

How Can a Righteous God Forgive the Sinner?

-Tim Minter

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.”

-Ephesians 2:8 & 9

It was early morning in the city of Jerusalem. The Man who claimed to be the Messiah (a controversial claim) had gone to the temple, where once again he could teach the people. The crowd gathered to hear his words, perhaps hoping that this would be the day that He would free Israel from their Roman oppressors. As He spoke, however, it would have become very clear that He had a different agenda than they expected. Rather than speak the angry rhetoric of political revolution, He no doubt spoke to them patiently of God’s salvation. He was well acquainted with the people’s bondage to Rome, but He was more concerned with their enslavement to sin. Because of His boundless love for these people, He longed to show them the mercy of God.

Suddenly, while He was still speaking, the teachers of the nation, the scribes and Pharisees, widely respected for their piety and devotion, pushed their way through the crowd. They carried with them a terrified woman, and cast her down before Him and the crowd. They confidently asked a question they were certain would discredit this man they considered a significant threat to their authority. “Teacher, this woman was caught in adultery, in the very act. Now Moses, in the law, commanded us that such should be stoned. But what do you say?”

The silence was deafening. The woman, “caught in the very act,” was guilty; all were certain of it. Moreover, the law was clear on such matters: “...the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death” (Leviticus 20:10 NKJV). And yet, as this woman stood hopeless before the Lord Jesus Christ, joy must have filled His heart, for he knew that day a woman, a sinner much beloved of God, would find mercy. This woman stood in terror, knowing that she had no hope. The silence grew more dramatic since she could make no defense. She felt only panic and dread as this righteous man stooped to the ground in response to the question. Was he reaching for a stone? The crowd wondered. But Jesus knew that this case would serve as an object lesson, not only to all those present in the crowd, but to many more for thousands of years after

this took place.

This incident, recorded nearly 2,000 years ago in the Gospel of John, raises a fundamental question: on what grounds is a man saved? Today, many believe that if they keep the Ten Commandments to the best of their ability, do more good works than bad ones, and go to church every Sunday and holiday, they will have earned the right to enter heaven. Is this popular belief accurate, or is the way to God altogether different?

The Pharisees and scribes were experts on the Old Testament, the only portion of the Bible that had been written by the time of the story above. They subdivided the regulations of the Old Testament law, and laid out precisely what they believed God expected man to do to earn salvation from Him. They prided themselves on their keeping of (and teaching of) the law and believed themselves to be as near to perfection as humanly possible. Indeed, they were among the most religious men ever to inhabit the planet.

In order to entrap Christ, the scribes and Pharisees approached Him with this question: *“Teacher, this woman was caught in adultery, in the very act. Now Moses, in the law, commanded us that such should be stoned. But what do You say?”* (John 8:4-5). Stoning was the form of execution mandated by the Old Testament as the punishment for certain crimes. Male members of the community would hurl stones at the convict. All men from the area were expected to participate in the stoning and thus proclaim their unanimous agreement with the judgment.

By asking this question, however, the Pharisees thought they had Jesus in an inescapable dilemma. Because the Romans had taken over the political affairs of the captive Jews, only the Roman governor could authorize an execution. If Christ said the woman should be stoned in accordance with Mosaic law, he would be seen as a political troublemaker and thus incur the wrath of a very jealous Roman Empire. On the other hand, if Jesus Christ told the Jews not to stone her, he would be contradicting Moses, one of the most revered prophets in Judaism. This would then, therefore, weaken his claim to be the Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament, and therefore, his claim to deity.

In His infinite wisdom, Christ chose neither answer, but rather ignoring the Pharisees and scribes, He began to write in the sand. No one knows for sure what He wrote, but the accusers repeated their question to Christ. What should be done with this vile sinner?

Christ answered, *“He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first”* (John 8:7). He then promptly returned to his writing in the sand.

The Pharisees were astounded and silenced by Christ’s answer. They were each forced to concede that they, themselves, were sinners as well as the woman; they were *“convicted by their conscience”* (v.9). One by one, starting from the oldest and ending with the youngest, they walked away in silent testimony to their hypocrisy. Christ and the adulterous woman were therefore left alone.

It is significant that there was indeed one present who was without sin—the Lord Jesus

Christ. Scripture tells us of Christ, *“in Him there is no sin.”* (I John 3:5), yet he chose not to cast a stone in judgment. Why? Did not He, as the Holy and Sinless God, have the right to execute the very judgment He, as God, had commanded in the Old Testament?

The Bible is clear that all men are sinners. *“For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God”* (Romans 3:23). No man can attain to God’s holy standard of absolute, sinless, perfection because each and every one has committed sin. Because sin is rebellion against God, a righteous God **must** exact punishment for sin; *“For the wages of sin is death”* (Romans 6:23). All men deserve judgment for their sin, yet, Christ Himself stated that He did not come *“into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved”* (John 3:17). How can this be??

Jesus Christ Himself gave us the answer. *“For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved”* (John 3:17). God the Father chose to send His Son, *“the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person”* (Hebrews 1:3), to save us. The apostle Paul wrote, *“For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him”* (II Corinthians 5:21). The Sinless Savior took our place as a substitute, fully discharging the debt. God therefore sees us as legally righteous because of Christ’s death on the cross.

We cannot do anything to earn this salvation because Christ completed all the work. *“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.”* (Ephesians 2:8-9). The requirement for salvation is that one must simply believe and acknowledge the authority of Jesus Christ; *“if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved”* (Romans 10:9, NASB). Just as self-imposed community service will not exempt a debtor from paying off his loan, good works cannot make a rebellious sinner right with God. Only Christ’s death in our place could reconcile the sinner to God.

If one does nothing about his sin, a just punishment awaits him for his rebellion: hell. *“But the ... unbelieving ... shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death”* (Revelation 21:8). There is a hell awaiting those who reject God’s offer of salvation. Hell does not exist because God is some sort of sadistic fiend who takes joy in people’s suffering. Rather, hell exists because God is holy and will not dwell in the presence of sin. Sin must, therefore, be judged. God takes no pleasure in the damnation of a soul. *“[God is] not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance”* (II Peter 3:9). *“As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live”* (Ezekiel 33:11). The damning of a soul is an action God never wants to take. It is never His choice to condemn a person to hell. It is the choice, rather, of the person who opts to reject God’s free offer of salvation.

There is an added dimension in the Lord’s response to the woman. In Deuteronomy 17:6, God commanded Moses to create this legal prerequisite to the conviction of a criminal: *“At the mouth of two witnesses, or three witnesses, shall he that is worthy of death be put to death; but at the mouth of one witness he shall not be put to death.”* (cf. Numbers 35:50, Deuteronomy 19:15, et al.). The Pharisees and scribes may well have

caught this woman “in the very act,” however, since they had left, there were no longer remaining any human witnesses. While Christ Himself was omniscient, and therefore knew her guilt, He was technically not a “witness.” And even if the Lord were a physical witness, there would not be “two or three,” but only one. She, therefore, could **not** have been executed according to the Old Testament Law. He showed mercy to this woman, a guilty sinner, and never violated the Law of Moses.

The scribes and Pharisees, on the other hand, had two witnesses against them concerning their sin—their own consciences, which “convicted” them (cf. John 8:9), and Christ who by exposing them, demonstrated Himself to be a second witness. They were guilty indeed. This shows how Christ in all points kept the law. It is crucial to understand how Christ was perfectly sinless in all that he did. Only because of his flawless perfection was Jesus Christ able to take our place in judgment. The Lord Himself stated, “*Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill*” (Matthew 5:17). Scripture testifies of Christ, “*in Him there is no sin*” (I John 3:5) and that He is “*holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners*” (Hebrews 7:26).

The story adds an important note. When the Lord and the woman were alone, He asked the question, “*Woman, where are those accusers of yours? Has no one condemned you?*” (John 8:10). The woman answered, “No.” Christ then told the woman, “*Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more*” (John 8:11). While she was not condemned for her sin, this did not give her a license to continue in sin. Forgiveness of sins does not give *carte blanche* permission to continue therein.

Similarly, while believers are forgiven, they must not continue to live sinful lives. Christ, “*gave Himself for [the church], that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish*” (Ephesians 5:25-27). (The phrase “church” here does not refer to any earthly ecclesiastical body, but to all believers in Christ alone as Savior.) We are not to continue in sin, but rather to serve Him out of gratitude and returned love. While the penalty of all our sins, both past and present, has been completely paid, believers are expected to serve God and refrain from sin. Ephesians 2:8-10 states that, although we are saved by faith alone, we are saved **unto** good works. The purpose of our salvation is service. Salvation is **not** a license to sin.

This story presents a guilty woman, one caught “in the very act” of sin. She had absolutely no hope, yet through the Man who calmly sat and taught the multitudes, she found the Savior who could show her mercy and yet perfectly fulfill the law. As sinners, we too are “without hope” (cf. Eph. 2:12). We have no hope of meriting salvation through religious works, though many people, just as the ultra-religious Pharisees, attempt to earn salvation on their own merit. Only by faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ can we be saved. We must simply accept this salvation by faith. It is God’s earnest desire to see all men saved (cf. 1 Tim. 2:4), and therefore spend eternity with Him. The responsibility to make that choice and *then* to serve Him in “good works,” however, lies with each individual.

**“Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy
He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy
Spirit.”**

-Titus 3:5