

Introduction

Jesus is teaching in the Temple when the religious leaders bring a woman to him. They have caught her in the act of adultery! The Law demands that she be put to death for her sin. If he forgives her, he is not following the Law. If he condemns her, he is compromising his message. What will Jesus do?

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The religious leaders were frustrated and angry. For months, they had watched Jesus closely and they did not like what they saw. He healed on the Sabbath. He did not always ceremonially wash before his meals. He welcomed sinful people to dine with him. He offered forgiveness on the spot, as if he had authority to do that.

Every time they brought up an objection to his work, he would reply with words of wisdom they could not answer. When they protested that he healed on the Sabbath, Jesus told them that priests performed circumcision on the Sabbath. Circumcision brought a child into the covenant with Abraham and officially made him part of the community of God's people. If they could bring a baby into the community of God's people on the Sabbath, why was it wrong for him to restore adults to full health by healing them on the Sabbath? If their own sons attempted to cast out evil spirits from people, why was it wrong for him to cast out evil spirits? They had no answer to these questions.

During the Feast of Tabernacles Jesus was teaching in the Temple. The people loved his words about the kingdom of God. But the religious leaders hated them. They sent men to question him, but Jesus answered every question. They sent officers to arrest him, but when the officers heard him teach, they were left speechless and came back empty handed.

The leaders said, "Where is he? Where is Jesus? We sent you to arrest him and here you are before us without him!"

The officers said, "We have never heard anyone speak the way this man speaks! Many of the people are saying he is the Messiah or the prophet that Moses said would come!"

"Don't tell me that you have been led astray! You don't see any of us in this room believing in him, do you? This crowd of uneducated people are under a curse. They don't know God's Word."

But one of the leaders of the people spoke up for Jesus. His name was Nicodemus. He had visited Jesus one night many months before and had asked Jesus face to face about his teaching, and the things he heard stirred his heart.

Nicodemus had come politely and said, "Jesus, many of us believe you have come from God. No one can do these miracles you are doing without being from God."

But Jesus penetrated to the heart of Nicodemus when he said, “Nicodemus. You must be born again. I know you long for the kingdom of God to come but you cannot enter the kingdom of God unless you are born again.”

Jesus, in so many words, told him that he had come for more than teaching Israel. Jesus had come to change the hearts of people. Jesus had come to revolutionize lives from the inside out. People would not see the kingdom of God unless they were reborn, and when Nicodemus asked how that could be, Jesus explained that he was talking about a spiritual rebirth, about a work of the Spirit of God.

Nicodemus was never the same after that encounter with Jesus, and while his colleagues were deeply suspicious of Jesus and some had already concluded that Jesus must die, Nicodemus defended him.

“Our Law does not condemn a man unless it first hears from him and allows him to defend himself. You have already concluded that he is guilty of breaking the law but many of you have never spoken to him and asked him to explain himself.”

“Nicodemus! Search the Scriptures! Nowhere does it say that a prophet comes out of Galilee. That is where he is from! He can’t be from God if he is from Galilee. You are not from Galilee, are you?” And many of the leaders laughed at the insult thrown at Nicodemus. Nicodemus did not think it was funny and he left the meeting.

There wasn’t anything more to be said and the meeting adjourned, but unknown to Nicodemus was that some stayed and plotted to destroy Jesus. As they talked late into the night they came up with a plan to lead to his arrest.

We don’t know her name. We don’t know her age. We don’t know where she lived, what kind of upbringing she had, or if she was in a marriage where she felt trapped. But the leaders in Jerusalem knew her, and they knew that she was an easy target for a man who wanted something on the side, for a man not content to be with his wife but who wanted to explore new areas of sexuality with other women.

That night she lay with a man who was not her husband. She no longer enjoyed it. It seemed exotic and exciting at first, to be with a man who was not her husband, and it brought a sense of belonging and being loved. But when the man was finished, she would often be left alone, and a deep sense of shame, guilt and emptiness would come over her. The same was true on this night. After she and the man had satisfied their desires, they slept together but sleep did not come easily for her. She felt ashamed. She felt lost, and she felt fear. She could not explain the fear, but something was different about this encounter. The man who approached her insisted that he must have her that night and that he must stay with her.

Then she realized, “this is a trap.” She started to get up, but it was too late. She heard footsteps outside the house, the door burst open and several men, dressed in long, religious robes strode into the room. “Is this your husband?” one of them demanded.

“You know very well he is not my husband,” she said.

“Then you know the Law. “You shall not commit adultery.” You are under arrest for breaking the Law of God. Take her away and hold her until that rabbi from Galilee comes back into the Temple. We have quite a surprise for him.”

“What about him?” the woman asked pointing to the man who was still on the bed. “It takes two to commit adultery.” But the leaders just sneered at her and nodded to the officers who seized her arms and led her to the jail that would hold her until the strange trial would begin.

Jesus had spent the night outside Jerusalem. He had gone to the Mount of Olives just to the east of the city. It was a beautiful place and from this location he could look down upon it from his little booth that he and others shared during the Feast of Tabernacles. But early in the morning he entered the city and the Temple. As people saw him, he greeted and welcomed them. Then he began to teach them many things about the kingdom of God.

“The kingdom of God is not coming with a sword, but with seed. The kingdom of God is not coming to cut the bodies of men to bring death. It is coming to penetrate the hearts of people and bring life the way a seed enters soil and brings a fruitful plant into the world. The kingdom of God is not coming with a great show of power to dazzle the leaders and to scare away the Romans, but it is coming in small ways to change people and communities and nations from the inside out, just like a small mustard seed slowly grows into a large plant or just like yeast quietly penetrates a lump of dough.”

Everything was going so well. Jesus was enjoying teaching in his Father’s temple. The people were enjoying his words, and then they heard a scream and some shouts.

“No, please, stop! This isn’t fair! This isn’t right!”

“Quiet woman and do as we say. You will get your trial!”

Many religious people were headed Jesus way. Some were old and had been in their positions of power for decades. Others were young, full of energy and zealous for the ancestral traditions of their people. In their midst was a woman, her hair loose around her shoulders, the way it should not be in public. Her body barely covered with a light robe, as if she had been pulled out of bed, and her face filled with anger, fear and hopelessness.

The crowd parted to let them through. They went to Jesus and forced the woman down in front of him.

“Teacher, this woman has been caught in adultery, in the very act. We are witnesses. Now, in our Law, as you know, Moses commanded us to stone such women. And so, we have brought her to you for your counsel. What do you say we should do with her?”

The hearts of the religious leaders were filled with glee. They knew they had him. The woman had been caught sleeping with a man who was not her husband. She was not some vague “sinner” who could claim that she had repented. She was not some poor person who was lamenting mistakes in life to whom he could give a fresh start. She was a woman who had a reputation and a woman who had just sinned and been caught in her sin just hours before.

This was the trap. If Jesus offered forgiveness, as he had to so many, they could accuse him of not obeying the Law of Moses, and the people would not support him. They knew the Laws of God. They knew adultery was wrong and was punishable by death. If Jesus did not uphold this Law, the leaders hoped the people would lose confidence in him. They could also arrest him on the spot for counseling rebellion against the word of God.

But if Jesus did not forgive, then he could be accused of compromising his teaching. He had been offering salvation and forgiveness to all. He had been offering a fresh start to all. Could he offer a fresh start to this woman? But she was caught in the very act! She was caught defying the laws of the God of Israel.

Clearly Jesus was in a tough situation!

And in our next broadcast we will find out what he did.