

# The Forgiveness Choice

John 8:2-11

My friends, every one of us here comes this morning with a story. I don't know your story; you might know something of mine, I don't know. But we all have a story. For example, a significant part of my story is that I was born in Holland and came to Australia when I was just a one-year-old kid. But being Dutch influences something of who I am, and you all know that the Dutch have the reputation for being the humblest people in the world.

What's also part of that story is that I was raised in a really strong Roman Catholic environment. Both my sisters were nuns. So when I heard, for the first time heard in my heart, the Word of grace and forgiveness, heard it as a 21-year-old, it meant that there was a cleaving with my family. I've often noted that Christians are really glad when someone joins them; but my joining the Lutheran Church, and really my being able to grasp the power of grace, meant that in one sense I didn't belong to that other family any more.

Another part of that story, which was not communicated to me until later, is the fact that the emotions and spiritual cut-off that happened because of that step was not as severe as I always thought it was. And I was reminded of this when I was reading the Old Testament text this morning.

My father was in the Dutch Army. Their war lasted five days. But when the Germans ran out of labour, because all their men were somewhere else, my father, along with all of the people who were in the Dutch Army, was conscripted to work in Germany. My father finished up, not in a factory, but on a farm below Hamburg in Germany. And the thing

that he talked to me about was the fact that that was a *Lutheran* farmer. And that Lutheran farmer had a word inscription over the door where he walked in and out of his house. You know how those texts go — you often used to have them over the altar. But it was the text that Joshua spoke and that we read this morning. Over the doorway there was:

As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.

That made a deep impression on my father; and many years later, probably 10-15 years after I had become a Lutheran and a Lutheran pastor, we talked about that; and it explained partly why he dialogued and sent Christmas cards to that farmer. Twenty-two years after the war, he was still sending Christmas cards.

But that's part of my story. I have many other parts of my story which I don't have time to share with you; but, you know, I had brothers and all of that, and where I went to school — all of that is, for example, part of what brings me to this place.

The reason I mention that, and why it's important, is that if I am going to talk about the woman caught in adultery (and really, it's more than that), I need to talk to you about background, because what's happening here is the scribes and the Pharisees, the teachers of the Law, having a testing session, and it's not a *little* testing session, with Jesus. And it goes back — you can include in it what was said by Joshua: "Will you serve the Lord?" And the people said "We will serve the Lord!" And he said "You can't!" And they said, "No, we will serve the Lord. We will uphold the word that we have received through you and through Moses. We will live by that."

And then you have the history that goes all the way through to the time where the nation was expelled into Babylon. And their history is a history of *not* living according to that word. Their history is a history of idolatry; and wherever there was idolatry, there was adultery. Those

two things always go together. There is always sexual sin where there is idolatry. It never, ever fails.

But it wasn't only that. There was rebellion, there was a refusal to listen to the prophets. They didn't take notice. And not only that, but those who were appointed to teach the people this word did not do it.

And there are some texts that summarise their being vomited out of the Promised Land and sent to Babylon:

*Psalm 82:5* - They have **neither knowledge nor understanding**, they walk around in darkness; all the foundations of the earth are shaken.

*Hosea 4:1* - There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no **knowledge of God** in the land.

*Jeremiah 51:17* - Everyone is stupid and **without knowledge...**

*Isaiah 56:10* - Israel's sentinels are blind, they are **all without knowledge**; they are all silent dogs that cannot bark...

*Jeremiah 14:8* - For both prophet and priest ply their trade throughout the land, and **have no knowledge**.

*Malachi 2:7* - For the lips of a priest **should guard knowledge...**

*Ezekiel 34:5* - So they were scattered, because **there was no shepherd**;

*Hosea 4:6* - My people are **destroyed for lack of knowledge...**

*Isaiah 5:3* - Therefore my people go **into exile without knowledge.**

Now, this is not all of Israel: this is Judah. Israel was transported out of its land to places around Samaria, and they never came back. These people from Judah knew that history. Then *they* went to Babylon, and they cried out in their hearts, "Why did this happen? Why did the Lord do this to us?" And their conclusion was "Because we ignored the Law of the Lord. We did not listen, and we did not obey, and we went our own way."

And so, building inside them, there was a resolution, a terrible resolution, that "If we get back to that land, we will live by the Law of the Lord!" And if you want to know what that's like, go home and read Ezra and Nehemiah, two priests who led the people back there, and from that time on, there was this rigid adherence to the Law, and it was unbending and it was inflexible. And that slowly became a tradition, that was not just the teachers of the Law, the scribes, the Levitical teachers; it also became the Pharisees.

And it's that group who claimed, as Jesus said, "They sat on Moses' seat." Every synagogue in Israel, at the time of Jesus, had a spot that was called Moses' seat. It was a stool where you sat down to teach, while everybody else stood to listen. If you were a scribe or a Pharisee, you could occupy that seat. And you know that Jesus often walked into the synagogues and he began to teach; and he always sat to teach.

Those who sat in the chair of Moses were the teachers. And they were teaching this rigid adherence to the Law as the Word of God, the beginning of the Word of God, the end of the Word of God. "If only all of Israel will keep that Word perfectly for two weeks, the Messiah will come." That's their dream.

And it's into that world that Jesus comes. And the first thing that he diagnoses is that there is actually no proper shepherding going on among the people.

Let's recall the feeding of the 5000. This particular episode happens just after Jesus has heard that his cousin John the Baptist has lost his head. The disciples have just come back from their first mission trip, and they want to talk. Jesus needs a break, and he recognises that they all need a break, so they say, "We'll get in the boat and go across the other side of the lake, and we'll have a break."

Now, I don't know what it's like for you; but if I went across the lake for a break, and there were 5000 people on the other side, I would have a problem. I would have a problem. But what does the text say?

As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were **like sheep without a shepherd**; and he began to teach them many things.

*Mark 6:34*

His diagnosis of what was going on in Israel, his awareness, his knowing, was that whatever was being fed to the people of Israel at that point in time was not food for the people. It was not proper shepherding. This was about "They were like sheep without a shepherd, so he began to teach them." Shepherds *teach*. Shepherds are responsible for making sure that whatever word you are hearing from the Lord *is* the Word of the Lord, and not some distortion of the Word of the Lord, or not some half measure of the Word of the Lord that doesn't include it all.

That's the background for our text. In the text, from John chapter 1 right through to today's text, there is a slowly-building sense of hostility between, on the one hand, the Pharisees and the scribes (the teachers of the Law), and on the other Jesus. It's getting more intense. And you see it in the other Gospels as well — they're always there trying to trip

him up. There's a hostility; and it's about who has the right — "By what right do you speak the words you speak?" That's the background for our text.

Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, 'Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?' They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him.

Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.' And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?'

She said, 'No one, sir.'

And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.'

*John 8:2-11 (NRSV)*

Now, I have no idea what is your picture of that scene. How would it feel if you were in front of a crowd of 500? What would it be like for you, if you were being dragged through that crowd by the righteous, and stuck in the middle of all those people; and being made, not just an

example, but a central point in the testing between the Pharisees and Jesus.

There's a crowd. This doesn't happen in a little corner of the temple where no one else is. This is out there in public. And who are you in this process?

They're making their accusations, and Jesus doesn't say anything! But notice that they address him as "teacher". This is about teachers. And as you know, Jesus gets on his knees, and he begins to write... What was he writing?

Most of us have probably been trained, have learned to think of it as Jesus was writing their sins. Could be — no one really knows. But I think that maybe he wrote Psalm 32, verses 1-5:

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.

Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long.

For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.

Then I acknowledged my sin to you,  
and I did not hide my iniquity;

I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord," and you forgave the guilt of my sin.

Maybe he was writing Isaiah: "Though your sins be as scarlet, they will be as white as snow." Who knows? One thing he said to the Pharisees consistently:

Go and find what this means: I desire mercy and not sacrifice.

And at that point, if that's what he wrote, you realise that that's where the clash is, because the word of Moses was *never* the final word. Just Jesus being there in the temple, being there teaching, is a reminder that the whole sacrificial nature of what went on in the temple was about this: there is forgiveness for people who have repented.

All they were interested in is this fulfilment of the Law. And you can understand, if he wrote their sins or if he wrote those words of mercy, then those men from the oldest to the youngest — because they were the ones who could read — just imagine it: they're looking at it, and there is a command for mercy on the part of Israel's leaders. They could not go ahead with what they wanted to do, and what they insisted was their right to do. So they all go away.

And then Jesus looks at the woman, and he says, "Where are they? Is there no one here to condemn you?" And she says, "No one," and he says "Well, I don't condemn you either." I don't condemn you either.

Now we say he made a choice. The accusers are no longer there; and he made a choice. You see, there was one person there that day who had the right to throw the stone. There was one, if he chose, who could go to the pile of stones, and he could grab one, and he could start throwing. And that was Jesus himself, Jesus the sinless one.

But he chose not to do that. And in making that choice, he also made another choice. Every single time he goes to someone and says "Your sins are forgiven", he is saying "I will take that sin myself." When he speaks forgiveness to someone, he does it on the basis that the sin, the judgement, the guilt, the condemnation, will come to him. That's his choice.

And even if everybody else in the world in the world was sinless, the moment he said to that woman "Your sins are forgiven, there's no condemnation", he would have to go to the cross. Every time he spoke forgiveness to someone, an extra bit of the weight of the cross went

onto his shoulders. Do we understand? That's what's happening when he speaks forgiveness.

When you think about what you bring in here on a Sunday morning, and sometimes it's that you told lies, and sometimes it's much worse than that, sometimes it's terrible gossiping and who knows what it is; and what I bring in here on a Sunday morning, and the thoughts I've had and the sort of things that I would never want anybody else to know; then every time, our understanding of the grace that is in Jesus Christ is just growing. He is taking all of this on board. And when he hangs there on the cross, and he's dealing with all those people present, who represent humanity, and he's saying "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do", it's like a giant vacuum cleaner — he is sucking all of that up to himself. That's the love of the Cross. That's where our forgiveness comes from.

At that moment where he speaks no condemnation to the woman, that's the moment when the cross is inevitable. That's why he came. John 3:16:

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him would not perish but have everlasting life.

And it goes on to say, "For the Son of Man did not come into the world to condemn the world." Can you understand why that is such a powerful text which is read every year at Christmas from John chapter 1? "Law came through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." That's what this is about: Moses was not the last word; Moses was a preparatory word.

Now, a second thing I just want to mention, on top of that. The woman got a gift! If it were me being dragged into that spot, I know how I would feel. I would wish to die. I would wish that I could disappear. I would wish that this is not happening. But those scribes and Pharisees did her the greatest favour that they could ever do. They did it with

malice, and they did it with anger, and they did it with evil intent; but they brought that woman to Jesus.

We just sang *You are my hiding place*. They brought her to the one place where she could hide in perfect safety! They brought her to the one place, in fact they brought her to the one *person* where she would know what freedom was. They came as prosecutors, but they had actually been gentle ushers. Well no, we won't say gentle; but they had ushered this woman into the place where there was forgiveness and freedom.

Another point. We get stuck in our sins — would you agree with that? There are some sins that we are stuck with, and we don't seem to be able to get away from them. But this woman, struck by the power of the grace that she had received, to her Jesus could say — and because he could say it to her, that meant it was true — “Go and leave your life of sin.” Do you think she was repentant standing there, and not just sorry that she got caught? Yes, of course she was repentant — she was really broken by this. But in the forgiveness is the grace; and if you were to go onto [biblegateway.com](http://biblegateway.com), and just search for “grace” and “power” in the search field, you will see that grace and power get linked; and for Paul, grace is *a power in its own right*. So if you have received grace after what you have done, within that lies the power for your release; because that's where the new heart is, that's where the new spirit is, that's where the joy in the Lord is, that's where it is.

Having said all that, just one other thing. Every one of us will also carry wounds from someone else's sin. And those wounds usually come from people very close to you. More so from people close to you than from people far away. And it hurts! It's the stuff that, when you do get to sleep finally, you wake up at 1:30 and 2 o'clock in the morning, and you can't go back to sleep because it's just churning around in the background and you do not know how to deal with it.

What does Jesus ask us to do? Paul puts it beautifully:

Forgive one another, as God in Christ has first forgiven you.

So there is a *call* on your life and my life to forgive. Part of that is that you don't condemn. One of the ways that I have worked out about forgiveness is that I don't pray any more that the Lord would crush 'em and smash 'em and take 'em out. I'm quite happy to say to him, "Lord, let there be forgiveness, and I know that in eternity, if you put me at the same table, I'll be OK." But what happens to the sin that you forgive?

That forgiven sin is part of the cross that *you* carry. And you bear it because your Lord bore it before you. It doesn't make life easy; but forgiveness is saying "I will wear the cost." Now, that sounds incredibly difficult; but you're in Christ. You have Christ's heart. You have the mind of Christ. You have the Spirit of Christ. You have the presence of Jesus Christ. You have the feeding of Jesus Christ. You have the community of Jesus Christ. The Father loves you. The Spirit pours out the love of Christ in our lives, and it's in there that we get the power and the freedom to walk away from our sins; and it's in that immeasurable love that we find the power and the freedom to forgive others for the way they have sinned against us.

Just enjoy the enormous, immeasurable love of your Father as it comes to you in Jesus Christ. And live in the freedom of it. Jesus is Lord. Amen.