



## BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

John 8: 1-11

Summer 2022

"Unspeakable Love"

TRANSCRIPT

Thank you Seth, and good morning. We are in the Gospel of John. We just finished chapter 7 last week, which is a lengthy chapter, so we begin chapter 8 this morning.

Chapter 7 ended after the Lord has given some teaching in the temple and had a lengthy discussion with the crowd that was there. Then the scene shifts to the Sanhedrin where they discuss Christ—and the Pharisees dismiss Him as, ‘not a prophet, not the Messiah’. He’s from Galilee and, of course, ‘No prophet comes from Galilee’, as they said. Well, they were wrong about that. But there’s obviously hostility toward Him and the chapter ends with verse 53, "Everyone went to his home.", and Chapter 8 begins,

**8** But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. <sup>2</sup> Early in the morning He came again into the temple, and all the people were coming to Him; and He sat down and *began* to teach them. <sup>3</sup> The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery, and having set her in the center *of the court*, <sup>4</sup> they said to Him, “Teacher, this woman has been caught in adultery, in the very act. <sup>5</sup> Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women; what then do You say?” <sup>6</sup> They were saying this, testing Him, so that they might have grounds for accusing Him. But Jesus stooped down and with His finger wrote on the ground. <sup>7</sup> But when they persisted in asking Him, He straightened up, and said to

them, "He who is without sin among you, let him *be the* first to throw a stone at her." <sup>8</sup> Again He stooped down and wrote on the ground. <sup>9</sup> When they heard it, they *began* to go out one by one, beginning with the older ones, and He was left alone, and the woman, where she was, in the center *of the court*. <sup>10</sup> Straightening up, Jesus said to her, "Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you?" <sup>11</sup> She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "I do not condemn you, either. Go. From now on sin no more."

John 8: 1-11

May the LORD bless this reading of His Word and bless our time of study in it together.

*(Message)* The Puritan theologian, John Owen said, "We are never nearer to Christ than we find ourselves lost in a holy amazement at His unspeakable love." And our passage gives us an opportunity to lose ourselves in that love with one of the greatest examples of Christ's mercy—His compassion for the weak and helpless.

The Old Testament promised a Messiah. Isaiah said He would be both king and servant; a Savior who would "bind up the brokenhearted", and "proclaim liberty to captives". (Isa 61:1).

And He did that here in John 8, when a woman who had been caught in sin was shoved in front of Him by ruthless men who demanded that He decide her fate. What He did was a marvel when He responded to her with "unspeakable love"; and with such a love that shows all, who are weighed down with sin and guilt, that there is hope of forgiveness. It's a picture of the Gospel—a famous story that has given us one of the best-known statements in the Bible, "He who is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone." (vs7).

But, there's some question about the rightful place of this passage in the Gospel of John. There is a textual problem which suggests that it was not originally part of the Gospel. The reason is, these verses are absent from the oldest manuscripts. Also, some

of the words in it don't fit the style of John. That said, however, there is no reason to doubt that the event that's described here actually occurred. In fact, as Leon Morris wrote, "It rings true." —And it certainly does.

And there are a lot of facts to support it. It's a very old text. There's evidence that Papias, who was a disciple of the apostle John, spoke of this account and preached on it. And it fits naturally in this chapter. It gives a good introduction to the Lord's statement in verse 12, "I am the Light of the world." By the Light of His grace, He saved a woman from the powers of darkness. So I feel confident that this is Scripture—and that it even is in its right place in the Bible.

It occurred early in the morning when the Lord came to the temple. He had spent the night on the Mount of Olives after a long day of debating His challengers. At the end of it we're told, "Everyone," (the priests, and the scribes and Pharisees), "went to his home." Perhaps they went to their homes to plot a trap to set for Him while He went to the mountainside where He slept outside, under the stars, (maybe in the Garden of Gethsemane, where He so often would go for a time of peace and solitude and prayer.) Then at dawn, He made His way across the Kidron Valley and up into the temple to one of the great porches in the outer court where a crowd gathered to hear Him teach.

Suddenly, He was interrupted by some scribes and Pharisees who brought a woman, put her before Jesus, and said, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in adultery, in the very act." (vs4). Now these men were legal authorities, students of the Scripture. The scribes were often lawyers, and usually Pharisees—they knew the Law. And they addressed Jesus with a show of respect; they called Him "teacher", which is very much like 'rabbi', and by which they were indicating that 'He should know the Law and obey it!'

Then they put a legal question to Him in verse 5, 'Here is a woman who has committed adultery. We caught her in the very act.' "Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women; what then do You say?"

Now at first glance, the whole thing seems straightforward enough. She had broken the Law and there were witnesses; but on further reflection there's something suspicious about it. Adultery involves another person and yet there's only the woman here. If she was caught red handed how was the man allowed to escape?

Circumstances have raised the suspicion that the whole thing was a setup—that the woman was entrapped and the man allowed to flee. What is clear from all of this is that the woman's accusers weren't at all interested in justice but in only putting Jesus in an embarrassing situation. And that's what verse 6 states; they were “testing Him” in order that “they might have grounds for accusing Him”—all at the expense of this woman, who may have been young.

And they spoke of stoning her. That was not the means of execution in every case of adultery but in Deuteronomy chapter 22, verses 23 and 24, it's the penalty for a case involving an engaged girl. So that suggests the woman was actually a young person, a teenage girl, standing before Jesus and probably shivering in fear in the cold morning air, as these men asked Jesus to condemn her to death.

That was done rarely, if ever, in first century Jewish society. Today, stoning for adultery happens in Muslim countries but in first century Jewish society, it was practiced only rarely. These men hadn't brought this young woman to Jesus because they loved justice and hated adultery, but because they hated Him. They were pious connivers, self-righteous men who felt no pity for the girl who had been caught.

They were hard men who failed to see anything of themselves in her. They lacked the theology of the English reformer, John Bradford, who famously said when he saw some criminals being led off to the hangman, "But for the grace of God, there goes John Bradford." There goes all of us. But there was nothing of that here. These men weren't humbled at the sight of sin—or even grieved by sin.

In fact, they were happy it happened. It gave them an occasion to trap Jesus and impale Him on the horns of a dilemma. If He refused to have her stoned, He would be seen as opposing the Law of Moses and His credibility as a teacher would be

undermined. 'He claims to be sent from God', they would say, that 'He rejects God's Law. His teaching is unreliable. He is a lawless person.'

On the other hand, if He condemned her, He would have collided with the Roman government and been charged with sedition, or something like that since only the Romans had authority to execute criminals.

And He would have lost the good will of the people: He invited the weary sinners to come to Him for rest. —But who would come if, when they came, they found only justice and not mercy?

This was a test of His compassion for sinners—and a well laid trap by His accusers. They had put Him on 'the horns of a dilemma', so they thought.

But no one could outwit the Lord; He is always in complete control and always has the right response. And His answer to them here was silence. We read that Jesus "stooped down and with His finger wrote on the ground." (vs6b). He wrote in the dust. But why He wrote and what He wrote has always been a mystery. This is the only time Jesus is recorded to have written anything. And we don't know what it is—though there have been many suggestions.

One of the oldest is that He wrote Jeremiah 17, verse 13, "Those who turn away from You will be written in the dust, because they have forsaken the LORD, the spring of living water." (That would fit with the previous passage, wouldn't it?, ("living water")). These men would have known that passage well. It comes a few verses after Jeremiah's statement that, "The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; Who can know it?" (Jer 17:9). Not we. But the Lord does; and He knew the hearts of these men and how deceitful they were.

'He knows what is in man.' Remember from chapter 2, where that statement was given. He was in Jerusalem. He cleansed the temple. He was doing many signs, many miracles, and it says, 'many were believing in His name' (vs23). 'But the Lord was not giving himself to them because He knows what is in man.' (vs25). He knows what is in all of us, and He knew what was in these men. He knew their purpose, their plot. He knew

their whole history. He knew the hidden things in each one of these men. And it's possible that's what He wrote, the hidden things in their heart and in their lives.

There is a manuscript that says that that is what He wrote with His finger in the dust, each of the sins of each of these men. Maybe He did. And maybe some of them were guilty of adultery. If not, they were certainly guilty of murder. At least they were guilty of murder in their hearts, for they had schemed to put Him to death. They were hypocrites.

Now really, all of them were worse than this woman that they had brought and accused of a sin worthy of death. We don't know what He wrote but we can be sure that what He wrote, what the Word wrote, what the Logos wrote, was profound because the finger writing in the dust was the finger of God. It was the same finger that wrote in stone the Ten Commandments—and the seventh commandment against committing adultery.

At the feast of Belshazzar in Babylon, God's finger appeared, writing on the wall, "MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN." "You have been weighed in the balances and found wanting." (*Dan 5: 25-27*). So had these men, so have we all, apart from God's sovereign grace; "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (*Rom 3:23*). —And here, the finger of God may have written judgment against these men.

After a while Jesus stood up, and looking around He replied to them, "He who is without sin among you, let him *be the* first to throw a stone at her." (vs7).

It was an opportunity to upbraid this bunch of hypocrites. It was an opportunity to castigate them publicly for their callousness, for their cold hearts, for their hypocrisy, their wickedness—an opportunity to drive them off for they deserved it.

But He didn't do that. He was completely calm. Maybe He even had compassion on them. They were sinners. They were so lost they didn't even know it. And He came to save people like them.

Well rather than speak, we read that "Again He stooped down and wrote on the ground." (vs8). Some have thought that He wrote Psalm 22, verse 15, "You lay me in the dust of death." Or Isaiah 53, verse 11, "My Servant will justify the many, as He will bear their iniquities."

Again, we don't know. But any of those would have been very appropriate for what followed next. He returned to His writing and His challenge began to have its effect. Some of the old manuscripts say that 'The accusers were convicted by their own conscience'; and the King James Version follows that reading. They clearly were convicted, they knew that none of them was "without sin". "One by one", John writes, "they began leaving." (vs9). The older ones left first, maybe because they, the older ones, had more sin weighing upon them and their consciences than the others.

Well, when the last of the accusers were gone, Jesus stood up, and for the first time He spoke to the woman, and spoke to her in words that were entirely respectful; He said to her, "Woman..." We might say, 'Well, that doesn't sound very respectful.' But you'll remember in chapter 2, before He did His first miracle, He addressed His mother Mary as "Woman." And then from the cross, when He gives her into the care and the charge of the disciple "whom He loved", (John), He called her "Woman."

And here He addresses this young lady in the say way that He addressed His mother. "Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you?" (vs10). To which she answered, "No one, Lord." With the accusers gone, and the charges dropped, Jesus then answered her, "I do not condemn you, either. Go. From now on sin no more." (vs11).

Well there's the "unspeakable love" that Owen wrote about: Love that binds up a broken heart and gives release to a captive. Love that delivers the guilty from the Law's penalty. What a contrast Jesus is to His accusers. They wanted to destroy her, He wanted to save her. They were compassionless, He was compassionate, full of mercy and grace. That is God. That is Christ. And John revealed that about Him from the very beginning of this Gospel. Back in chapter 1, verse 17 he wrote, "The Law was given through Moses: grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ."

And yet, does this seem a little too easy, a little risky? The woman committed adultery, was caught in the very act. There's no debate about that. That's a terrible sin. And Jesus simply let her go. Does that mean we can sin with impunity, we can sin without consequence?

The concern that some might interpret the incident that way and take a casual attitude toward immorality has been suggested as the reason for this passage being omitted from the oldest manuscripts. Augustin gave that as the reason the story is missing from the early texts: 'Scribes feared people would use the incident to excuse infidelity, so they removed it at an early date.'

But rightly understood, there's nothing here that might encourage sin. It's really just the opposite. And the Lord certainly never made light of adultery—of any sin for that matter. Rather, I would say He gave the strictest words in the Bible on that very thing; He said that adultery happens when one simply looks at a woman with lust—or when a woman looks at a man in that way. That takes place in the heart and it's happened. (See Mat 5:28).

And this was not a case of easy forgiveness. Our Lord never engaged in easy forgiveness. Forgiveness is never easy or cheap with Him: Forgiveness has come at the cost of the cross where He paid for the sins of those He purchased with His own blood. That's how serious He takes sin, how serious the Father takes sin.

That's the reason He did not, and was able to not pronounce judgment on her. He did not come into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. He does not pronounce judgment on those who come to Him by faith. And I don't think that we read too much into this by assuming that through Jesus' words, she was brought to faith in Him: She called Him "Lord."

This is the story of salvation. Jesus can freely forgive because of the sacrifice He would make, and the sacrifice that He *has* made, where He bore the full penalty of sin for all who come to Him. And He removed our guilt through that cross and through the faith that brought us to Him.

So we have in this, not only an example of the Lord's compassion for the oppressed, as one who "binds up the brokenhearted", but also an example of Him as Savior. He gives release to the captive. This is the Gospel: "I do not condemn you." That's forgiveness. It's justification. And based on that, the Lord said to her, "Go. From now on sin no more." That's sanctification.

Justification and sanctification are different from one another but they are inseparable and they're very important words. And I think we, as Christians, should know the vocabulary of the Christian faith; and justification and sanctification are very important words. Justification, (I know many of you know this, but we all need to know it), is a judicial or legal act. It doesn't change the inner man, it changes our status before God. It's God's act of pardoning the sinner and bestowing on the sinner the status of acceptance for Jesus' sake, that is based on His sacrifice for them because the penalty has been paid fully.

Sanctification is God's work of changing the justified person, renewing the whole person into the image of God by enabling him or her to die to sin and live to righteousness.

Justification occurs at the moment of faith. God declares the believer 'Forgiven'. 'Not guilty'. 'Righteous', even. So His acceptance of us is full and complete. It is permanent, it is not repeated, it is forever.

Sanctification is a process of ongoing transformation by which God, the Holy Spirit, produces real righteousness, moral change in the believer. It is a process that never ends in this life and ultimately ends in the complete glorification of the sinner.

Now we're still sinners. The reformers talked about the believer, the man or woman, who has been justified as 'righteous sinners', bearing the righteousness of Christ legally but we're still sinners. We're fully accepted by God, based on the work of Christ and based on our connection to Him. But we need to have our lives changed, sanctified, conformed to the image of Jesus Christ.

And so, while we are still sinners, we need to understand that: "If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." (1 Jn 1:8). While we're still sinners, we still are constantly going through this process of sanctification. It's progressive; and as it goes on we grow in our faith and our obedience. That's 2 Corinthians chapter 3, verse 18, "We...are being transformed into the image of Christ from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, who is the Holy Spirit." "From glory to glory", that's the process of our life in this present time.

Both of those aspects of salvation are expressed here in our text. There's nothing here of what might be called 'cheap grace', or an indifference towards sin or repentance. Just the opposite. It is sovereign grace that's displayed in this passage. And that's the incentive to live as the Lord instructed: to, "Go.", and "...sin no more." There's no greater incentive to staying on the path of holiness than the love of God.

And that's what Paul wrote about in 2 Corinthians 5, verse 14. "For the love of God controls us," —or "The love of God *constrains* us." His love for us that sacrificed His own Son, that we, the guilty, the undeserving, might be saved. That motivates us—that love constrains us to live a life that's pleasing to Him.

Don't you think it did this woman? Do you think that she left that day with a feeling of indifference—relieved that she had gotten off so easy and so now she could go back to a life of sin and immorality? Or do you think she left the temple, lost in a holy amazement at His unspeakable love—transformed having embraced Christ as Lord, as her God and Savior—and wanting to live a life that was pleasing to Him?

Well I guess it's an open question, because we're not told. But I know what Scripture teaches about believers in Christ and about the Christian life. It's what Jesus says in verse 12. "I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life." We have His Light, and we have His life, and we don't live in sin. I don't mean we don't fall into sin. Every believer does. I don't mean we don't persist in it for a time. But the believer will be brought out of that and the tenor of his or her life will be one of obedience.

We've been freed from the penalty of sin in justification, which means the believer in Christ is accepted by God at the moment of faith, because Christ has wiped away all of our sins, removed all of our guilt. —He did it all.

Now that is liberating, and I think it's very important to understand justification from the practical aspect of it. We don't have to spend our time, our lives, worrying and striving to gain God's acceptance.

When a person doesn't understand what has taken place in justification he or she can spend his or her life spinning his or her wheels, as it were, seeking to gain that assurance. But we should understand what we have through justification. We have, at the moment of faith, God's acceptance. He has accepted us fully and forgiven us fully. We are righteous in His eyes because He has imputed to us the righteousness of Christ.

Christ has done everything for us. There's nothing more to do. "It is finished," as He said. (Jn 19:30). We cannot be more accepted by God the Father than we are at the moment of faith. It is complete.

And again, the knowledge of that—of the unconditional, eternal love of God for the lost—motivates obedience, (which ultimately the Holy Spirit enables us to have), so that we walk in the Light. And we do so gladly; we do so with a desire to please the Lord because of all that He's done for us.

Well I think one of the greatest examples of that in the Gospels is the one given in Luke chapter 7, (which Mark taught two weeks ago in the adult Sunday School class; so it's fresh on some of your minds, I think.) It's a text with another sinful woman. She interrupted a dinner party in the home of Simon the Pharisee. Simon had invited Jesus

to his home for a meal. He was watching the Lord carefully but not respectfully. He had not extended the common courtesies to Jesus that he had his other guests. He hadn't anointed Jesus head with oil as He came in, as was the custom. He hadn't permitted his servant to wash the Lord's dusty feet.

But then in the midst of the meal, a woman entered the house: she was a woman with a reputation, a sinner, and notorious. Simon knew who she was, but when she learned that Jesus was there, she entered, uninvited—and even made a scene. But she, too, was a woman Jesus had received with compassion and forgiveness.

So she came to the Pharisee's house with an alabaster vial of perfume, “very costly”, and with a lot of her own tears. She came in behind Jesus and stood at His feet where she began weeping. Maybe she was weeping because she saw the dust on His feet and that brought on this flood of tears because of the lack of care that was obvious, the lack of care that had been given to Him. And so she was moved. She was moved by other things, of course, moved by her sin and the forgiveness.

But as her tears fell on His feet, she bent down, let her hair down, and with the hair of her head she wiped His feet carefully, cleaning them, and then kissing them repeatedly. Then she anointed them with the perfume.

Simon took it all in—and he was shocked. What a scandal! He thought that something was wrong with Jesus for letting this woman, such a woman as this, touch Him. ‘Did He even know what kind of woman she was?’ he wondered. Well, He did of course, and He let Simon know that; He let Simon know not only what kind of woman she was but what kind of man he was.

She was a sinner, a notorious sinner, who had been forgiven. That's the reason for her tears and perfume. She loved much because she had been forgiven much. And the implication is; ‘You, Simon, have no concept of forgiveness because you have no concept of sin and what a self-righteous man you are—and how desperately you need a Savior.’

John Owen, the great Puritan, was right. "We are never nearer Christ than we find ourselves lost in a holy amazement at His unspeakable love." His unspeakable love is witnessed in His concern for sinners: That He would come to die for them, the worst of them, in order to save them at the cost of His own life. And He loved Simon the Pharisee at least enough to accept his invitation and suffer his disrespect, all in order to give him a word of grace and reveal to him his desperate need of a Savior.

Listen, there isn't one of us who isn't a great sinner. The older we get and the more we know Christ and His goodness, the more we will share the reflections of the hymn writer and preacher, John Newton, who confided to his friend before he died, "My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things; that I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Savior." He is. He died for great sinners in order to take away their guilt and give them everlasting life.

And if you know that you're a sinner, He can be your Savior, He will be your Savior simply by looking to Him, believing in Him as the Son of God who suffered for your sins so that you can then be forgiven, and then go and "sin no more." May God help us to do that, to live that kind of life, out of gratitude for the grace that He's shown us.

Father, that is so true; 'Our sins are many, but Your mercy is more.' We thank You for Your saving grace. Thank You for making us new people, a new creation, giving us a heart that has a bent toward righteousness and obedience.

We can only live that way by the power of the Spirit. We can only understand Your grace, Your mercy, and Your sovereign work in the life of a sinner, (who is incapable of understanding in and of himself or herself), by Your Word Father, and by the Light that You've given us. You have greatly blessed us who have faith; it's Your gift and You that enable us to live a life that's pleasing to You. May we live that life out of gratitude for all that You've given us, all that You've sacrificed for us, to Your glory.

Father, we pray that You would bless us throughout this day and throughout the week. —And may the LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make His face shine on you and be gracious to you. The LORD lift up His countenance on you and give you peace.  
In Christ's name, Amen.

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