

# *Second Sunday in Lent*



Jesus defies expectations as scribes and Pharisees set the cruelest of traps. A woman caught in the act of adultery stands alone in the temple. Notably absent is the man whose sin was likewise uncovered. Made to stand before the men, she faces mob justice intent on her death by stoning. The only question is whether Jesus will uphold the death penalty as the Torah commands and so defy Rome by meting out death or deny the law of Moses by offering the forgiveness that only God can dispense. Either way, the scribes and the Pharisees plan to use Jesus' words and actions against him.

The oddest of scenes ensues: "Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They say this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him," the Gospel of John tells us. Then, "Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground."

Jerome's take on this passage is worth considering. Jerome is best known for the *Vulgate*, his translation of parts of the Bible that he compiled together with some texts translated by others into the "vulgar" Latin of the people. Yet, the saint spent significant time praying and studying scripture as a hermit in the desert of Chalcis near Antioch after his conversion to Christianity; later in his life, he visited the famed hermits of the Egyptian desert. Jerome's writings reveal a man haunted by his own sexual sins from his days as a student in Rome, so it is noteworthy that he did not see adultery as the point of this story and certainly did not view the woman's sin as worthy of her being singled out. This is because Jerome saw, as have many other interpreters before and since, that the point Jesus makes is that none of the accusers are without sin.<sup>10</sup> Jesus needs no divine insight to know that everyone sins. Everyone.

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<sup>10</sup> Phillip Schaff and Henry Wace, *A Select Library*

*of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series, Vol. VI "St. Jerome: Letters and Select Works,"* Trans. G. Lewis and W.G. Martley (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1893), 469

Jesus does not join the crowd in seeing the woman as less than human for her adultery. He refuses to join in singling her out for judgment. Just as Jesus tells her, "Go your way, and from now on do not sin again," the weight of the passage shows that those who condemn her need to hear these same words from Jesus. The Savior offers them all a second chance, making room for forgiveness and amendment of life. He also reserves judgment to the one without sin, thereby affirming that to judge is for God alone.

Forgiveness of sins through faith in Jesus is central to Christianity. Jesus' teachings on the matter are clear, from "If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you" (Matthew 6:14) to his words while on the cross, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). Central to his teaching is the emphasis that you and I are to concern ourselves with the ways we are falling short of the glory of God. Judging others is left to God alone.



— *What is the difference between how the scribes and Pharisees act toward this woman and how Jesus treats her?*

— *Why might Jerome and others not see her adultery as the point of this story?*

— *Jesus connects our forgiveness to our forgiving others, yet some people make this challenging. One prayer that can assist with moving our hearts in regard to a difficult person in our lives is "Bless \_\_\_\_\_. Change me." Pray by name for God to truly bless the person you find difficult and to genuinely change your heart toward him or her. This prayer prayed faithfully over time breaks the ground for God to make a real change in your heart.*

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