

## SM034 Caught in the Act of Sin!

The religious leaders of the people were frustrated and angry. For months they had observed Jesus and they did not like what they saw. He healed on the Sabbath. He did not ceremonially wash before his meals. He welcomed sinful people to dine with him. He offered them forgiveness on the spot, as if he had authority to do that.

Every time they brought up an objection to his work, he would reply with words of wisdom that they could not answer. When they complained that he healed on the Sabbath, Jesus told them that they performed circumcision on the Sabbath. Circumcision brought a child into the covenant with Abraham and made him officially part of the community of God's people. If they could bring a baby into the community of God's people on the Sabbath, why was it wrong for him to restore people to full health by healing them on the Sabbath? If their own sons attempted to cast out evil spirits from people, why was it wrong for him to cast out evil spirits? They had no answer for him.

And now, during the Feast of Tabernacles Jesus was teaching in the Temple. The people loved what he had to say about the kingdom of God. But the religious leaders hated it. They sent men to question him, but Jesus answered every question. They sent officers to arrest him, but when the officers arrived and heard him teach, they were left speechless and came back empty handed.

The leaders said, "Where is he? Where is Jesus? We sent you to arrest him and here you are before us without him?"

And the officers said, "We have never heard anyone speak the way this man speaks! And now many of the people are saying he is the Messiah and the prophet that Moses said would come!"

"Don't tell me that you have been led astray. You don't see any of us in this room believing in him do you? But this crowd of uneducated people, they are under a curse. They don't know God's Word."

But one of the leaders of the people spoke up for Jesus. His name was Nicodemus. He had visited Jesus one night many months before and had asked Jesus face to face about his teaching and the things Jesus said had stirred his heart.

Nicodemus had come politely and said, "Jesus, many of us believe you have come from God. No one can do these miracles you are doing without being from God."

But Jesus got right to the heart of the matter with Nicodemus and said, "Nicodemus. You must be born again. I know you long for the kingdom of God to come but you cannot enter the kingdom of God unless you are born again." Jesus, in so many words, told him that he had come for more than being a teacher in Israel. Jesus had come to change the hearts of people. Jesus had come to revolutionize lives from the inside out. People would not see the kingdom of God unless they received a rebirth and when Nicodemus asked how that could be, Jesus explained that he was talking about a spiritual rebirth, about a work of the Spirit of God.

Nicodemus' life was never the same after that encounter with Jesus and while his colleagues were deeply suspicious of Jesus and some had even concluded that Jesus must die, Nicodemus stood up for him and said:

“Our Law does not condemn a man unless it first hears from him and allows him to defend himself. You have already concluded that he is guilty of breaking the law but many of you have never even spoken to him and asked him to explain himself.”

“Nicodemus! Search the Scriptures! Nowhere does it say that a prophet arises out of Galilee. That is where he is from! He can't be from God if he is from Galilee. You are not from Galilee are you?” And many of the leaders laughed at the insult that was thrown at Nicodemus. But Nicodemus did not think it was funny and he left the meeting. There wasn't anything more to be said and so the meeting adjourned, but unknown to Nicodemus and to others was that some stayed and they plotted to destroy Jesus. And as they talked late into the night they came up with a plan to destroy him.

We don't know her name. We don't know how old she was. We don't know where she lived or what kind of upbringing she had or if she was in a marriage where she felt trapped. But the leaders in Jerusalem knew of her and they knew that she was an easy target for a man who wanted something on the side, for a man who was not content to be with his wife but who wanted to explore new areas of sexuality with other women.

That night she lay with a man who was not her husband. We don't know where her husband was, or if he was part of the sinister plot, or if he was out indulging in forbidden desires with someone else. The woman never enjoyed it. It seemed exotic and exciting at first, to be with a man who was not her husband, and it brought some sense of belonging and being loved. But when the man was finished, she would often be left alone and a deep sense of shame and guilt and emptiness would come over her. The same was true on this night. After she and the man had satisfied their desires, they slept together but sleep did not come easily for her. She felt ashamed. She felt lost, and she felt fear. She could not explain why she felt fear but something felt different about this encounter. The man who approached her insisted that he must have her that night and that he must stay with her.

Then she realized, “this was a trap.” She started to get up but it was too late. She heard footsteps outside her house and then the door burst open and several men, dressed in long, religious robes walked into the room. “Is this your husband?” the men demanded.

“You know very well he is not my husband,” she said.

“Then you know the Law. You shall not commit adultery. You are under arrest for breaking the Law of God. Take her away and hold her until that rabbi from Galilee comes back into the Temple. We have quite a surprise for him.”

“What about him?” the woman asked pointing to the man who was still on the bed. “It takes two to commit adultery.” But the leaders just sneered at her and nodded to the officers who seized her arms and led her to the jail that would hold her until the strange trial would begin.

Jesus had spent the night outside Jerusalem. He had gone to the Mount of Olives just to the east of the city. It was a beautiful place and from this location he could look down upon it from his little booth that he and others shared during the Feast of Tabernacles. But early in the morning he entered the city and the Temple. People saw him and he greeted them and he welcomed them. Then he began to teach them many things about the kingdom of God.

“The kingdom of God was not coming with a sword, but with seed. The kingdom of God was not coming to cut the bodies of men and bring them death. It was coming to penetrate the hearts of people and bring them life the way a seed penetrates soil and brings a fruitful plant into the world. The kingdom of God was not coming with a great show of power to dazzle the leaders and to scare away the Romans but it was coming in small steps and in small ways to change the lives of people and communities and nations from the inside out, just like a small mustard seed slowly grows into a large plant or just like yeast slowly but surely penetrates an entire lump of dough.”

Everything seemed to be going so well. The people were enjoying his words and Jesus was enjoying teaching in his Father’s temple. And then they heard a scream and some shouts.

“No, please, stop! This isn’t fair! This isn’t right!”

“Quiet woman and do as we say. You will get your trial!”

Many religious people were headed Jesus way. Some were old and had been in their positions of power for decades. Others were young and full of energy and zealous for the ancestral traditions of their people. In the midst was a woman, her hair loose around her shoulders, the way it should not be in public. Her body barely covered with a light robe, as if she had been pulled out of bed, and her face filled with anger and fear and hopelessness.

The crowd parted to let them through. They went up to Jesus and set the woman down right in front of him and said for all to hear.

“Teacher, this woman has been caught in adultery, in the very act. We are all witnesses. Now, in our Law, as you know, Moses commanded us to stone such women. And so we have brought her here to you for your counsel. What do you say we should do with her.”

The hearts of the religious leaders were filled with glee. They knew they had him. The woman before him had been caught sleeping with a man who was not her husband. This was not some vague sinner who could claim that she had repented. This was not some poor person who was lamenting mistakes in life to whom he could pronounce forgiveness. This was a woman who had a reputation and a woman who was a fresh sinner, who had just sinned and who had been caught just hours before in her sin.

And here was the trap. If Jesus offered forgiveness, as he had to so many, they could accuse him of not obeying the Law of Moses, and the people would not support him. They knew the Laws of God. They knew adultery was wrong and was punishable by death. And if Jesus did not uphold this Law, the leaders

knew the people would stop following him and they could then arrest him on the spot for counseling rebellion against this clear teaching.

But if Jesus did not forgive, then he would be seen as compromising his teaching. He had come offering salvation and forgiveness to all. He had come offering a fresh start to all. Could he offer a fresh start to this woman. But she was caught in the very act! She was caught defying the laws of the God of Israel.

Clearly Jesus was in a tough situation and when we come back we will find out what he said and what he did.

### **Interlude**

The religious leaders stood defiantly before Jesus. They had made their case powerful and simple. The woman had been caught just hours before in a bed of adultery.

The crowd who had been sitting and listening to Jesus now stood and drew near to see what Jesus would do.

The woman lay prostrate before Jesus weeping for the injustice that was done to her. She was just a tool in their hands to get at Jesus. They would sacrifice her life in order to accuse and kill this teacher. Yes, she was an adulterer but they were manipulators, and plotters, and schemers, and murderers. But they were not on trial. Nor was the man with whom she had sinned anywhere around. But she was just a woman and what could she say and what could she do? She was helpless. She was powerless.

Jesus looked upon the leaders. He looked upon the crowd. He looked upon the woman and then he stooped down and began to write something on the ground as if he weren't paying attention to what had just been said and done right in front of him.

The leaders watched for a moment and then in exasperation said again, "Jesus. We asked you a question, and as someone who wants to teach the people, we have a right to hear an answer from you. This woman has been caught in the very act of adultery. Moses commanded us to stone such women. We have brought her before you. Tell us what we should do."

Jesus stopped writing on the ground. He stood up again and looking directly into the faces of these men he said, "Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to cast a stone at her." And then he stooped back down and began writing on the ground again.

All became quiet. The leaders looked at one another and realized that their trap for Jesus had been sprung on them. They had caught the woman in the very act of adultery. But Jesus had caught them in the very act of deception and lies in order to kill. The Law that said "you shall not commit adultery" also said "You shall not murder" and "you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." They knew they were as guilty as she was and they knew that Jesus saw into their hearts.

The plan had been exposed. It was so easy for everyone to see anyway for if they caught the woman in the very act of adultery then they caught the man too but where was the guilty man who had slept with

this woman? But more than their misstep and oversight and glaring hole in their argument was the deep searing conviction they felt for their plotting and their scheming and their leading this woman into sin just in order to get at Jesus.

One by one the religious leaders walked away, starting with the wiser, older ones and ending with the young zealots who were men of action and followers and not very smart. One by one these men walked away, heads down and defeated, faces full of shame, and hearts full of turmoil. Oh, if only they had fallen on their faces before Jesus. Oh, if only they had fallen to the ground with the woman and asked her forgiveness and asked Jesus for mercy. How the story might have changed. But they were too proud for that. And so one by one, from the oldest to the youngest the men walked away.

All eyes watched them as they exited the Temple and then all eyes turned back to Jesus and to the woman who was still before him. What would Jesus do now? What would he say? She was guilty. She was not denying her sin.

Jesus stopped writing on the ground. He stood back up, looked upon the woman and said, "Woman, where are your accusers? Has no one condemned you?"

The woman stood up. She wiped the tears from her face. She looked around and saw that all the men were gone. Those moments when she was at the feet of Jesus and when she heard their words of condemnation had seemed like an eternity to her. But now as she looked around she saw that all of her accusers were gone and she said to Jesus with astonishment in her voice, "There is no one, Lord. They are all gone. The ones who have condemned me are gone."

And then the one who was sinless, the one who could have condemned her, the one who could have cast the first and the last stone at her said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go. From now on, sin no more."

And the woman wrapped her light garment around herself and with indescribable relief and astonishment and joy walked through the crowd and went home – a new person who had been touched by the grace of Jesus.

Friends, you know that this story is really a story about all of us. All of us are like the woman or like the religious leaders in the story. Which are you like? Are you like the the religious leaders who are critical and judging and trying to bring others down rather than restoring and helping those in need? If you are, if that is your tendency, prepare for Jesus to expose your hypocrisy and prepare to slink away as quietly as you can, unless, you fall before him and confess your sins and failures and ask for his mercy.

Most of us are probably like the woman. If we have not committed adultery with our bodies, the likelihood is great that we have committed adultery in our hearts. Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY';<sup>28</sup> but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart." And if it is not adultery, then it is something else. All of us have sinned.

What is your sin? What is your weakness? Do you remember what Jesus said on another occasion about this? He said, "It is not the things that come into the person that defile a person, but the things that come from the heart, and those defile the man. <sup>19</sup> For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders. <sup>20</sup> These are the things which defile the man. Jesus could have picked any other number of sins. There are so many. And we have committed them.

Yes, none of us can cast the first stone and all of us are like the woman who stands before Jesus guilty of our sins. In the final scene of our story the woman was left alone before Jesus. She who was full of sin was before him who was sinless. And whether we identify with the woman in the story or with the religious leaders who walked away in shame doesn't really matter because ultimately you and I will stand before Jesus with our sins exposed before him.

And you and I must realize that there is really only one opinion that counts and one opinion we need to worry about. It's not our accusers. It's not our fellow humans. It is the opinion and the verdict of Jesus who is the Judge of all for God has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through Jesus whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.

Jesus is Lord. Jesus is the Judge and he is the Lord and the judge because he has risen from the dead but I have indescribable good news for you. When he died, he died for our sins that we might be forgiven. And when he rose it was proof that nothing more had to be done to pay for our sins. It is as if he were stoned for the woman. When he took the nails in his hands and side it was for her sins and your sins and mine. And when he rose from the grave, it was proof that everything that needed to be done to save us from condemnation had been done.

And to this woman he said, "I do not condemn you. Go and do not engage in this activity again. Go and do not sin, but you may go and you may now live in freedom."

And to us he says, "I do not condemn you." And when he says "go and sin no more" to us he means that we are to go into a new life and into a new way where we learn to follow God and learn to live in obedience to him.

And so the woman left the presence of Jesus in the temple that day as a new person. The religious leaders left the presence of Jesus in the temple that day but they were not changed. The woman humbled herself. The men remained proud. The woman heard the freeing words of Jesus. The men could have heard such words if they had remained and begged Jesus for mercy but they chose to walk away from the presence of Christ.

And that is a picture of the whole world. Some remain before Jesus and wait for his word of mercy. Some walk away from him and harden their hearts. And some will walk away for eternity and never hear his offer of peace and forgiveness because of the stubbornness of their soul.

Which example will you follow today?