

Condemn or Condone

John 8:2-11
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First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson

Chuck Colson is the founder of Prison Fellowship, a non-profit dedicated to the belief that all people are created in God's image and that no life is beyond God's reach. Describing a prison in Brazil operated on Christian principles, Colson wrote the following.

"When I visited this prison, I found the inmates smiling, particularly the murderer who opened the gates and let me in. Wherever I walked, I saw men at peace. I saw clean living areas, people working hard. The walls were decorated with biblical sayings from Psalms and Proverbs.

My guide escorted me to the notorious prison cell once used for torture. Today, he told me, that area houses only a single inmate. As we reached that cell, he paused and asked, 'Are you sure you want to go in?'

'Of course,' I replied impatiently. 'I've been in isolation cells all over the world.'

Slowly the guide swung open the massive door and I saw the prisoner in that punishment cell: a crucifix, beautifully carved by the inmates – the prisoner Jesus, hanging on a cross. 'He's doing time for the rest of us,' the guide said softly."¹

That prison in Brazil neither condemns nor condones the crimes the inmates committed, just like Jesus neither condemned nor condoned the woman caught in adultery. Instead, he did something much more powerful – for her, for her accusers, for the society in which she lived, and for us and the world we live in.

John tells us that Jesus was teaching in the temple when the Pharisees "brought a woman who had been caught in adultery." And making her stand before all of them, they said to him, 'Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?'

Here Jesus has a choice – either condemn or condone, or do something else. Jesus chooses to do something else.

Society today wants us to believe that, when faced with someone who is deviating from the norm or has come up against the law, the only option is condemn or condone.

Such things as theft, vandalism, lying, breaking social taboos, and disobeying the law are all examples of deviant behavior. Thanks to social media and round-the-clock news programs,

¹ As quoted in Max Lucado, *In the Grip of Grace* (Dallas: Word Publications, 1996), 113.

we now have a heightened sense of how much deviant behavior is going on out there, whatever you think of as deviant. And this makes us want to take control of it, condemn it, and control and condemn the people caught up in it.

And when that doesn't work – because too often those responsible for keeping things in line are the very ones breaking the law and acting nasty – we get frustrated. It's scary to see things so out of control, so different from how it's always been.

Gripped by fear and worry – for society, for our families, our very way of life – we dig in our heels against anything we “know” is wrong. We start seeing only the behaviors and not the person.

The woman who was caught in adultery and brought before Jesus was being treated like an object, something to be used and discarded. The Pharisees' only concern was tripping up Jesus, testing him, as John said.

So they drag this woman into the middle of the crowd, and demand that Jesus either condemn her or be seen as condoning her behavior. They knew of his compassion and they sought to use that against him.

If Jesus shows compassion, then he's a lawbreaker. The Law of Moses says those caught in adultery must be stoned to death – both the man and the woman, by the way. Alternatively, if Jesus condemns her, then he's a hypocrite, preaching compassion but not living up to it.

It's quite a dilemma. It's a dilemma we face everyday. Countless situations in real life and on the news and social media are just begging us everyday to either stand with Christian compassion or lash out based on our conviction about what's right and what's wrong.

But Jesus, instead of getting pulled into that trap, Jesus does something quite strange. He bends down and writes with his finger on the ground.

Jesus chooses not to engage. He knows that the threat isn't real, that who he is is not based on what this woman did or how he responds to it. He knows that whatever this woman has done isn't about him – it's about her and God.

How many times do we get pulled into criticizing or condemning someone for their behavior, making it all about us, not even seeing the person, let alone getting to know them or taking an interest in them, in their side of things, their situation?

Jesus knows this about us. He knows we are judgmental. That's why he says to the crowd, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.”

All of a sudden, it's no longer just about her. It's about her and you, as you place yourself in the crowd that day. What do you do? That's what Jesus is waiting to find out, as “once

again he (bends) down and (writes) on the ground.” It’s hard to condemn others when faced with our own sin, our own transgressions.

There’s a lot of speculation about what Jesus wrote on the ground. Some say maybe it was all the sins of those gathered around. But what if it was something much more simple, something like, “Thou Shall Not Kill.”

For me, no matter how riled up I might be, I can’t imagine picking up a stone to throw at someone, particularly in the presence of Jesus, with the Law of God written on my heart. And yet, we see ourselves and others do it all the time – not literally throwing stones, but throwing insults and judgment and condemnation at others.

When you feel tempted to do such a thing – to pass judgment against someone else – remember how Jesus handled it. Rather than being forced to engage, rather than getting caught up in the frenzy, Jesus takes a moment to let things settle down and to point people in a better direction.

After the first time he bent down, wrote something and then straightened up, the crowd - faced with their own sins - walks way, one by one, beginning with the elders, the scribes and Pharisees, and Jesus is left alone with the woman.

He’s bent down a second time, writing on the ground. What did he write the second time? If the first time maybe he wrote, “Thou Shall Not Kill,” I like to imagine that the second time he wrote, “God loves you, and so do I.”

Just think if that was our response to someone whose behavior bothers us, worries us, scares us. You look at the person and say to yourself – if not also to them – “God loves you, and so do I.”

We don’t love the behavior, but we love the person, and we value the person more than we hate or fear the behavior.

That’s what Jesus did. Jesus straightened up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one, sir.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”

Jesus neither condones the sin nor condemns the person. Jesus hates the sin, but he loves the person – even me, even you, even those you fear, even those whose behavior causes you great concern.

Jesus not only turned the woman toward God that day, but he saved the crowd from the sin of self-righteousness and vengeance. And he showed us all a better way.

As Jesus says elsewhere, in John (15), “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” Love one another, not condemn. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Let us pray:

With gratitude we come to you in prayer, gracious God: For the gift of life and daily blessings – like the music of birds, the joy of seeing a smile on a loved one's face, the warmth of the sun and the hug of a friend. For these gifts which we so often take for granted, we offer you our thanks and praise.

Especially we thank you for your presence when we come to you in the dark nights of our souls, when our companion is not faith, but fear; not certainty, but doubt.

When we are besieged with anxious questions, O God, help us to be still. Remind us of all that we have which assures us of your love for us.

In the midst of our darkness, let us be reminded that you enter into our pain, and that our prayers of fear and doubt are actually prayers of deepest faith, for they affirm your presence, even when we do not feel it.

We pray your presence and healing touch upon those dealing with illness and disease. And for us, O God, we tend to be so discouraged when something doesn't go our way.

We hold onto resentments which prevent us from moving forward in love. We linger over words we have spoken in haste and soon our hearts are full of resentment instead of gratitude, and despair instead of joy.

We come to believe that we have nothing, when, in fact, we have everything!

Help us to remember, Lord, even as we remember the prayer that you taught us, saying together:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen