

Living Word Small Group Study Guide

January 26, 2020 – February 1, 2020

Sermon Series: You Be the Judge

Week Four: “Neither Do I Condemn You”

Study groups can choose to use the daily Scripture readings and associated questions from either the current or previous week’s Daily Study Guide, or to focus on the Scripture reading from Sunday’s sermon. This study guide delves more deeply into the Scripture from the Sunday sermon.

Suggested Opening Prayer:

Both the opening and closing prayer are offered as suggestions. Feel free to offer spontaneous prayer instead.

Almighty God, in every age You have called out men and women to be Your faithful servants. We believe You have now called us to join that great company who seek to follow You. Bless us today and always with a clear vision of Your call, and strengthen us to fulfill the ministry assigned to us. We pray in the name of Christ. Amen.

This Week’s Sermon Theme:

At the end of the interaction between Jesus and the woman caught in adultery is Grace. Though there is judgment, it doesn’t hold out a final sentence. Can we imitate Christ in the same way?

Sunday Scripture Reading: John 8:2-11 (A group member should read the passage aloud)

For Group Discussion:

What does the text actually SAY?

The goal of this discussion is to make sure group members understand the actual content of the passage.

Where and when does this passage take place? (8:2)

Who is initially present? Who joins them? (8:2-3)

Where do the teachers and Pharisees position the woman? (8:3)

What is the woman’s crime? What is the standard punishment? (8:4-5)

Why did the Pharisees and teachers confront Jesus with this issue? (8:6a)

What is Jesus’ initial response? (8:6b)

What do the teachers and Pharisees do after Jesus' initial response? (8:7a)

What is Jesus' second response? (8:7b)

What does Jesus do after his second response? (8:8)

What happens as a result of Jesus response? (8:9a)

Who remains in the final scene (8:9b)

What does Jesus ask the woman privately? (8:10)

How does the woman respond? (8:11a)

What is Jesus' judgment of the case? (8:11b)

What does Jesus' finally command the woman to do? (8:11c)

What questions does the text raise for us?

The goal of this discussion is to allow group members to respond to their own emotions and reactions related to the passage. Questions are suggestions, but open discussion is encouraged.

Identify the various emotions on display in the story. Think about things like anger, empathy, patience, and others. Who exhibits which emotions?

What do you think "all the people gathered" to hear Jesus teach thought about this intrusion by the teachers and Pharisees?

Does the story imply that the woman IS actually guilty of adultery? How?

The teachers and Pharisees were "using this question as a trap". How exactly was this scenario supposed to trap Jesus? What did they expect him to say?

What do you think, or what suggestions have you heard, about what exactly it was Jesus wrote on the ground?

What is being implied by the story pointing out that the older witnesses to the scene left first after Jesus' response?

Who do you relate to most in the story? Have you ever been in the position of the teachers and Pharisees? Have you ever been in the position of the woman?

Who is the teaching aimed at? Do you think the intent of the story is more to console a guilty person that there is forgiveness, or to convict a hypocritical person to look at themselves first, before condemning another?

Does Jesus' forgiveness of the woman come with expectations? What are they? How does that make you feel?

Commentary on the text:

The goal of this section is to provide further background that provides context for the content of the passage.

Read also: John 7:24; John 8:15-16; John 8:59; Deuteronomy 22:22-24; Exodus 23:1; Exodus 23:7; Jeremiah 17:13;

Scholars today universally agree that this story was not part of the original text of the Gospel of John. This is why nearly all Bibles today set the story apart from the main body of the gospel, accompanied by asterisks explaining why it is set apart. It is not found in the most ancient copies of the Greek New Testament that have been discovered, or even in the earliest translations into other languages. The manuscripts that it IS found in vary widely in the actual wording of the passage. It is never cited in the Christian writings of ancient theologians before the tenth century. However, that is not to suggest that the story is not authentic! Many scholars today believe that the story is simply one that continued to circulate widely in the oral tradition concerning Jesus (like all the stories of Jesus did before eventually being written down), but that for unknown reasons escaped being recorded by Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. At some later time, a scribe likely made the decision to include it here due to its thematic connection to John 7:24, 8:15-16 (all concerning Jesus teaching on judgment), or perhaps even as a metaphoric parallel to the overarching story of Jesus throughout John 7 and 8 – notice that in 8:46, Jesus' accusers are unable to prove Jesus' guilt (as the woman's accusers fail to do) and that in 8:59, Jesus escapes an intended stoning (just as the woman does).

The woman was accused of adultery. According to Old Testament law, as given in Deuteronomy 22:22-24), that could mean one of two things. Either, she was a married woman who slept with someone who was not her husband (Deuteronomy 22:4 – “they must die”), or she was a single woman who was “betrothed” (promised) to another man and the girl was in a town and did not scream for help (Deuteronomy 22:23-24 – “you shall take them to the gate of the town and stone them to death”). The Mishnah – ancient Jewish interpretation of the Law of Moses – suggested a more lenient form of execution by strangulation for married adulterers, reserving stoning for cases of adultery involving the betrothed, suggesting this woman might have been a young girl, betrothed to another. However, linguists point out that the Greek word used here in the original texts is used exclusively of married adulterers throughout other Greek writings from the time, suggesting the woman was married.

Given their portrayal earlier in the Gospel, it is clear the teachers and Pharisees are not seeking Jesus' actual advice. They seek to discredit Him publicly, multiple ways. First, these leaders were offended that Jesus regularly ate with people the Law judged as unclean or sinful, in apparent disregard for the Law. Now, by bringing a woman before Him who had clearly committed sin, they were putting Jesus in the position of either a) upholding the Law, and thereby contradicting His way of life and preaching; or b) maintaining his outlook and preaching and denying Moses, demonstrating Himself to be a lawbreaker who must be brought to justice himself. Additionally, at this time, Jews did not have the right to actually carry out capital sentences – that was reserved to the Roman authorities. Any answer Jesus could seemingly give would generate animosity a) among the Jews for not upholding the Law; or b) with the Romans, for pronouncing a sentence illegal for Him to pronounce. In either case, it is clear the intent is to lay a trap impossible for Jesus to escape from.

What did Jesus write in the dust? There is no way of knowing, but people have made guesses for centuries. Some say He was simply doodling, to bide His time to see what would transpire. Others note

that Roman judges always wrote out their decision on a case for public viewing before actually pronouncing it. Others point to Exodus 23:1 and Exodus 23:7, which were often cited in Jesus' day to prevent malicious witnesses from bringing charges against someone, and the Pharisees and teachers of the Law malicious toward Jesus. Still others believe He may have written the actual text from Deuteronomy, which required the woman AND the man to be killed – suggesting that Jesus was questioning why only the woman had been brought to Him. Finally, from ancient times, writers have noted the relevance of Jeremiah 17:13 – “Those who turn away from you will be written in the dust because they have forsaken the LORD, the spring of living water”. If so, Jesus' writing in the dust would be a metaphorical way of suggesting the accusers are those referenced by the Jeremiah text.

Even if this action is ambiguous to us, the words He speaks make His intention clear. Jesus' words forced the accusers to examine their own behavior, their own motivation, and indeed, their own lives. And each and every person present failed the test, convicted by their individual consciences. Certainly, the writer of the passage intended the reader to undertake the same self-analysis. As described in the first paragraph above, Jesus had already taught His followers to stop judging based on appearances only. Just as Jesus had taught before, hypocrisy in judging others is as significant a sin as the sins we are tempted to judge. Everyone must examine their own life before passing judgment on another, and all of us, if we are honest, will find ourselves guilty.

The significance of Jesus' final words to the woman cannot be overstated. What we have here is a story of God's infinite grace, and a reminder that God's will is that sinners be saved, not that sinners suffer the due penalty for their sins. Jesus pronounces forgiveness, and, as for all of us, that forgiveness is undeserved. But Jesus also commands the woman, “Go now, and leave your life of sin”. She is not called upon to simply never commit adultery again – she is called into a transformed life, a life no longer defined by sin. The experience of God's mercy should lead us away from sin, into God's life.

Final Thoughts for Discussion:

The goal of this section is to get people thinking and talking about how the passage should affect their behavior after they leave the group.

Who are you tempted to condemn? Who are you willing to extend forgiveness to? What distinguishes the two groups for you?

How have you experienced God's mercy in your own life? How has that experience formed your response to the sin of others?

Are there areas in your life where you rationalize away the reality of your sin – “it's not as bad as” – while still demanding punishment for “bigger” sins?

How are the grace of forgiveness of sin, and the grace that gives new life in the Holy Spirit, related in your life? Have you taken to heart Jesus' command to “Go now, and leave your life of sin”?

Suggested Closing Prayer:

Holy God, form in us the heart of Jesus – the heart that is quick to save and slow to condemn. Show us the places in our own lives where we demand judgment against others while seeking pardon for ourselves. Create in us the same mind that was in Christ Jesus. Amen.