

September 24
Lesson 4 (NIV)

Jesus Prevents Two Stonings

Devotional Reading: Matthew 7:1–5
Background Scripture: John 8:1–11, 39–59

John 8:1–11, 56–59

¹ but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.

² At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. ³ The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group ⁴ and said to Jesus, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. ⁵ In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” ⁶ They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.

But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. ⁷ When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” ⁸ Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.

⁹ At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. ¹⁰ Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”

¹¹ “No one, sir,” she said.

“Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.”

⁵⁶ Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.”

⁵⁷ “You are not yet fifty years old,” they said to him, “and you have seen Abraham!”

⁵⁸ “Very truly I tell you,” Jesus answered, “before Abraham was born, I am!” ⁵⁹ At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds.

Key Text

“Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.”—John 8:11b

God’s Law Is Love

Unit 1: Love Completes, Law Falls Short

Lessons 1–4

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How to Say It

Abraham *Ay-bruh-ham*.

Absalom *Ab-suh-lum*.

Babylonian *Bab-ih-low-nee-un*.

Jerusalem *Juh-roo-suh-lem*.

Messiah *Meh-sigh-uh*.

Mosaic *Mo-zay-ik*.

Pharisees *Fair-ih-seez*.

Tabernacles *Tah-burr-nah-kulz*.

Introduction

A. Deciding the Game

Referees can be much-maligned by coaches, players, fans, commentators—almost anyone who is watching the game. They are second-guessed, taunted, and even on occasion blamed for a team's loss. Theirs is a difficult task. Referees must be quick and direct with their decisions. They must work together as a team to effectively officiate a game. And they must trust one another to know and care about the rules and work with integrity and skill to enforce those rules fairly.

The contest Jesus was called on to referee in today's lesson was no game. At stake were Jesus' credibility and a woman's life. Who would come away from this confrontation crying foul?

B. Lesson Context

The events and teachings recorded in John 7 and 8 occurred during one of Jesus' visits to Jerusalem for the Festival of Tabernacles (see John 7:1–2, 37; 8:20). God instituted this festival for two reasons. First, it was a time of thanksgiving during the season of the olive and fruit harvests (the September–October time frame). Second, it was a time to remember deliverance from slavery in Egypt (see Leviticus 23:33–44).

As something of an object lesson, many who celebrated this festival would live in tents ("tabernacles") outside the city to reenact the 40 years that the Israelites had lived in tents while wandering in the wilderness. "Then they all went home" (John 7:53) closes the day before the events considered in the first half of this lesson (see lesson 3).

The second half of this lesson begins in John 8:56. In John 8:12–55 (not in our printed text), Jesus responded to questions from a crowd of both laypeople (some who believed him, others who did not) and Pharisees. Of particular interest to the following episode are the conversational threads about being Abraham's descendants. Despite the Jews' confidence that they were Abraham's family, Jesus declared that their own actions revealed them to be children of the devil (John 8:44; compare 1:13)! No crowd would respond well to being called children of the devil, and this crowd was no different. They went so far as to claim Jesus must be demon-possessed to think that if Abraham and all the rest of the prophets died, Jesus' own followers would not (8:52–53).

We do well to note that the contrast Jesus set up can apply broadly to anyone who claims to be a child of Abraham (and therefore chosen by God, including Christians today) but acts in evil ways that contradict this heritage. Neither Jesus' words here nor anywhere else justify violence against Jews, past or present.

I. A Woman's Cause to Rejoice (John 8:1–11)

A. Jesus Prepares to Teach (vv. 1–2)

1. but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.

Jesus routinely took time to be in his Father's presence (examples: Luke 5:16; 6:12; 9:18). And *the Mount of Olives* was a common stop for Jesus when he was in Jerusalem. Given his prayerful habit, the specific location, and no further information, we surmise that Jesus took this time to pray (consider 21:37; 22:39–45).

The Mount of Olives first appears in the Bible in 2 Samuel 15:30, when David fled Jerusalem during Absalom's rebellion (see 2 Samuel 15:32–16:4). The spot was aptly named due to the proliferation of olives in this area, though the modern reader might suggest it was more of a high hill than a mountain. It did overlook the temple, sitting off to its east side. Other examples of reference to the mount of Olives in the Old Testament include 1 Kings 11:7; 2 Kings 23:13–14; Ezekiel 11:23; and Zechariah 14:4. The mount looms large in the Christian faith because it is the location of Jesus' last night of prayer, betrayal by Judas, and arrest (Luke 22:39–54).

2. At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them.

Jesus often began his day very early in the morning (examples: Matthew 21:18; Mark 1:35; Luke 21:38). *The temple* was the place for religious teachers to meet with and instruct their students (example: Luke 2:46). *All the people* drawing near suggests that they were primed—through recent experience, word of mouth, or other means—to seek out Jesus' teaching. *Again* points to at least one event that would have prepared the people to hear from Jesus on this occasion (see John 7:14). Teachers commonly sat as they taught (Matthew 13:1; 26:55).

B. Change of Curriculum (vv. 3–9)

3a. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery.

The relationship between Jesus and *the teachers of the law and the Pharisees* was typically contentious (examples: Matthew 23; contrast John 3:1–2). In the generations following the return from Babylonian exile, these two groups of religious leaders came into prominence in the Jewish faith. Their zeal for the law was commendable, intended to prevent the sins that had led to exile in the first place. Unfortunately, several factors, including mistaken expectations (John 7:52), vested interests (11:48), and hypocrisy (Matthew 23:13–32), prevented these leaders from seeing God's larger picture and made recognizing his Messiah incredibly difficult.

How this *woman* was found *in adultery* but her partner was not is a mystery. There could be perfectly innocent reasons (on the part of her accusers) why this man was not present: he escaped, he fought them off, etc. The most cynical reading (which is refuted by Jesus' instructions in John 8:11, below) would suggest that the woman was unjustly accused or even framed by these religious leaders.

Gender dynamics of the time are the most likely explanation for the male adulterer's absence. Especially in Roman culture, though also present to some degree in Jewish culture, adultery on the part of men was often considered an unfortunate fact of life. The women with whom they committed adultery, however, frequently were held to a higher standard and harshly punished for the role they played (see commentary on John 8:5, below). This double standard dichotomy likely resulted in part from questions of paternity and inheritance should a woman become pregnant by a man who was not her husband (consider Numbers 27:1–11).

3b–4. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery.

Why would Jesus' enemies refer to him as *Teacher*? We could assume that the honorific was slathered in sarcasm, since the teachers of the law and Pharisees largely did not consider Jesus

to have any authority to teach (compare John 1:38). In addition, using the title might have been a ploy to the crowd that was gathered around Jesus. On the one hand, it could sound like they were being very respectful. On the other, it put the listening audience on alert—would Jesus answer as a learned teacher ought to, or would he reveal himself as a fraud?

5a. “In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women.

The teachers of the law and Pharisees devoted their entire lives to learning and living the Law of Moses faithfully. Given their long years of training and scholarly debate, they no doubt believed they had an edge on Jesus regarding questions of *the Law*. Direct reference to *Moses* was unnecessary to establish what law they were talking about; dropping his name, however, raised the stakes of giving any answer that would seem to undercut this revered lawgiver and the God who gave him the law (consider Deuteronomy 34:10–12).

Commands to stone adulterers (found in Deuteronomy 22:20–21, 23–24) were specifically linked to a woman’s promiscuity before marriage or during her engagement. In the first instance, the man with whom she had sexual relations apparently was unknown, so she alone would be punished. In the second, the man who was not her fiancé was also to be executed. According to the law, both parties were meant to be held accountable. At least ideally, women in Israel would not face harsher consequences than the men with whom they consorted. The guilty parties were both subject to the death penalty (Leviticus 20:10; Deuteronomy 22:22). The harshness of this punishment reflects how repulsive God finds this unholy faithlessness (22:23–27; Ezekiel 22:11; Malachi 3:5; compare Romans 13:9–10).

5b. “Now what do you say?”

For a clearer idea of Jesus’ apparent dilemma in answering *what do you say*, one should consider two key points. First, Jesus was known to be a friend of the sinners (examples: Matthew 9:10–12; Luke 7:36–50). What would happen when he was faced with blatant sin, punishable by death? Second, under Roman law the Jews had no authority to carry out the death penalty. Religious leaders were endlessly frustrated that Rome was the final authority (John 18:31). On one significant level, this question had nothing to do with the woman, though her life hung in the balance. Instead, it was a question designed to trap Jesus and thereby discredit him (compare Mark 12:13–17).

6–7a. They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him,

This *trap* should be understood as a test of Jesus—fitting, given the teaching setting. Their motive was to discredit *Jesus*. If they were successful at discrediting him, they would, in turn, be able to bring a charge against him. This was not the first time Jesus’ opponents asked him seemingly innocent questions to have reason *to accuse him*. In those instances, Jesus always had a ready response (examples: Matthew 19:3–9; 22:23–46). When he *bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger*, the teachers of the law and Pharisees might have believed they finally had him stumped! Jesus, for once, seemed to be speechless.

What Jesus wrote or why he acted “as though he heard them not” (*KJV*) is unclear (see John 8:7b–8, below). We could speculate based on the context and Jesus’ character and ministry up to this point. His pause, however, did nothing to deter the men from continuing to question him.

7b–8. he straightened up and said to them, “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.

Rather than address the issue the teachers of the law and Pharisees presented, Jesus went to the very heart of the matter. Whether the woman deserved to die for her sins faded to the background; Jesus’ challenge was whether any of these men was *without sin*. Later Paul—an educated Pharisee himself—asserted that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23), and further: “the wages of sin is death” (6:23). Surely these legal minds also knew that every person was a sinner.

Jesus’ statement was a pointed reminder that even those who studied the law and sought to obey its every word were still guilty of breaking it (James 2:10–11). And because of that, all of them—not just the woman—faced a death sentence. This should prevent any honest person from initiating the execution.

9. At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there.

Heartfelt conviction of conscience leads to repentance (example: Acts 2:37). Far from insisting that they were correct, Jesus’ challengers accepted this humbling turn of events and *went away one at a time*. This movement started with the *older* accusers until Jesus was the only one left, suggesting something about wisdom that can come with age. Ironically, those who came to discredit Jesus and catch him in a trap were caught in their own trap and left without a sound.

The men who left were also the only witnesses to this crime. Without witnesses, no one was left in the crowd who was able to initiate punishment (Deuteronomy 13:9; 17:7). Thus, the question of whether Jesus would break Roman law for the sake of Jewish law was rendered void (see John 8:5, above). The *KJV* translation “in the midst” reminds us of the learners who were still present, observing Jesus’ interaction with the religious leaders and now with *the woman*. The lack of this phrase in the *NIV* emphasizes the intimacy of the conversation between Jesus and the woman.

C. Life-Changing Lesson (vv. 10–11)

10–11a. Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” “No one, sir,” she said.

Jesus’ response began with a pair of clarifying questions. Addressing the *woman* for the first time, Jesus’ rhetorical questions were intended to confirm that the accusers were gone. Her address *sir* stands in contrast to “Teacher” (John 8:4, above). While the previous title was used less than genuinely, the woman spoke to Jesus with respect.

11b. “Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.”

Jesus knew this woman’s sin, whether this particular accusation was true or not (example: John 4:16–19). Just like her accusers, the woman’s sin made her subject to death (see 8:7b–8, above). And being the Son of God, Jesus was entitled to enforce the death penalty, if he so chose (consider Hebrews 10:28–31). But Jesus gave the woman another option. He desired her to repent and thus *leave her life of sin*. In this act, we see an example of the choice between death in sin and life offered in Christ.

No further information is given regarding the woman's repentance. But based on other, similar interactions Jesus had, we might surmise that the woman did indeed find her heart changed by this interaction with the Lord (compare John 5:1–14).

II. Abraham's Cause to Rejoice (John 8:56–59)

A. Jesus' Day (vv. 56–58)

56. "Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad."

Given that Jesus just asserted that the crowd's actions showed them to be children of the devil, calling *Abraham* their *father* implies that, if they were really his children, they would react as Abraham did. The man had received the promise from God that his own family would bless the whole world (Genesis 12:1–3). This promise is fulfilled in Christ (Galatians 3:16), giving Abraham reason to rejoice that Jesus' day had finally come. By faith Abraham believed this would be so. Because of his hope in God's promise, Abraham *saw it and was glad* even without living in Jesus' time (Hebrews 11:8–12).

57. "You are not yet fifty years old," they said to him, "and you have seen Abraham!"

Given the antagonistic character of the conversation up to this point, it's no surprise that the Jews misunderstood what Jesus was saying. They knew Jesus was not even *fifty years old* in this time (compare Luke 3:23). He would need to be generations older than 50 to have *seen Abraham!* For context, Abraham was born about 2167 BC, which places his death at 1992 BC (Genesis 25:7). But readers of John's Gospel are well-aware that Jesus was not exaggerating his knowledge of Abraham—Jesus is from the beginning (John 1:1).

58. "Very truly I tell you," Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!"

Very truly draws attention to the truth of what Jesus was about to declare. Not only did he know *Abraham*; Jesus predated the man (compare John 1:1–5)! His claim here is weighty indeed. "I am" is God's formula for self-identification (Exodus 3:14; Isaiah 43:10; 45:18; etc.). For anyone to use this formula in the same way was blasphemy (47:4–11; Zephaniah 2:15). With this statement, Jesus' audience heard him claim to be God.

In the Gospel of John, we notice Jesus making frequent statements about himself that involve God's sacred name, I Am. For the sake of convenience, we can call these "the 'I am' sayings." These sayings take two forms. The first form occurs when Jesus simply applied God's divine name, I Am, directly to himself. He did this to stress his complete union with the Father (John 8:24, 28, 58; 13:19).

B. Not Jesus' Time (v. 59)

59. At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds.

Leviticus 24:16 states that anyone who blasphemes the name of the Lord must be put to death by stoning. Their reaction confirms that they understood Jesus' "I am" to be a claim of equality with God (John 8:58, above). But the crowd was unsuccessful in the moment because

Jesus hid himself, slipping away. The larger picture, however, makes clear that they were unable to stone Jesus because his time had not yet come (John 7:6–8).

Conclusion

A. Following I Am

Jesus was completely within his rights to condemn the adulterous woman, but he chose to offer mercy with his call to repentance. Jesus could have refrained from revealing himself as I am, but he chose instead to make himself known. We certainly benefit from Jesus' self-revelation and his merciful call to turn to him. Considering who Christ is and who he calls you to be, what repentance is necessary in your life? What "stonings" will you divert because of your love for Jesus? What rejoicing will you spread?

B. Prayer

Lord, we all have sinned and fallen short of your ways. Lay our hearts bare so that we might repent and sin no more. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

What cause has Jesus given *you* to rejoice?¹

¹ Lauren Parliament, Marsella Evans, and Andrew Wood, "[Jesus Prevents Two Stonings](#)," in *The NIV Standard Lesson Commentary, 2023–2024*, ed. Jane Ann Kenney, Ronald L. Nickelson, and Taylor Z. Stamps, vol. 30, *The NIV Standard Lesson Commentary* (Colorado Springs, CO: Standard Publishing, 2023), 33–39.