



Raise Your Voice

'If she have the necessary gifts and feels herself called by the Spirit to preach, there is not a single word in the whole Book of God to restrain her, but many, very many, to urge and encourage her.'

Catherine Booth



**GOD'S DESIGN FOR
GENDER EQUITY**

A Bible study from creation to Jesus, and beyond.

Chapter 3



Chapter 3

What Was Jesus Doing When He Talked to Women? The Men Caught in Hypocrisy

by Major Christina Tyson



'Much power is exercised by instilling fear in people and keeping them afraid. Fear is one of the most effective weapons in the hands of those who seek to control us.'

Henri Nouwen¹⁴

Let's start

This New Testament story is one of political intrigue, as a trap is set for Jesus in which a woman is used as means to a desperate end. We are challenged to consider our response whenever women are treated as objects to own or even dispose of, rather than as people created in the image of God and of equal status with men.

Let's read

*John 7:53–8:11 (The Inclusive Bible)*¹⁵

After that, everyone went home, and Jesus went out to the Mount of Olives.

At daybreak, he reappeared in the Temple area, and when the people started coming to him, Jesus sat down and began to teach them.

A couple had been caught in the act of adultery, though the scribes and Pharisees brought only the woman, and they made her stand there in front of everyone. 'Teacher,' they said, 'this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. In the Law of Moses, the punishment for this act is stoning. What do you say about it?' They were posing this question to trap Jesus so that they could charge him with something.

Jesus simply bent down and started tracing on the ground with his finger. When they persisted in their questioning, Jesus straightened up and said to them, 'Let the person who is without sin throw the first stone at her.' Then he bent down again and wrote on the ground.

The audience drifted away one by one, beginning with the elder. This left Jesus alone with the woman, who continued to stand there. Jesus finally straightened up again and said, 'Where did they go? Has no one condemned you?'

'No one, Teacher,' came the reply.

‘I don’t condemn you either. Go on your way—but from now on, don’t sin any more.’

Although this story is typically headlined ‘The Woman Caught in Adultery’, New Testament scholar N.T. Wright¹⁶ says one of his friends prefers to call it ‘The Men Caught in Hypocrisy’, because the real villains of the piece are ‘angry men’ looking to ‘to take out their own frustrations on this solo woman’.

We begin by acknowledging questions about this passage’s origins. Many of the oldest New Testament manuscripts don’t include this story. Others place it as John 7:53 and 8:11, some at the end of John’s gospel, and a few in Luke’s gospel. In modern Bibles, we typically find this passage italicised and/or with a note signalling its textual challenge.

Despite these complicated manuscript issues, Wright easily accepts this as a ‘characteristic story of Jesus’, one he believes was shared as ‘oral tradition’. However, he suggests that because its moral implications were so shocking, many in the early church worried about what this passage was opening the floodgates to, leading some to have likely removed it.¹⁷

Kenneth E. Bailey notes that for centuries, traditional Middle Eastern culture understood the honour of the family to be attached to the sexual behaviour of its women, so that in conservative traditional village life women who violated the sexual code were sometimes killed by their families. (Sadly, the same is still true, with so-called ‘honour killings’ in heavily patriarchal systems today). Bailey explains that in the early centuries of the church—the days of hand-copied manuscripts—a person who wanted their own copy of a manuscript usually hired a professional copyist to carry out this work for them. Although some Christians were ‘brave enough to preserve the story even though it violated deeply rooted cultural attitudes’, he imagines a scenario in which it would have been easy for the head of a household to take a copy of the Gospel of John to a copyist

and say: ‘I want a copy of this document. Please leave out the story of this adulterous woman. I don’t want my daughters committing adultery and telling me, “Jesus forgave this woman and therefore you should forgive me!”’¹⁸

Augustine (354–430 AD) is identified as the only writer from the earliest centuries of the church prepared to speculate on why this text was absent from many manuscripts. Church historian Thomas O’Loughlin says, ‘Augustine identified this as a text which many would find sensitive, one which went against the grain of his society, and which many Christians would prefer to do without lest it gave their wives ideas or lessened their threats and control.’¹⁹

O’Loughlin’s own observation is that this text ‘challenges some very deep-seated fears about the behaviour of their wives, the fear of sexuality without control among women whose sexuality was considered accounted for, and the notion that religion must support the structures of the society.’ He concludes that even if not ‘excised’ from the biblical canon, ‘it was excised from the mental canon of the readers—“bad women” were “bad women” no matter what Jesus said or did.’²⁰

Let’s discuss

- How do you respond to this story, and the experience of the woman in particular?
- What do you think about renaming this story to focus on the men, not the woman?
- How do you feel about the hypothesis that some men may have preferred to exclude this story from the Bible so they could continue to ‘threaten and control’ women?

Let's dig deeper

This passage fits into the latter part of Jesus' life. His celebrity was on the rise, as was the opposition of his enemies who hatch a plot in which a woman whom they are ready to shame and condemn will be used to trap Jesus. There was no loophole through which this woman could escape judgement, and therefore no loophole for Jesus either.

The passage immediately before this sees Jesus travelling cautiously to the pilgrimage festival of tabernacles, eventually going to the Temple in Jerusalem to teach. Although people are astounded by his knowledge, the crowd is divided over whether Jesus is the Messiah or not. The Pharisees are convinced Jesus is a fraud. They see his teaching in the Temple as undermining their power and position on their patch. Something must be done.

The next day, Jesus is again teaching at the Temple when he is interrupted by a group of scribes and Pharisees. A woman 'caught in the act of adultery' is with them. They ask Jesus what should be done with her, reminding him that the Law of Moses says she must be stoned to death (see Leviticus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 22:22).

A powerless pawn

What follows is an 'undoubtedly menacing' conflict, says Dr Merrill C. Tenney.²¹ The woman's guilt is without question. Jesus cannot claim to uphold the Jewish Law and hold a different opinion on what should happen to her. Either he sides with her accusers and agrees she should be stoned (showing he is no 'friend of sinners'), or he defends her by refusing to support the death penalty for adultery (showing he is a lawbreaker and discrediting him as a religious teacher).

In truth, no execution would be carried out. Palestine was part of the Roman Empire, and the Romans denied the Jews the right to put anyone to death

(John 18:31). Bailey describes the setting of this encounter as one that would certainly have prevented an execution but that also raised the stakes for Jesus. The Temple area was about 35 acres, with a long, covered walkway around three sides. Connected to this walkway on the north side, Herod the Great had strategically built a large military fort, realising civil unrest was likely to begin in the Temple. The first century Jewish historian Josephus says armed soldiers patrolled the walkway, monitoring the crowds for signs of trouble.²² If Jesus calls for the woman's death, he is sure to be arrested in the chaos that would undoubtedly erupt.

Where is the man?

Jesus' defence of the woman could, of course, start with the question: 'But where is the man?' This question seems obvious to us, but there was plenty of wriggle room for Jewish males in adulterous relationships. Jewish Law grew out of a patriarchal society and defined adultery as 'voluntary sexual intercourse between a married woman, or one engaged by payment of the brideprice, and a man other than her husband'. While adultery by a woman was punishable by the death of both woman and man, infidelity by a married man was not regarded as a crime. This was connected to the economic realities of married life in the biblical period and extending to later Jewish law—a wife was the husband's possession, and therefore adultery was a violation of the husband's exclusive right to her. The wife, as the husband's possession, had no such right.²³

As unfair as this seems, it is therefore not surprising that the man was not also brought before Jesus. Elijah M. Baloyi, reflecting on this passage with a view to addressing the problem of abuse of women in South Africa, says that 'the Jews regarded a man as a ruler with unquestionable authority. They were not ashamed to leave him out when they brought the woman to Jesus.'²⁴ The interest of the scribes and Pharisees was not justice, and they were certainly prepared to protect another man at the expense of this woman.

Jesus responds in an extraordinarily clever way to disarm his enemies. After pausing to write or draw in the dust—an action that offers respect to the woman by refusing to gaze upon her distressed and possibly semi-naked state—he asks those who haven’t sinned to cast the first stone. Now the dilemma is reversed. Jesus’ accusers know the words of Isaiah 53:6, ‘We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity [sin] of us all.’ Sin is the great leveller. In their humanity, male and female are equal because all are sinners. Which causes these men to confront the uncomfortable truth that they have neither the religious right nor the moral authority to judge this woman.

Humiliated hypocrites

Here is the hypocrisy of these men, which Tenney captures so well: ‘The scribes and Pharisees were actuated by malice, and not by a disinterested passion for righteousness. Their main desire was to trap Jesus, not to purge Jerusalem of its moral evils. Had they desired sincerely to abolish the immoralities of the city, they would have begun with themselves. Their whole attitude toward both the woman and Jesus was one of cruelty. She, dishevelled and sullen, was catapulted into the centre of a public assembly, and her sin was shouted for all to hear.’²⁵

And so, from eldest to youngest, the woman’s accusers slink away. Defeated. Humiliated. Exposed as hypocrites. The woman, previously dehumanised and held captive by fear of men’s power over her, is now liberated as equal and free—evident from the respectful and sensitive way Jesus engages with her. While he didn’t defend the woman against the accusation of adultery, Jesus stood between her and those misusing their power against her. He knew she received no protection in the patriarchal Jewish religious system, so Jesus found a way to save her.

‘Has no one condemn you?’

‘No one, Teacher.’

‘I don’t condemn you either. Go on your way—but from now on, don’t sin any more.’

To shake things up even more, it is not beyond the realms of possibility that Jesus ended this conversation at ‘neither do I condemn you’, with ‘go and sin no more’ a copyist addition to make a difficult passage more palatable. Whether or not that is the case, a striking lesson from this passage is that when it comes to salvation, Jesus starts with affirmation and inclusion rather than condemnation and exclusion. The sins and shame of our past—or the prejudices of others—do not disqualify us from friendship and life with God today (see John 5:24 and 1 John 1:9).

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Not just a ‘possession’

Like other women of her time, this woman was essentially ‘owned’ by the males in her world, particularly her husband if she was married. She was not allowed to speak to men in public because she might seduce them and lead them into sin. She was not entitled to enjoy her own sexuality as a gift from God; her purpose was to give pleasure to her husband. Some speculate this woman was the victim of rape, because she would not have felt safe to say ‘no’ to the person who demanded intercourse from her. Baloyi says it was

‘not common for the Jews to see men as perpetrators of rape or any sexual immorality because men were always viewed as being more pure and free from sexual sin than women.’²⁶

This unnamed but representative woman lived in a culture where religious attitudes and rules were shaped by men, often at the expense of woman. Tragically, these were carried over into Christianity where their echoes still influence church and societal norms today. Consider these examples:

- Women continue to be subjugated behind the closed doors of their homes, with misunderstood teaching that they are to ‘submit’ to their husband used to minimise and excuse emotional, sexual and physical abuse.
- Women continue to be viewed as a temptation to sin, and are therefore expected to show modesty and also to shoulder blame when men transgress moral and legal boundaries.
- Women continue to routinely encounter the violation of sexual harassment.
- Women continue to experience inequality in life opportunities, and often need to defend their right to full participation and fair remuneration in the workplace.

As Christians needing to leave behind the patriarchal influences in our faith and return to the equality we knew before sin entered the world, we are on a similar journey to some within the Jewish faith tradition. Canadian rabbi and author Tzvi Freeman says: ‘...women continue to get the short end of the stick. Whatever women’s emancipation gains on one hand seems to get taken away from the other. There are currently about four million female slaves worldwide... One of the largest sectors of American society living beneath the poverty line is single mothers and their families. Working mothers almost always do more work at home than their working

husbands. And when was the last time you heard a man ask someone to accompany him home at night for protection? It goes on and on.’²⁷

It does go on. Unless we follow Jesus’ lead.

Let’s discuss

- Have you ever experienced being excluded because you are a woman (within society or the church) or included because you are a man? What was that like?
- How can unequal power structures lead to abuse within the church?
- Jesus challenged the Pharisees unspoken assumptions—how does he change our assumptions about gender today?
- Read Galatians 3:28 again, as we did in chapter 1. This was written by Paul who—as a Pharisee before following Jesus— would have prayed: ‘Blessed art thou, O God, for not making me a Gentile, slave, or woman.’ What, then, is the significance of his words in Galatians?

Final thought

‘The history of humankind can be seen this way: A transition from male to female values, from authority to dialogue, from dominance to persuasion, from control to nurture. But we’re not there yet.’

Rabbi Tzvi Freeman²⁸