

“TOØ MESSY” / Series 2: Loving and Loathing
Sermon 2: “An Adulteress Woman”
October 18, 2015

That was powerful! I’m so glad you’re here. Let’s start by playing a mean little game. I hope you were handed a card when you came in with some names on it, and scale by each name. 1-10: 1 = “They disgust me”; 10 = “One of my heroes”; 5 = neutral, or “Who is it?” I’m going to flash their pictures on screen, and either with a pencil or with your mind, rate each person from 1-10. Are you ready?

- Hillary Clinton
- Donald Trump
- Miley Cyrus
- Justin Bieber
- Joel Osteen
- Oprah Winfrey
- Tiger Woods
- Tim Tebow
- Caitlyn Jenner
- Kim Davis

Chances are, though you probably have met none of them personally, you probably still have some pretty strong emotions about most of them. But here’s the deal: how we judge people says just as much about what is in us, as about what is in them. You buy that? How we judge people reveals as much about us as about them.

And sometimes ... sometimes we mess up pretty badly when we judge people. You see, sometimes we judge people by their sins, but we give different sins different scores. On the other side of your card is a list of sins. And I want you to score them from 1 to 10. 1 = pretty small, it doesn’t matter much. 10 = terrible, awful, horrible. Here they are, 1-10.

- You steal a pen from work.
- You embezzle money from work (a lot of it!).
- You tell a white lie (you tell her she looks great, and she ... really ... doesn’t).
- You slander a political opponent (you twist their words to make them sound stupid).
- You get a little drunk.
- You get drunk a lot (and you mess over your family).
- You commit adultery.
- You gossip about someone else’s adultery.
- You dishonor your parents. You’re probably wondering, how big the dishonor?
- You molest a child.

We weigh sins, don't we? And we weigh people based on the weight of their sins. But here's the deal, how we weigh sins, and how we weigh sinners says as much about us as it does about them. In fact I can probably learn a whole about you by looking at how you rated these people, and these sins.

Now ... we are going to dig into a story of Jesus today about some people who were judging, and what Jesus says about it. So if you have a Bible or a Bible app on your phone or tablet, find John 8. We are going to jump in at verse 2; John 8.2. Now when you find it, it may look a little strange. Some Bibles will actually put this story in the margin. Others put it in italics, or put brackets around it. That's because this Jesus story isn't in some of the earliest manuscripts of John. Now scholars are quite sure this is an authentic Jesus story; but it looks like it was added to the gospel of John sometime after John was written. It is in your Bible because we believe it is real Jesus; but it is set apart because it probably wasn't originally part of John. But because it is real Jesus, let's dig in.

John, who was one of Jesus' disciples, says: "Early one morning Jesus was back again at the Temple. A crowd soon gathered, and he sat down and taught them. As he was speaking, the teachers of religious law and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery. They put her in front of the crowd. "Teacher," they said to Jesus, "this woman was caught in the act of adultery. The law of Moses says to stone her. What do you say?" They were trying to trap him into saying something they could use against him, but Jesus stooped down and wrote in the dust with his finger."

(v 2) So Jesus is in Jerusalem, the capital, and he goes to the temple, which is kind of church central for all the Jews. And the temple had these porches along the outer walls where teachers would teach. And Jesus (who was a teacher) was there early. Now you need to note the time, it will be important. This is early – first thing in the morning. And Jesus is sitting – which was traditional: the teacher would sit and the students would gather around. Kind of the opposite of the way we're doing it.

(v 3) And the religious bigwigs drag this adulteress over to Jesus. Now we can read between the lines a little here. This girl was either engaged or

married, because in that day adultery was a violation of another man's fiancé or wife. If a married man had a fling with a single girl, they didn't call it adultery – though Jesus would. So this girl is either engaged or she is married, to someone other than the guy they found her with. And if this girl is engaged, she could have been as young as 12 or 13 – about the age of my granddaughter. Just a kid! Now that would add a bit more pathos to what is about to go down, wouldn't it?

Now they know this girl is an adulteress because they caught her in the act. So you know her embarrassment, her shame is intense. They probably didn't give her the time, or the courtesy to clean herself up, or to dress herself up. She is out there exposed for everybody to gawk at.

Now according to their law, there had to be two witnesses ... two eyewitnesses. Do you suppose they had been stalking her, waiting for her to mess up? And remember, it's early in the morning. Now it's possible she was fooling around early in the morning. But it's more likely, isn't it, that they had caught her the night before, and they were holding her, waiting for Jesus so they could spring their trap?

Because that's what this was all about ... setting a trap for Jesus. The girl is just a pawn. Which tells us a lot about these accusers, these religious bigwigs. We can deduce they were arrogant men, ruthless and cunning and calculating. You see they didn't care about this woman. They didn't care about her shame, or her reputation, or her future ... she's just a pawn, she is expendable. That's how we treat people sometimes who are caught in big sins; we treat them like they have forfeited the right to be treated as a person. And these twits didn't care about the guy at all. He's not even part of the story. Either he was faster than they were, and he got away. Or they ranked her sin as greater than his (which we still do sometimes). Or else, he was just irrelevant to their trap.

Because it was Jesus they are after. They figured they could put him in a no-win. You see, their law was pretty clear.

- Leviticus says, "If a man commits adultery with his neighbor's wife, both the man and the woman who have committed adultery must be put to death." (Leviticus 20.10)

- The law says the same thing in Deuteronomy. It says, “If a man is discovered committing adultery, both he and the woman must die. In this way, you will purge Israel of such evil.” (Deuteronomy 22.22)

So the law is crystal clear. And if Jesus tells them to let the girl go, he is contradicting the law, and all the people who respected the law would lose their respect for him. That would be a win for his enemies. On the other hand, if he told them to kill her, he was doubly messed over. You see, Jesus had this reputation for compassion, and mercy, and grace. Messy people simply loved him. And if he told these religious bigwigs to follow the law and kill her, messy people might push him away. And that would be a win for his enemies too. And it probably would tick off the Romans too. The Romans didn't let the Jews execute their own sinners. So if Jesus told the Jews to kill the girl, the Romans could come after him. They had him hosed, they thought.

But for us the story isn't as much about Jesus evading their trap, it's more about exposing their hearts. Because this story tells us a whole lot about their hearts, doesn't it? The fact is, they are not that interested in God's truth, and they are certainly not interested in God's grace. They just want to take down Jesus. The girl is just a pawn, the guy is irrelevant. These are ruthless, cunning, calculating men. Kind of like ... a lot of us, sometimes. Because how we judge people reveals as much about us, as it does about them. So ... where do you fit in the story?

Now I want to press pause for just a minute and refocus in on the sins that are on display in this story. The girl's sin is the most obvious. She is not only caught in the act, by two witnesses, her sin is one of the biggies. Her sin is a 10 in that world. According to their law, it called for death by stoning. And I'm not talking about little rocks. The Jewish lawbooks tell us they were to dig a pit and throw the girl into the pit. If the fall killed her, so be it. If the fall didn't kill her, the witnesses, the ones who caught her were to take really big rocks and throw them down on the girl, trying to crush her. If she survived their stones, the rest of the people would join in, until she's dead. This was serious stuff.

Now we don't take adultery quite so seriously today. We know it's a sin, a serious sin. We know that it's a sin that tears up marriages, and tears up kids. And occasionally, if it's the husband or the wife who catches them in

the act, there is some serious violence. But in our world it's not a sin that calls for the death penalty – unless you live in some part of the world governed by sharia law. In fact, for some folks in our part of the world, it's really not that big a sin at all. After all, you have to follow your heart, right? And it's just sex, right? By the way: the answer to questions is, No; you don't have to follow your heart, and it's not just sex. But to get some idea of what these guys thought of adultery, think of a serial rapist, think of a child molester. That's how big this sin was to them. This girl had just sunk to the bottom of the barrel.

But what if we try to change the focus and look at the sins of her accusers from God's perspective. You see ... this is hard for us to get, this is hard for us to process. Even though we weigh sins and see some of them as little, and others as big; from God's perspective every sin is disobedience and every sin drives a wedge between us and God. Different sins affect us differently, but all sins separate us from God. Sin always builds a wall between us and God. You get that; the same is true for you in other relationships. If your child lies to you, and you know it's a lie, it damages the relationship...it builds a wall...things aren't as they should be. That doesn't mean you don't love the child...it does mean you don't trust them like you did. If a coworker takes money from your desk, and you find out, does that impact your relationship? Does it create a distance? You see, that's what sin does...it damages relationships. And every sin damages our relationship with God.

So ... God was just as disgusted with the sins of this girl's accusers. They were arrogant, ruthless, cunning, calculating men – they were sinners, they were sinning. They didn't care about the girl, she was just a pawn – that attitude is sin. They didn't care about the misbehavior of her partner at all – that's sin too. They act like they are all about God's truth, but they blow off God's grace – that's sin too ... it's a big one. God says, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." They were all about sacrifice, they were all about sacrificing her to preserve their purity; but they are clueless when it comes to mercy. So Jesus has some work to do... in us – because they are us too.

So here's what Jesus does, verse 6. John says, "They were trying to trap him into saying something they could use against him, but Jesus stooped

down and wrote in the dust with his finger.” Now, you wouldn’t believe how many people have tried to figure out what Jesus was writing.

- Some guys think maybe he was jotting down the 10 commandments; not just the “don’t commit adultery” part, but all 10 of them. Because none of us score too well when you count all 10.
- Others think he was doing what judges used to do back then. They would write what they were going to say, and then they would say it. So he’s writing his verdict. Doubt it!
- Others think he was just doodling, he was making them curious, he was making them sweat. Maybe.
- One of my favorites is that he was writing down their sins; and as they watched him, they started squirming. Maybe he was letting them know, he knew. He knew what they were doing, he knew what they were thinking, he knew what they were hiding.

I don’t know. John says, “They kept demanding an answer, so he stood up again and said, “All right, but let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone!” Then he stooped down again and kept writing.” (7-8) Let the one of you who has never sinned, let the one of you who is without sin ... That’s really what he says! “Whichever one of you is perfect, whichever one of you is sinless ... here’s a rock, crush her with it.” Can any of you, throw this rock?

Now, if you already know this story, have you ever wondered why Jesus didn’t chuck this rock? He could have! In fact he’s the only one ever who could have. But it would have been kind of counterproductive, wouldn’t it? Since in a few months, maybe, he was going to take the stoning for her. Because that’s what the cross was all about, wasn’t it? On his cross Jesus was telling this girl, “I’ll take this one for you... and any others that might be separating you from the God who loves you this much.” So ... why is it that even though the only one who had the right to stone her didn’t, so many of us Jesus followers still do? And do you think that may have something to do with the fact that so many of the messy people who loved Jesus, push us away?

Now this is just a little side path. I don’t want to get bogged down here, but I think I need to pause here for just a moment. Jesus said, “Whoever is without sin, let him (or her) cast the first stone.” Does that mean that we don’t have the right to call sin “sin”? Does that mean that we don’t have to

right to call sin “wrong,” to judge sin? Some people think so. Some people uses verses like this to tell us that because we are sinners, we don’t have the right to challenge their sin. But I don’t think that’s the point. Jesus was all about grace ... but he was also all about truth – because he loves us. And as Jesus followers were are all about grace ... and we are also all about truth. Because we love people. Truth, with grace. In just a moment Jesus is going to tell this girl to stop it, to go and “sin no more.” That’s truth. Right after he says, “I’m not going to condemn you.” That’s grace. And that’s our job too – to try to help each other stop sinning (because sin corrupts, sin destroys what God loves) – that’s truth, but it’s also our job to forgive, to show mercy – that’s grace.

I know it’s hard, but we can hate the sin, and love the sinner. We can challenge the sin, and still value the sinner. And we start by admitting that we are sinners too. I know that you may have sinned some sins that I haven’t sinned, yet. But I have sinned some sins you haven’t sinned yet too. And all our sins are equally effective at separating us from God. We are all in this together. God owes us nothing. Everything good we have is grace. We are just the graced doing whatever we can to help other messy twits find grace. So if you want to pick up a stone, attach it to a boomerang, okay?

Anyway, here’s what happens. John says, “When the accusers heard this, they slipped away one by one, beginning with the oldest, until only Jesus was left with the woman.” (9) So they slithered away, oldest first. Which is kind of remarkable to me, because sometimes the oldest are the cruelest. Not always, but sometimes we get hard when we get old – may God have mercy on our souls. But in this case, it’s pretty cool. The old guys lead the young ones – like we’re supposed to. They recognize God’s truth, and they respond to it; and the younger guys follow their lead. It’s pretty cool.

Now there’s something going on here we need to get. You see, we can look at sin from man’s perspective, or from God’s perspective. When we look at sin from man’s perspective, there are big sins, and there are little sins. And if I stay away from the big sins, or if my sins are littler than yours, I’m OK. And if you sin some of the big sins, if your sins are bigger than mine, then I can judge you – we think. So we get arrogant, and proud, and judgmental.

But if I try to look at sin from God's perspective, that all sins separate us from God, that all of us are sinners, that none of us has a chance with God except by grace – then it's hard to be arrogant, and proud, and judgmental, isn't it? You have your sins, I have mine. Both our sins mess us up. Both our sins separate us from God. Your adultery is bad, my unforgiveness is equally bad in God's eyes. Your addiction is bad, my gossip about it is equally bad – if it is measured by how it separates us from God. Your shallow faith is bad; my judgmentalism is equally bad – if it is measured by the wall it builds between us and God. So Jesus says, "Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone." And somehow the old guys got it, and they left the scene quietly. Then the young guys got it, and they left the scene quietly, until only Jesus and the girl are left.

Then John says, "Jesus stood up again and said to the woman, "Where are your accusers? Didn't even one of them condemn you?" (10) Why does he ask her that? I don't know. Maybe ... maybe ... When Jesus said, "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone," maybe she closed her eyes, and she covered her head, waiting for the pain to begin. And maybe when Jesus says, "Where are your accusers she raises her head, and she opens her eyes, and she looks around, and different kinds of tears begin to flow. "Where are they? Does no one condemn you?"

"No, Lord," she said. And Jesus said, "Neither do I. Go and sin no more." (11) I don't condemn you either, now go stop sinning. I don't condemn you – that's grace; now go stop sinning – that's truth. You see, Jesus never compromised on God's truth. Adultery is a sin. It's a sin against your partner, it's a sin against your kids, it's a sin against another family. And it's a sin against God – it drives a wedge between a man or a woman and God. But Jesus doesn't call her sin "sin" to condemn her, he does it to liberate her, to set her free, to restore her to her family, and to her God.

But those words ... "Neither do I" ... They are haunting. Because do you know why Jesus said them? I think he said them because he wasn't there to condemn her, he was there to take her place. He didn't come here to condemn us, he came here to take our place. He looked her in the eyes, maybe he wiped away her tears, and he said, "I've got this one for you. I'll take this one for you. Now, go and sin no more."

Why is why what could have been the worst day of this girl's life became the best day of her life. One of the most famous Christian teachers of all time describes the scene when only Jesus and the girl are left with these words, he says: *relicti sunt duo miseria et misericordia* – “and there were left the two: misery and mercy.” *Miseria et misericordia*: an adulteress and Jesus, misery and mercy. And do you know what can happen when misery meets mercy – mercy wins – if you let it. Mercy wins. Because His grace is infinitely more powerful than your sin – if you let it.

But -- here's what is so intriguing about this story – we don't know what happens next. We don't know if this girl embraces grace, or whether she goes back to her sin. We don't know. It doesn't say. Maybe ... maybe ... because John is telling your story, and my story, and it's up to each of us to write the ending.

You have another list. You have a list of the sins that have driven a wedge between you and God. There are some little ones that nip at you, and there are some really big ones that have torn chunks out of your soul.

- Maybe yours are sins of the tongue. You lie. Or you gossip. Or you slander. Or you are divisive. Terrible sins.
- Maybe yours are sexual sins. You lust, or you're addicted to porn, or you have engaged in sex outside of marriage.
- Maybe yours is some addiction. You are an alcoholic, or a drug addict, or a workaholic, or a shopaholic – and it's tearing your family apart.
- Maybe your sin is greed, or money, or power. And you'll sacrifice people to get ahead.
- Maybe you have a foul mouth, or you struggle with anger, or unforgiveness, or bitterness; those take down so many Jesus followers.
- Or maybe you dishonor your parents – that's a big sin in the Bible, you know.
- Maybe your sin is pride, or arrogance, or judgmentalism – those are some of the worst.

Well, your accusers have slipped away (don't you wish!), and only you and Jesus are left. And Jesus asks you, “Where are your accusers, does no one condemn you?” Don't you wish? And then he says, “Neither do I –

because I'm here to take your place; because I've got this one for you. Now go and sin no more." And now it's your move.

Is that too much to believe? Is that too much to hope for? Max Lucado puts it like this. He says, "If you have ever wondered how God reacts when you fail, frame Jesus' words and hang them on the wall; read them, ponder them, drink from them, let them wash over your soul." Because Jesus responds to our sin with the only thing greater than our shame – God's forgiveness. If anyone has the right to condemn us, he does. If anyone has the right to be angry, he does. With our sin we slap his Father in the face. If anyone has the right to be resentful, he does. It was for our sin that he died. Instead he says, "Neither do I condemn you; now, turn around and follow God." Grace and truth. A perfect balance: he condemns the sin, and he accepts the sinner.

One more piece, guys. And this one is huge. Now that you have been graced, go live it. We are Jesus followers, which means that we are just as consumed with God's truth and God's grace as Jesus was. And when we get it... You know those messy people who love Jesus and hate the church ... Well, not here. Because we are determined to be a different kind of people, and a different kind of church. Wouldn't that be amazing? Wouldn't that be powerful? Will you help us get it done?