



INTERPRETING THE SIGNS

READING JOHN'S GOSPEL

**SESSION 16:
JESUS: THE TRUE SPIRITUAL LEADER**

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Interpreting the Signs Study Guide: Reading John's Gospel, Session 16
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JESUS: THE TRUE SPIRITUAL LEADER SESSION 16

SERMON DISCUSSION GUIDE

1. This may be a familiar passage to some of us, which often times numbs us to really what's going on. Describe how powerful the dynamics are at play here.
2. What would you have done if you would have been in Jesus place?
3. Why is forgiveness such a powerful, life-changing force?
4. Have you experienced Jesus forgiveness in this way?

PERSONAL STUDY GUIDE

John's story to this point has not painted the Jewish leaders in a very positive light. From the beginning with John the Baptizer, the Jewish leaders questioned the testimony concerning Jesus (1:19-28). They sold out God and the faith by allowing money changers into the temple (2:13-25). Jesus showed that they didn't know basic points of the Jewish Scriptures, even though they were "the teachers" of Israel (3:1-21). Their motivations were revealed to be suspect when they cared more about their man-made traditions than the healing of a man who had been lame for almost 40 years (5:1-47, 7:14-24). Jesus exposed their selfish desire for glory, seen in their disregard for their Scriptures, their lack of knowledge in the Scriptures, and the abuse of the Scriptures and their positions to protect their status and glory (7:40-52).

As a result of their own deceitfulness and treachery, Jesus will reveal how despicable, selfish, and contemptible the Jewish leaders truly were. Through the short narrative of a public event with the Jewish leaders, Jesus, and an adulterous woman, we see Jesus publicly humiliate the Jewish leaders and turn what they meant to be a trap against them, which will turn up the heat even more on Jesus and his words.

STUDY THE SCRIPTURES

Read the Passage:

John 7:53-8:11

Think Through the Questions:

1. How was this a test for Jesus?
2. What is missing from this scene?
3. Why does John mention that Jesus wrote on the ground? Is there any significance to it?
4. Why do you think the Jewish leaders left, beginning with the oldest, after Jesus stated, "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone."
5. Why does Jesus have the power to release this woman from accusation?

COMMENTARY

It is critical to understand the context of this passage. The setting is during the Feast of Booths, throughout which Jesus increasingly positioned himself against the Jewish leaders showing them to be self-serving, in contrast to himself, who did the will of the Father under the authority of the Father. Jesus' words towards the Jewish leaders will get more stern and direct in Chapter 8, and this short passages centered around an adulterous woman will demonstrate why Jesus is going to pull out all the stops in regards to his condemnation of the Jewish leaders, and indeed all Israel.

In addition to the immediate context, this passage assumes knowledge of the Law of Moses regarding the punishment of adulterers. Two specific laws address this situation. The first law, found in Leviticus 20:10, states the following:

If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death.

The law is repeated in Deuteronomy 22:22:

If a man is found lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman, and the woman. So you shall purge the evil from Israel.

Another law, which may be more applicable to the circumstance in this story, is found in Deuteronomy 22:23-27:

If there is a betrothed (engaged) virgin, and a man meets her in the city and lies with her, then you shall bring them both out to the gate of that city, and you shall stone them to death with stones, the young woman because she did not cry for help though she was in the city, and the man because he violated his neighbor's wife. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.

But if in the open country a man meets a young woman who is betrothed, and the man seizes her and lies with her, then only the man who lay with her shall die. But you shall do nothing to the young woman; she has committed no offense punishable by death. For this case is like that of a man attacking and murdering his neighbor, be-

cause he met her in the open country, and though the betrothed young woman cried for help there was no one to rescue her.

Laws concerning adultery were critical to the health and well-being of the nation of Israel. As a family of twelve tribes, all of whom descended from the twelve sons of Jacob, the nation could not suffer adulterers. Adultery breaks down trust. Obviously, it first breaks down trust between a husband and a wife. If one of the two commits adultery, they have given their heart, mind, and body to another, breaking the promises of the marriage covenant. The victim of the adultery, which is the innocent spouse, would experience a great deal of anger, betrayal, a sense of revenge, hatred, and a whole host of other emotions and feelings that could significantly affect his or her happiness for years to come. The children of the adulterer would also carry a great deal of emotional baggage that would carry into their future relationship with their spouse. It also broke down trust between neighbors. It was the responsibility of the nation to punish adultery, for adultery eventually undermines relationships with neighbors and the community in general. As a nation built around a family, this family needed to maintain its unity and strength, especially with such fierce opposition that Israel continuously encountered. It could not survive a nation of adulterers, which is why the punishment was so severe against those who committed adultery.

However, the Jewish leaders were not especially concerned about upholding the Law for the wellbeing of the nation as much as they were using the Law to try to trap Jesus. The Jewish leaders brought a woman caught in adultery to Jesus and put her destiny in his hands. The motivations of the Jewish leaders are suspect from the very beginning because of what is missing from this scene—the man! Adultery requires two people. If the Jewish leaders caught her in the act of adultery, then they would have caught the man as well. Why didn't they bring the man? Nevertheless, Jesus must face this challenge. What would Jesus do? Would he condemn the woman to death for adultery? If he did this, how could Jesus be known for mercy and grace (1:14-16)? Wouldn't this be inconsistent with the way he treated the Samaritan woman, who was also sexually promiscuous? Or, would he excuse her, which would then appear to trivialize the Law of Moses, which would have given the Jewish leaders a legitimate opportunity to undermine Jesus and his purported connection to God, who gave Moses the Law in the first place. In addition to this difficult case, the Jewish lead-

ers pulled this stunt in view of the crowds who had assembled to hear Jesus teach. Jesus was on display at the temple with a big crowd. How would he pull himself out of this one?

Jesus then writes in the ground, which has puzzled scholars for centuries. The text does not say what Jesus wrote or why. It simply says that he did. I believe that it was recorded to affirm eyewitness testimony. This detail does not contribute to Jesus' solution to the test. However, from the readers' perspective, we do see that whoever reported the event was there. He reported Jesus doing this twice (vv.6,8).

Jesus' response is brilliant. He simply states, "Let him who is without sin throw the first stone." The Law of Moses stated that in cases of idolatry, capital punishment was required, just as in the case of adultery (Deuteronomy 17:1-7). However, in this case, there are stipulations given to the process of applying the death penalty. First, there must be more than one witness. Second, the witnesses were to be the ones to throw the first stones. Jesus' response is a response from the Law of Moses itself, but Jesus adds an important addition, namely the condition of he who is without sin. Does Jesus expect these Jewish leaders to be perfect? That is unlikely. However, Jesus does need to challenge the supposed innocence of the Jewish leaders. The Jewish leaders are not without sin, as their response to Jesus indicates. But what were they guilty of?

In the very least, they were guilty of chauvinism and of not fairly judging on the basis of Law. Prejudice against women and their sexual sins abound not only in contemporary cultures, but has existed for centuries around the world. It is common for societies to brush aside male sexual promiscuity since "they are just being males." However, there is much less latitude given to women, especially those who are expected to develop into wives. However, the response to chauvinism and favoritism is not to simply let the women be as sexually promiscuous as men, which is what has happened to women in Western cultures. This simply changes the mode of male abuse from legal disparity to a much more covert abuse—men as sexual predators who prey on the emotional longings and passions of sexually free women. No, the solution is to hold the same standard to men as women, which the Jewish leaders failed to do.

Most likely, the Jewish leaders were also guilty of adultery. Jesus' statement regarding those without sin was specifically pointed towards those of the Jewish leadership guilty of that particular sin. As adultery is common among the political elite and clergy in our day, adultery among the religious and political elite was common 2000 years ago. After Jesus spoke these words, the older members of the group began to leave, followed by the younger ones. We don't know why John includes this statement. Perhaps the older ones were more sensitive or even more burdened by more years of unfaithfulness to their wives and wanted to distance themselves from that situation as soon as possible for fear of being revealed in front of the crowd.

After the accusers left, the woman was left standing alone with Jesus. With no one left to accuse her because of Jesus' advocacy, Jesus tells her to go her way and sin no more. She had been forgiven. She no longer owed God for her sins. The Word of God who came with grace upon grace demonstrated mercy to this woman instead of accusation and judgment. In contrast to the Jewish leaders who would have her stoned simply to trap Jesus and undermine his reputation, Jesus proved to be wise and merciful in his protection of the woman and thwarting of the Jewish leaders. In this simple story, we can see that Jesus is a true spiritual leader worthy of following.

THINK THROUGH THE ISSUES

The people of God always seem to be in shortage of quality spiritual leadership. Recent surveys show that a third of pastors have logged on to porn sites in the past year. The revelations in the last several years regarding the Catholic Church's protection of serial child molesters are still significantly hurting the church. Adultery, hidden extramarital sex lives, and drug and alcohol abuse are unfortunately not uncommon among those in spiritual leadership. Additionally, we are all too familiar with spiritual leaders that seem to be in it for the money or the perks, using their position to draw huge amounts of money from naive supporters.

John shows us that Jesus is a true model of spiritual leadership. In this short narrative, we see an amazing range of spiritual leadership qualities that today's ministry leaders would do well to imitate.

Issue: Spiritual Leadership

1. What qualities of spiritual leadership did Jesus demonstrate in this passage?
2. How did Jesus deal with subtle, direct, and deceptive opposition?
3. How did Jesus' knowledge of the Scriptures help him in this situation?
4. How did Jesus deal with law and sin?
5. How did Jesus conduct himself with a helpless, young woman?
6. How did Jesus protect and embolden people?

Respond to the Questions Below:

DINNER TABLE DISCUSSION GUIDE

Note: These discussions are more advanced than previous discussions because of the nature of the subject matter. You may want to take some time to think through how best to engage these discussions prior to the actual discussion.

MEAL #1: ADULTERY AND SIN

Read John 7:53-8:11, Leviticus 20:10, Deuteronomy 22:22

With sensitivity and tact, talk to your family about adultery. Discuss why it is so destructive to families and communities. Discuss why the Law of Moses would be so strict against adultery.

MEAL #2: EVIL SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

Read John 7:53-8:11

Discuss how adultery requires two people and talk through the following questions.

1. Why do you think the Jewish leaders brought the woman before Jesus?
2. Why do you think they all walked away when Jesus said, "Let him who is without sin throw the first stone."
3. What kind of men were these Jewish leaders?

MEAL #3: THE PROTECTION OF JESUS

Read John 7:53-8:11

1. Why do you think Jesus protected this woman from harm?
2. Why did the Jewish leaders want to harm her?

MEAL #4: THE GRACE OF JESUS

Read John 7:53-8:11

1. How significant was this woman's sin?
2. Did Jesus just ignore this woman's sin?
3. Why do you think Jesus forgave this woman of her sin?

FAMILY PRAYERS



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