

To the Apostate Church: “Let him who is without sin cast the first stone...”

By Chris M. Coursey

Here is the scene. Jesus has been teaching in the temple, going about His Father’s business, proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom. Word is spreading. The scribes and Pharisees approach with a woman caught in the act of adultery. They were fishermen, but not like the disciples. No, this group wanted to TRAP Jesus. Their bait is a woman caught in the very act of sin - adultery, crime punishable by stoning. These leaders were arrogantly prepared for the utter humiliation and devastation of this Teacher called Jesus. They knew the Torah, so they recite to Jesus what the law says concerning matters of this magnitude. The group was bent on snaring Jesus, “that they might have something of which to accuse Him”.¹

Instead of mercy, they were seeking judgment and condemnation, not only for the woman, but for the Son of God. What does the Son of God do in such a delicate situation? What else would the Son of God do, but reveal the condition of their hearts. He responds by writing on the ground. What is He writing? There are numerous theories and speculations out there, but I believe He is writing their names. Why do I believe this? Let’s take a look at the context.

The previous day was the great day of the Feast of Tabernacles. Part of the celebrations included a water pouring ceremony. It was here Jesus outspokenly declares Himself to be the “Spring of living water”. Interestingly, in Jeremiah 17:13 God is called the “mikvah” of Israel.² A mikvah is a collection of water used for a ritual bath. Mikvah refers to a water immersion in order to be pure, and this bath is often a natural collection of water, even “living” water or flowing water such as a spring. The verse in Jeremiah reads, “O Lord, the hope of Israel, all who forsake You shall be ashamed. ‘Those who depart from Me shall be written in the earth, because they have forsaken the Lord, the fountain of living waters.’” These leaders would have known the above verse in Jeremiah, but this passage would have been fresh in their minds considering what Jesus declared the day before! As Jesus bent down to write in the sand, I suggest they recognize what He was doing, particularly *what* He was saying. As they continue to question Him, Jesus replies, *He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first.* (vs. 7) I wonder if they felt conviction. I bet they felt a sting of shame. Whatever they felt or thought, they depart one by one – oldest to youngest. I believe Jesus was not only exposing their motivations, but conveying, “You who are older, wiser, and mature should know better!” I speculate they left, oldest to youngest, because those who should have known better, failed to. They were not living or acting like Kingdom-minded People. We can expect malfunction, error, misjudgment, and even poor discernment for those of us that are young in the Lord. However, we hope for more from those who are elders and leaders, don’t we? Oftentimes those in leadership bring death rather than life and pain rather than comfort. There is no shortage of train wrecks in the faith often at the hands of trusted leaders.

So what does the Son of God choose to do with the adulteress? After rescuing her, He tells her “... go, and sin no more.” (vs. 11) In other words, “change your ways, learn from this, you have been given another chance, you are pardoned, forgiven and cleansed”. He did NOT condemn, judge, rebuke or shame her – He loved and accepted the sinner, but rejected the sin. Given this example,

¹ John 8:6

² First Fruits of Zion, Torah Club Vol.4, Parashat HaShavuah Shelach

can we as a Church do anything more or less? I often wonder how do we become confused in feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, housing the homeless, loving the sinner but disapproving of the sin? Why do great numbers of people continue to receive stoning from leaders and churches? Why are they rejected, abandoned and despised because they have made mistakes, failed to heal/change “fast enough”, or struggle with immaturity, addiction and pain? I have to ask the question, are we as a Church doing enough? It wasn’t secular, non-religious men who approached Jesus to trap Him – it was the Church, God’s elect, who wanted Him dead. “*And He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.*”³ It appears Jesus Christ is still being persecuted, rejected, and despised by His Church, this time in the form of men, women, and children who are neglected or hurt by those who should cover and care for them.

It seems easier to point out problems in other people, to notice the speck in a brother or sister’s eye, but fail to consider the plank in our own eye.⁴ Jesus didn’t condemn the adulteress nor did He justify her behavior. He handled the situation with righteousness, dignity, and the respect of His Father in heaven. Can we respond the same with those God brings into our lives? Are we able to practice the love that *suffers long and is kind...is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. LOVE NEVER FAILS.*⁵ Are we able to practice this love, not only in speech or around other believers, but practice it daily with everyone – rich or poor, those who are easy to interact with and those who are difficult? This is my prayer and hope for the people of God.

God rebukes the church of Laodicea in Revelation 3:14+ because they say, *I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing...* God rebukes them. He reveals their condition and says they are “wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked.” (vs. 17) This group, as well as the Pharisees and scribes who grabbed the adulteress, are in the same boat – apostate, blind, and deceived. Other words for *apostate* are “backslider, renegade, turncoat, deserter, traitor, etc.”⁶ Many Christians have backslidden and require the Lord’s advice in verse 18 and 19, “*I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore, be zealous and repent.*”

What is God saying? God is telling them that they must suffer and be clothed in righteousness that is heavenly, not earthly. Their eyes need to be opened to see what He wants them to see, not what they think they are seeing. God will chasten them to bring about repentance and brokenness that leads to humility. God’s judgment is righteous, and He will bring back His unfaithful bride to be fully cleansed and prepared for Him. God will strip her as He did to Israel, depicted as the unfaithful harlot in the book of Hosea, “*therefore, behold I will hedge up your way with thorns, and wall her in, so that she cannot find her paths. She will chase after her lovers, but not overtake them; Yes, she*

³ Mark 8:31

⁴ Matthew 7:3

⁵ 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 emphasis mine

⁶ Webster’s Fourth Edition

will seek them, but not find them. Then she will say, I will go and return to my first husband, for then it was better for me than now."⁷

We cannot afford to be complacent or compromising. As Scripture attests, whatever we do for the least of our brothers and sisters, we do for the Son of God. (Mt. 25:40) Whether the acceptance or rejection of a broken person, refusal to come alongside of the wounded, judging the sinner instead of the sin – we do unto our Lord God in heaven. Shouldn't we be quick to search our hearts, minds, and behaviors if this is a reality for us as individuals and congregations? There should be a holy fear to be steadfast before God in having a lifestyle and mindset that depicts the love, forgiveness, and mercy that Jesus showed to the adulteress. I believe the Pharisees were convicted because they had the realization that they too, were in the position of the adulteress – in need of mercy and forgiveness. Are we any different? We all have walked in the place of the adulterous, *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*⁸ Do we then have the right or footing to stand in place of the accuser?

Our hope as a church is to be able to say what Job did before his misguided friends, *But He knows the way that I take; when He has tested me, I shall come forth as gold.*⁹ This is a similar prescription God gives the Church of Laodicea, that they purchase *gold refined in the fire*, to gain humble confidence that our heart condition will be exposed, made known, and revealed before God Himself. The shame of our nakedness would no longer be revealed, but that Christ who is within us would be displayed before the world. Isn't our very existence to fellowship and reflect Him and His glory alone? As soon as people see anything other than the qualities of Christ Himself in our lives, congregations, or ministry; we have stepped in the way. Woe to him who stands before God to hear the words, *I never knew you, depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!*¹⁰ What a catastrophic rebuke spoken by Jesus to people who said, "Lord, Lord" and even prophesied, cast out demons, and performed many wonders. In spite of the activities, Jesus still claims, *I never knew you.* Jesus states *he who does the will of My Father in heaven will enter the kingdom of heaven.* (vs. 21) A relationship with the Son is the key needed to unlock the door into 'kingdom living'. It is not a matter of good works, or doing an ounce of charity - it is doing the will of our Father in heaven. Everything springs from *that* relationship. After these verses Jesus talks about *putting into practice* His word. I would say we benefit from putting His Word into our lives, mind, heart, relationships, and every iota of our existence. For the leaders who tested Jesus with the adulteress, Jesus wanted them to recognize Him and know the Father's heart instead of missing the mark.

Jesus went about doing His Father's business, proclaiming and living out of the fullness of the kingdom. Our task as the Church is to do the same. May we not be caught in slumber, shame, or unruly behavior. Time is of the essence. I exhort us as individuals and congregations to practice the "fast of the Lord" spoken in Isaiah 58 so we may *loose the bonds of wickedness, undo heavy burdens, let the oppressed go free, break every yoke, share bread with the hungry, bring to your house the poor who are cast out, cover the naked, remove the pointing of finger and speaking wickedness, extend your soul to the hungry...* (6-7, 9-10) Often it seems easier to pick up a stone and attack rather than surrender and lay our stones down. He who had every right to cast a stone

⁷ Hosea 2:6-7

⁸ Romans 3:23

⁹ Job 23:10

¹⁰ Matthew 7:23

in judgment refused, instead offering Himself on a cross instead. May we have His mind in these times.