

# A Guilty Cheat

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- [ 0 : 00 ]     Good morning everyone. I'm Ian and our first Bible reading is Psalm 130, which was originally sung by pilgrims going to the temple in Jerusalem. Out of the depths I cry to you, Lord. Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy.
- If you, Lord, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, so that we can, with reverence, serve you.
- I wait for the Lord. My whole being waits, and in his word I put my hope. I wait for the Lord. More than watchmen wait for the morning.
- More than watchmen wait for the morning. Israel, put your hope in the Lord, for with the Lord is unfailing love, and with him is full redemption.
- He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins. Hello, church. My name is Lisa, and I'll be bringing us our second reading today, which is from the book of John, chapter 7, verse 53, through to chapter 8, verse 11.
- [ 1 : 18 ]     After the reading, I will invite you to join me in prayer before David brings us his sermon. So, John, chapter 7, verse 53. Then each went to his own home, but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.
- At dawn, he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered round him, and he sat down to teach them. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery.
- They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the law, Moses commanded us to stone such woman.
- Now, what do you say? 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, he straightened up and said to them, If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.
- [ 2 : 25 ]     Again, he stooped down and wrote on the ground. 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.
- Jesus straightened up and asked her, Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you? No one, sir, she said. Then neither do I condemn you, Jesus declared.
- Go now and leave your life of sin. Let us pray. Father God, as we draw around your word today, my prayer is that each of us would learn more of who Jesus is and the love he showers on every individual, regardless of how broken they are.
- I pray that you would use David for your heavenly purposes as he preaches today and that the message he brings us would be centred on the truth of the gospel and that it would resonate with all who are listening, regardless of where they are in their journey.
- Be near to us all, I pray. Amen. I wonder, do any of you have friends who are pranksters?

[ 3 : 43 ] The famous novelist Mark Twain seems to have been one. He once decided to play a trick on a dozen of his friends. He arranged for each of them to receive a telegram that bore this simple message. Flee at once.

All is discovered. Twain reports that upon receiving this telegram, all 12 of them left town immediately. Now, it's a funny story, but it also raises some serious questions.

What were they so afraid of? What did they have to hide? You may not be like Mark Twain, the prankster, but I suspect that there might be something of those 12 friends in each of us.

Imagine for a second that you, one morning, wake up, you check the post and you find there's a letter. You open up the letter and you see that there is a message written on nice fancy notepaper. The message reads, All is discovered.

Flee. What comes into your mind that that could possibly be referring to in your life, in your business? I suspect that all of us, if we're honest, have some skeletons or at least a bone or two lurking in the back of our closets.

[ 4 : 46 ] Things that we've locked away. Things that we've tried to forget about. Things that we've hoped no one will ever discover and find out about us. Nevertheless, the Bible tells us that there is someone who sees all things.

Who knows about all the things that have happened behind closed doors and in the secret places. Someone who is not deceived by any of our cover-ups. He is God. But he's also the only one who can help us.

The goodness I've got to share with you this morning is that if you ever wonder, could an almighty and holy God love me after what I've said, after what I've thought, after what I've done or not done, then the answer can be found in John's gospel.

If you ever want to know what God is like, what God thinks, then all you have to do is look at the person of Jesus, who is the face and the heart of God, fleshed out for all the world to see. Today we're going to be looking at a passage in John chapter 8.

It's the famous story of Jesus' encounter with a woman caught in adultery. To help us get inside this story and to witness the wonderful way that Jesus relates to a sinner who has been just caught in the act, I'm going to preach this message to you as a narrative sermon.

[ 5 : 59 ] That means that we're going to imagine that we're listening to someone who was there that day, someone in the crowd, and we're going to take that person's first person perspective and hear what they heard and see what they saw.

The next voice that you hear in a moment will be the voice of someone, one of the men who was in the crowd that day. That day is still crystal clear in my memory.

I was there in the temple courtyard with Jesus. Not as a Jesus follower. In those days, I was a Jesus hater. He was infuriating. Going around calling himself the Son of God.

Maybe if he had stuck to the title Messiah, then we could have lived with that. But he dared to make himself equal with God, calling God his Father. That was blasphemy to my Jewish ears. After all, every day we recite the Shema from Deuteronomy.

Shema'i Israel. Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad. Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Even my kids knew that from the very first day of Sabbath school in the synagogue.

[ 7 : 02 ] Who did Jesus think he was? There was something else deeply unsettling about Jesus. Whenever you spent time around him, you came away feeling dirty, unclean.

He always showed you up like a white glove that's just being rubbed over the top of your wardrobe. It's not that Jesus pranced around pretending to be holier than thou. Leave that to the Pharisees.

They had that covered. It was instead that Jesus just radiated holiness effortlessly. I disciplined myself for a lifetime of Torah obeying, Sabbath keeping, tithe giving, kosher eating.

But it all felt so empty, so inadequate compared with Jesus. What did he have that we didn't have? After two and a half years of that, many of us were fed up.

We'd had enough. We were determined to put an end to Jesus, to silence him one way or another. We had to find some way to catch him out and destroy him. And that's when we found out about her.

[ 8 : 05 ] I didn't know her name. She was nothing to me. She was disposable, a means to an end. Our wives had heard the gossip on the grapevine of a local woman engaged in an adulterous affair.

And so as we schemed and plotted, she became the bait for our trap to ensnare Jesus. Then the fateful day came when we knew that this woman could be found in an illicit rendezvous with her lover.

As soon as our lookouts give the signal, signal we got to work, breaking in through the door. We took them by surprise. Without a moment to think or hide or run, we grabbed her. We dragged her through the streets, kicking up dust in the air, screaming at the top of her lungs for someone to help her.

As we dragged her through the marketplace, she was humiliated in the eyes of her friends, her neighbors, her family. People started to shout slurs at her. Her state of undress revealed just what kind of woman she really was.

Arriving in the temple courtyard, we marched straight up to Jesus and we threw her headfirst down at his feet. Then we formed an impenetrable ring around the two of them. There was going to be no way for them to escape.

[ 9 : 12 ] Not either of them. The trap was set. We were ready. A few of us had even brought along our own stones for the occasion. Jesus looked around at us as if he was demanding we explain the reason for all the commotion.

And so one of the scribes spoke up, Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. At this there was a hiss from the crowd caused her to hide her face in shame and terror.

And then our spokesperson pressed his attack against Jesus. Now in the law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. But what do you say, Jesus? Silence descended.

The dust in the air began to settle and every eye was on Jesus. What would he do next? In that tense moment I rubbed my hands with glee.

We had got him. We had caught him between a rock and a hard place. He acts like he's the world's greatest humanitarian. Healing the sick, showing compassion to the poor, drinking and eating with tax collectors and sinners.

[ 10 : 15 ] Yet he also claims he's the son of God. The word of God in human form. And our test was going to play those two things off against each other. If in compassion Jesus sided with this woman over and against the word and law of God, well so much for his claim to be the son of God.

However, if instead he endorsed the law of God and called for her to be killed, well then he was defying Rome and Rome's prohibition against us executing anyone. Either way, discredited in Jewish eyes or dangerous in Roman eyes, surely Jesus was finished.

But as we waited with bated breath for him to reply, Jesus did something rather unexpected. He bent down and began to write in the sand. The crowd started to murmur.

People started pushing and jostling to see and I'm not the tallest of people. I was at the back of the crowd. I couldn't quite see what he was writing. In the years since, I've often wondered what was he writing? Was it perhaps the law, the Ten Commandments that he was writing out with his finger, literally preparing the ground for what came next?

Or perhaps did he write out the words of Leviticus chapter 20 verse 20? If a man commits adultery with another man's wife, both the adulterer and the adulteress are to be put to death.

[ 11 : 30 ] You see, the law recognizes that it takes two to tango. We were acting unjustly by condemning this woman while we had let the man off the hook. Or maybe, just maybe, Jesus was just doodling.

Wouldn't put it past him. Either way, what mattered was not what Jesus wrote, but rather, where he was as he wrote. You see, Jesus was kneeling down on the ground.

He was down on the same level as that woman. He was in close proximity to her as she cowered in fear. It was as if he was reassuring her with his presence, you're not alone.

I'm here with you. You don't have to be afraid. Jesus had made himself her personal shield and defender. While we looked down on this woman with moral condescension and condemnation, Jesus instead physically condescended to her to show her mercy and grace.

And then Jesus suddenly turned the tables on us. Decisively, he stood up for her as her advocate, this nameless voice, this powerless woman, fearlessly looking us in the eyes.

[ 12 : 39 ] He issued the challenge. Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone against her. A shiver went down my spine.

It seemed to shudder through the whole crowd. Those words pierced us through with conviction. Sure, we all try to be good people, but none of us could pretend to be perfect.

But even more unnerving was the look in his eyes. It was like he was reading us like a scroll, shining a light into the darkest recesses of our minds and our hearts. And I remember how he looked at me in that moment.

In that moment, I felt so naked and ashamed. I was exposed. It was as if Jesus could see through my righteous exterior and he could search the darkest recesses of my mind.

All of my past sins and shames, they were all exposed to in his sight. The scriptures tell us in Psalm 44 that only God knows the secret things of the heart.

[ 13 : 39 ] And yet here was Jesus and he seemed to be able to know the things that only God could know. All the times I've looked at a woman, not lovingly, but lustfully, wanting to use her for my own gratification.

All the times in my imagination when I've mentally undressed a woman as she passed by in the street. All the times when I've compared and preferred other women to my wife. Somehow, Jesus could see it all.

And in Jesus' sight, I was exposed. Suddenly, it came back into my mind what I had read in the news papyrus some years before, a quote from Jesus in his sermon on the mount.

At the time I dismissed it, it just sounded like some more crazy, extreme Jesus talk. But now I had new insight into his words. You've heard it said, you shall not commit adultery.

But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. It began to dawn on me in that moment that in God's sight I was no better than her, that I was as much a sexual sinner as she was.

[ 14 : 47 ] You have a saying in your country, don't you, that people who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones? Well, here I was with a stone in my hand ready to throw it at her. But suddenly, the strength to throw it had ebbed away out of my arm.

It was weighed down with guilt. That stone had my name on it, not hers. Having said all that needed to be said, Jesus then bent down again and resumed drawing in the sand.

All around with disgruntled murmurs, the crowd began to disperse. First, some of the old boys slinked off, perhaps because the longer you've lived, the more regrets you have to look back on and remember. I didn't want to be the first to admit defeat, but neither did I want to be the last standing around looking like an idiot.

And so I retreated too, finding a nearby pillar in the courtyard I hid, embarrassed, ashamed, convicted. But I was still close enough to hear what happened next.

After we'd all left, Jesus looked up. He and the woman were now left alone. Like a good rabbi sees in a teachable moment, he asked her a question. Woman, where are they?

[ 15 : 57 ] Has no one condemned you? At first, all she could do was sob. And when she found the breath to speak, she just sounded like someone waking up from a horrible nightmare.

She couldn't believe it herself. She replied, no one, Lord. But perhaps there was a lingering question in her mind. What was Jesus going to do with her?

If anyone was sinless, if anyone was justified to condemn her, surely it was him. But without a pause, Jesus delivered his verdict in a voice that sounded like the judge of the living and the dead.

He said, neither do I condemn you. Now go and sin no more. Her face lit up. Her death sentence was pardoned.

A fresh start in life had been granted. Like King Solomon of old, Jesus had rendered his judgment with the perfect balance of grace and truth. He didn't minimize her sin and yet he urged her to live in grateful repentance.

[ 17 : 01 ] But although Jesus let her go, that didn't mean that he let her sin go. I didn't realize that at the time. But with the benefit of hindsight, now I see that what Jesus did that day, the reason why Jesus was able to say, neither do I condemn you and let her go, was because Jesus was willing to stay behind and be condemned in her place and satisfy the demands of the law that she had broken.

You see, that day in the temple courtyards was just a little preview of the events that would follow just months down the road at the next Passover. When Jesus risked his life bending down and drawing alongside that condemned woman, it was a rehearsal of all that he had come to do for all of us.

Now I see that in coming down into this world as a human, God was coming down onto our level. He was drawing alongside us as the friend, not the judge of sinners. Now I see that Jesus condemned to death on the cross.

He was dying in our place, suffering the penalty that we deserve so that we might live. Now I see that Jesus died and rose again not only to save this adulterous woman, but to save a hypocrite like me.

And if there's hope for her, then there's hope for me. There's hope for all of us. Now many years later as an old man I need to tell my story one last time.

[ 18 : 27 ] It's too good to be forgotten in the sands of time. That day in the temple with Jesus changed my life forever. And now as I come to the end of life's journey, I know that he who waits for me beyond death's door waits to greet me with those same sweet words that I heard that day.

I do not condemn you. My regrets cannot imprison me to the grave. My sins cannot sink me down to hell. For I have a saviour in Jesus who has saved me from all my sins.

And I pray that my story will help you too. Although your life in this world will be marked by ups and downs, joys and regrets, successes and shames, I pray that you will take hold of Jesus' promise too.

For God so loved the world that he gave us his one and only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not come into the world to condemn the world, but so that the world might be saved through him.

That's my story. Shalom and amen.