the first stone. On the other hand, it shows that *Jesus offers grace and forgiveness to repentant sinners*.

John 7:53-8:11 is one of the most contested and debated passages in the entire Bible. Many ancient manuscripts do not contain this passage. Over 900 ancient manuscripts do contain it. Many scholars agree that it was a real event that did occur, but it may have been a piece of oral tradition that later scribes inserted here to illustrate the sinfulness of the Jewish leaders.

The passage contains no teaching that contradicts the rest of Scripture. Most English Bibles include this event, and many Christians believe it is authentic. Since chapter 8 begins with a sinful woman possibly being stoned, and the chapter ends with a sinless man possibly being stoned, this has led some interpreters to support its authenticity and placement in this chapter. It certainly fits with the ministry and message of Jesus.

After a previous event, people went back to their homes (7:53) while Jesus stayed at the Mount of Olives (8:1).

Early the next morning, Jesus was teaching in the temple in Jerusalem (2). People were interested and came to hear him teach.

Jesus' critics, the scribes and Pharisees, brought a woman whom they claimed to have caught in the act of adultery (3-4).

Jesus' critics were correct in their interpretation of the Law (5). The Mosaic Law required that both parties involved in adultery suffer death by stoning (Leviticus 20:10; Deuteronomy 22:22). By this point in time, it was probably not practiced.

The critics' goal was not purity, but rather to trap Jesus in a corner (6). If Jesus advocated not executing the woman, he could be charged with violating the Law. If he advocated for execution, he would lose the favor of the people and be in trouble with the Roman authorities.

When Jesus answered his critics (7), he cited passages in the Mosaic Law (Leviticus 24:14; Deuteronomy 13:9; 17:7). His statement didn't mean that the accusers had to be sinless, but rather that they were not guilty of the sin of the accused, adultery.

No one knows what Jesus wrote in the dust (8). But it gave his critics time to rethink their decision and repent.

By walking away, the scribes and Pharisees confessed their own guilt (9). After all the critics departed, Jesus and the woman are left alone.

Jesus addressed the woman respectfully (10-11). While he did not condemn her, he also did not condone her actions. He commanded her to stop her lifestyle of sin.

Application

Jesus offers grace and forgiveness to everyone, no matter what we have done.

We are not to permit sin to continue. But neither are we to condemn sinners. We are to provide a culture and a context where all people can start again.