

EASTER MIRACLES: PART 5 - COURSE CORRECTIONS

John 8:1-11

Scripture chronicles God acting to alter the course of His Kingdom and in every case it has been due to operator error on the part of his followers. Israel was called to be a holy and a priestly people whose primary calling was to promote the reality of the One True God in a sea of humanly created gods and goddesses. They did well for a time but began drifting, then dabbling in the same false gods they were called to speak against, which led to adopting the mores of the very people they were charged with impacting for God. It became worse when Israel began to inter-marry within these Gentile cultures, leading to even more syncretism, which was tantamount to serving two masters, which we know is all but impossible. After being set free from Egyptian servitude they griped and grumbled all the way to Mount Sinai, the Old Testament epicenter of *course correction*. God would reaffirm Israel's calling and give them a codified set of operating instructions. The Mosaic law would take the guess work out of consistently living for God *while* living out their calling to be a holy and priestly people. They left Mount Sinai with 613 laws to follow, including the ten we all have memorized.

When Jesus came on the scene the 613 laws had morphed exponentially, leading to a new line of "lawyer" rabbis. Over the centuries Judaism added traditions that became almost as binding as the actual law. It is within this cacophony of rules, regulations and long held practices that the waters muddied on the hoped-for Messiah. Despite the prophets laying out God's plans, Israel had created their own version of the Messiah, one quite contrary to the person of Jesus. Sadly Israel's C.V. for the Messiah didn't change during Jesus' three years and He died and resurrected with only a tiny band of believers. That course correction took place on the road to Emmaus with two followers who so bought into the altered Messiah-version they were heading home in resignation and defeat, only to go back to Jerusalem equipped with the Good News of the actual Gospel.

These two major, game changing course corrections are bookends to God's long-term macro plan for His created people. There were, however, several minor

reboots that led up to the final acts of Jesus that are easy to overlook. The reboot-course correction we focus on today is Jesus' encounter with the woman caught in the act of adultery (by the Pharisees) who was used as a foil to trap Jesus. Jesus exploited the heartless attempt to teach a lesson about the scope of the Kingdom reboot already in motion. John 8: 1-11 tells it this way:

Jesus walked up the Mount of Olives near the city where he spent the night. Then at dawn Jesus appeared in the temple courts again, and soon all the people gathered around to listen to his words, so he sat down and taught them. Then in the middle of his teaching, the religious scholars and the Pharisees broke through the crowd and brought a woman who had been caught in the act of committing adultery and made her stand *in the middle* of everyone. Then they said to Jesus, "Teacher, we caught this woman in the very act of adultery. Doesn't Moses' law command us to stone to death a woman like this? Tell us, what do you say we should do with her?" They were only testing Jesus because they hoped to trap him with his own words and accuse him of breaking the law of Moses. But Jesus didn't answer them. Instead he simply bent down and wrote in the dust with his finger. Angry, they kept insisting that he answer their question, so Jesus stood up and looked at them and said, "Let's have the first man who has never had a sinful desire throw the first stone at her." And then he bent over again and wrote some more words in the dust. Upon hearing that, her accusers slowly left the crowd one at a time, beginning with the oldest to the youngest, with a convicted conscience. Until finally, Jesus was left alone with the woman still standing there in front of him. So, he stood back up and said to her, "Woman, where are your accusers? Is there no one here to condemn you?" Looking around, she replied, "I see no one, Lord." Jesus said, "Then I certainly don't condemn you either. Go, and from now on, be free from a life of sin." (Passion Translation)

Imagine being there and witnessing all this playing out. Jesus was teaching in the outer court of the temple, an area open to anyone and everyone. As he was teaching the Pharisees and religious scholars brought a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery to Jesus for his advice on her punishment. The

Pharisees and religious lawyers had thought this one through. Theirs was a well-constructed plan to trap Jesus and expose Him as the sham Messiah wanna-be that He clearly was. He had already broken the Mosaic law several times and in so doing eliminated himself from being their messiah. Sure, the woman was expendable, but he won't allow her to be stoned to death. He's a law breaker. He doesn't follow the Sabbath rules and he spends a lot of time with *her kind of people*. Either way we finally have him. Let's get this over with.

It is a terrible thing for a sinner to fall into hands of fellow sinners.

(F.B. Meyer)

Several questions need addressing for us to fully embrace this highly uncomfortable story as a course correcting event.

Were the Pharisees right in condemning this woman to death by stoning? The short answer is yes, they were correct that adultery was a capital offense and stoning was the called for punishment, but only if there were two witnesses and both parties in the illicit act were punished. It's easy to see how complicit they were in this set up. Where was the man? Did they witness the event? If so, what were they doing snooping around people's private places in broad daylight? This was a set up for sure. The man was likely in on the plan; thus, he was not brought before Jesus with the woman.

Was stoning to death a regular event in Jerusalem in the time of Jesus? No, Rome did not allow the Jews that amount of power and the number of offenses calling for death was quite large. Richard Murray writes:

The Old Testament says many things which, if we read solely by the letter, would require us to literally kill our enemies, literally stone to death all rebellious children, literally stone to death all Sabbath breakers, even if all they did was pick up sticks on the Sabbath. Cursing the name of the Lord demanded that the offenders surely be stoned by the whole congregation. All non-virginal brides had to be stoned on their wedding night when their condition was discovered, as well as rape victims who didn't scream loud enough during their trauma. Ray Pritchard adds: To the Jews adultery was a terrible sin.

The rabbis taught that a man should take his own life rather than commit idolatry, adultery or murder.

Capital punishment had all but disappeared by the time of Jesus, although Jesus and most of the twelve disciples would die at the hands of religious leaders with sentences based on being blasphemers and lawbreakers.

How were the Pharisees and religious scholars trying to trap and discredit Jesus?

Under Roman rule only an appointed judge could sentence a person to death, otherwise it would be considered murder. Jesus did not have the authority under Roman law to sentence anyone to death. If Jesus had said, “yep, she’s guilty, stone her,” he would be breaking the Roman law. Conversely, if he had said to let her go without judgment, he would have been breaking with the Mosaic law. If he agreed with killing her for her sin it would have gone against the mercy, grace and forgiveness he had been teaching. Pritchard deftly adds: *By presenting this woman to Jesus, the Jewish leaders hoped to impale Jesus on the horns of a dilemma.* For the average rabbi this would have been a perfect trap and a lose-lose-lose situation. Technically Jesus was not a rabbi in the strictest sense as he had no formal rabbinical training (he had not gone to seminary) and he was not average in any sense. He was God doing a course correction that was long overdue. He was perfecting the original intent of the law of Moses by reestablishing its spiritual foundation while shifting away from the law providing for salvation. Works are out, grace and mercy are in.

Jesus did not come to destroy the law but to fulfill it, right? Yes, that’s true, but in fulfilling and perfecting it he was also trimming the fat. To go from 613 original laws to the several thousand additional laws and oral traditions had created a cumbersome bureaucracy that took specialists to oversee. Lost in the shuffle was the original intent, as discussed in *Torah was essential* (S.H. Venour).

To the Pharisee, keeping the law (both written and oral) was everything. The condition of one’s heart towards God was unimportant. Because of their strict adherence to Levitical laws of purity, they kept themselves separate from Gentile sinners (on whom they looked down), for fear of being considered unclean. All things considered Judaism had become a performance-based faith.

The Pharisees were the keepers of the Mosaic law (the Torah). They believed that having guardianship of this law was proof they were God's chosen people, to whom the Messiah would come. They believed the Messiah would be an earthly king, a son of David whom God would raise up. He would establish an earthly kingdom, freeing them from Roman rule. (H.L. Ellison).

They were separatists, or Puritans of Judaism, who withdrew from all evil associations and sought to give complete obedience to every precept of the oral and written law (M.C. Tenney).

The Pharisees held strict adherence to the law as a holy act and the path to salvation. In their view this was God's plan and it was their job to keep Israel in line. It seems reasonable they saw Jesus as a blasphemer and rank law breaker. He also taught that he did not come to destroy the law, yet he broke (or at least dinged) several laws and oral traditions:

Throughout his ministry Jesus violated many laws and traditions. He mixed freely with tax collectors and sinners, making him ceremonially unclean (Luke 7:39). He ate and drank with them and was called a glutton and a drunkard (Luke 7:34). He ate with ceremonially unclean hands (Luke 11:38). He broke the Sabbath laws by healing people and picking corn to eat (Luke 13:14, Matthew 12:1-2). He forgave peoples' sin, which to the Pharisees was blasphemy (Luke 5:21). He also freely criticized the Pharisees for their hypocrisy and self-righteousness (Luke 11:37-52).

Originally the law was intended to enable Israel to live righteous lives. This was necessary if they were to be the holy and priestly people who would reconcile the world back to God. The zeal to be more and more holy led to the loss of mercy and created a system of impossible religious legal burdens. Life for the Jews became a form of slavery to the ever-increasing law invented and perpetuated by the religious elite. Jesus came to rescue Israel from their own laws.

Who was *This Woman*? We do not know her name, only that she was caught in the *act* of adultery. "*Act*" tells us she was literally caught in the act of having sex with a person who was not her husband. This also suggests she was pulled

directly from that scene and taken before Jesus. Commentators seem united (a rare thing indeed) on two things related to this woman: First, she was chosen to play an unwilling role in the attempt to discredit Jesus; and second, she was not fully clothed when she stood in front of Jesus and the large assembly who thought they would hear Jesus teach, not referee an R-rated drama. This was a very public event. Imagine being in the crowd that day and seeing this painfully personal exchange unfold. Jesus is teaching and with flair and interruption the well-known Pharisees barge in with a mostly naked woman in tow. This was clearly a planned attack. The law requires witnesses to the illicit act and does not allow for the punishment of only one participant. It takes two people to do many things; adultery and the Tango come to mind.

Hardly clothed, drowning in embarrassment, scared and alone... she is publicly accused of her sin. She would have feared her fate, especially with the established religious leaders so blatantly announcing it. She was guilty, this was obvious, and she would be feeling the self-loathing that comes with being so weak, so wrong. She feels insignificant. Will anyone realize she is gone? Will anyone care?

It isn't hard to imagine the shame and fear that this woman experiences in this situation. Apparently she and her partner were discovered and interrupted while having intercourse, a traumatic event in itself. Now she is thrust into a public forum where her sin is publicly announced. The charges against her call for the death penalty, and it seems quite possible that she will be brutally executed within the next few hours – and very likely denied a proper burial. It is difficult to imagine how any person could be more miserable than this woman is at that moment (Richard N. Donovan).

The Mosaic law prescribed her fate. She was to die by stoning. Roman officials would need to sign off on her punishment, but her mind was beyond technicality, she was imagining how inhumanely painful her end would be; but she was guilty:

The purpose that runs through the entire process which led to death by stoning is that of holiness and the sanctity of the community. The LORD reminded His people many times that He was holy and therefore, they were to be holy also (Leviticus 11:45). Stoning, as a cruel and public means of

execution, was meant to foster the fear of God and of His laws. Such fear was meant to focus one's mind and heart on obedience to the LORD and as a deterrent to disobedience. Stoning, as a communal act, was a statement by the congregation (community) to rid itself of grievous sin and remain holy. It did not take place within the city so as not to defile the city and no one had to touch the corpse and be personally defiled (Kurt Michaelson).

She would be taken outside the city gate and the first witness would push her face first into a pit ten feet deep filled with large, jagged rocks. If the fall did not kill her, she would be placed on her back and the second witness would drop a large stone onto her chest. If this didn't cause her death another stone would be dropped onto her chest, and if she was still alive all of Israel would be allowed to throw smaller stones until she died. That was option one. The second option was even more barbaric. She would be placed in a hole in the ground up to her chest, arms buried, and stones would be thrown at her head until she died.

Jesus shifts the Kingdom... Jesus didn't come to destroy the law of Moses; He came to perfect it. In a sense He came to rescue it, reshape it, reapply it, and redeploy it. In its current state it had become a barrier to its original intent. Jesus silenced the Pharisees by taking the chronically misused law and setting it aside, inserting grace, mercy and forgiveness. The law had gone from functioning as guardrails, to fencing, to barriers that functioned to keep people out. This was never its intent; it was designed to provide a faith-based, orderly structure of right-living that would draw people in. How the first-century Pharisees were using the law was tantamount to theologically thinning the herd.

...By writing on the Ground with His Finger. Scholars have spent centuries speculating on what Jesus wrote or drew on the ground that day. Possibly, that is not the point of the exercise. Jesus, God the Son, wrote with his finger. God the Father wrote the original law on tablets with his finger. Jesus was reclaiming and redeploying the law in a similar, yet less dramatic fashion. The Pharisees had Jesus in their well-crafted trap: "Teacher, this woman was caught red-handed in the act of adultery. Moses, in the law, gives orders to stone such persons. What do you say?" The shift is on. Course correction is just words away: "Jesus was bent down

writing with his finger in the dirt. They kept at him, badgering him. He straightened up and said: *The sinless one among you, go first; throw the stone.* Bending down again, he wrote some more in the dirt.” The finger of God again changes the trajectory of the Kingdom to save the world. That day, in that moment, one humiliated and scared woman was saved.

She is all of us. In what could be characterized as their only honest act of the day, the Pharisees slowly retreated, leaving the woman alone with Jesus. He stands to provide her with some scrap of dignity and asks, “Woman, where are they? Does no one condemn you?” Did she expect that line of questioning? She answers simply, “No one Master.” Jesus responds, “Neither do I. Go on your way. From now on, don’t sin.” Revolutionary language for sure! The entire Kingdom was impacted with these few words:

This is a turning point in Christianity. Jesus could have picked up the stone and struck the woman. However, she stays with Him, boldly confronting Him and realizing her wrongdoing, awaiting His judgment. However, He lets her go free, to live in a life without sin. He gives her a fresh start. It seems as if He passes no judgment here, as He releases the woman. However, this is not so; remembering the writing in the sand Minear writes, “Jesus in fact did give a judgment to both parties involved, though that judgment was unusual, surprised both parties.” Through this passage, He puts into motion the idea of confession of one’s inner sin, as a personal desire to repent and receive God’s grace through being cleansed. This was different from what people were customary to, as in the Old Testament, it was the “people” who sinned and suffered as a “people.” Here, Jesus is calling each person, including women, to the opportunity to feel God’s love and forgiveness for themselves, to later help others and not judge them (Kaitlyn Vermeeren).

Takeaways

Toxic religion often uses fear and intimidation to force people to measure up. Religion says, “Change or I will condemn you.” Grace says, “I have forgiven you.

Now let me also change your life.” We do not change to be accepted; we change because we have already been accepted. Grace does what rules can never do.

Jesus did not condemn her, she stood condemned already. He didn’t condemn her because He came to be condemned on her behalf. Jesus saved this woman from physical death and in the process gave her spiritual life. He made this possible. He, Himself, became the course correction.

Before any of us step into the role of Judge, we must examine our lives and make sure we are morally qualified to pass judgment. We aren’t. We won’t be. We can’t be. So, this decision is easy to make, but hard to pull off.

Everyone, I repeat everyone, is significant. Everyone matters. If we find ourselves sizing rocks like we do bowling balls, it might be good to re-read the New Testament. Jesus hung out with a wide variety of people and not one was the president of the local Rotary club.

A new level of grace *was* the course correction. It saved her; it saved us; we should share it. You know what they say about hoarders (*they* shouldn’t, that’s judging, but you get the point).

By judging others we blind ourselves to our own evil and to the grace which others are just as entitled to as we are (Dietrich Bonhoeffer).

Amen and Amen.

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