

I AM THE LIGHT

John 8:3-18

During the Feast of Tabernacles, about six months before Jesus was crucified, He was teaching the people in the Temple area of Jerusalem. During that time, people had many questions about Jesus and there were numerous speculations regarding “Who He was” and “where He came from” in addition to talk about “the Jews (meaning the religious leaders) wanting to kill Him.” Jesus told the crowd that the reason the threat on His life was there was because of something that had happened one year ago at the last Feast of Tabernacles in which a paralytic man was healed on the Sabbath. This explanation was concluded with a principle that all of us should follow and that was that we should not judge by appearances but by “righteous judgments.” Later on, there would be situations that would come up in which Jesus would demonstrate this principle (righteous judgments) and also provide additional insight regarding this really important subject that was specifically mentioned by Moses in Deuteronomy 16:18.

There were various traditional ceremonies associated with the “Tabernacles” observance. One was carried out each evening which involved ceremoniously taking water from the pool of Siloam, mixing in some wine and then pouring it on the sacrifice on the altar to mark the significance of rain and for the gratitude of receiving it. It was at this ceremony on the last day of the Feast that Jesus announced to the people there that “if anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink.” Another practice was lighting torches and placing them in the court of the women in commemoration of the pillar of fire their forefathers had seen during the wilderness experience. Jesus used that occasion as another teaching opportunity related to the light of those torches which we find in chapter eight of John’s gospel.

In verse 53 of chapter seven, we find the beginning of an incident that many Bible scholars believe to better fit into events that happened six months later when Jesus was teaching in the Temple area during the final week preceding His arrest and crucifixion. During that time, the Scribes and Pharisees attempted to trap Jesus into doing something that would discredit Him with the people who had turned to Him during His entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. The authorship of this incident of the “woman caught in adultery” is thought to better fit the style and word choices of either Matthew or Luke than what we find in John’s gospel. We could argue that this account of Jesus being asked to pass judgment on a situation provides a good transition into other discussions He would have about judgment later on in chapter eight.

Trapped – 8:3-6

³ The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst ⁴ they said to him, “Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. ⁵ Now in the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?” ⁶ This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. John 8:3–6 (ESV)

The earliest Greek manuscripts of the New Testament do not have this account included. As we shall see, the events that it presents and the way Jesus handled the situation are instructive and we can learn some important truths by carefully examining them. It seems obvious that the incident was a staged trap to discredit Jesus. Matthew related a different trap that the Scribes and Pharisee attempted to use on Jesus regarding whether the Jews should pay taxes to the Romans. If He said “yes,” then His popularity would suffer among the common people. If He said “no,” then Roman authorities would be upset and even try to arrest Him. It is essentially the same setup with the woman caught in adultery. If He said to just ignore the sinful act, then He would be showing disrespect to Moses and the Jewish common people would be displeased. If He said

that Moses' law should be followed, then He would be violating the rules of the Roman which would not allow executions by the Jews. The trap was set and they just waited to catch Jesus in a no-win situation.

Jesus' initial response seems somewhat like He was disinterested in what they were asking Him. If He was teaching in the Temple area when they brought in the woman, he was probably seated already and He simply leaned over and wrote something in the sand with His finger. People have speculated about what He wrote, but we don't know. However, it was likely something that was related to what was happening and was probably intended to communicate a subtle truth to them if they were spiritually aware. Since the general subject was "the Law" that Moses had given them, Jesus may have simply written the twenty Hebrew words that God had written with His finger on the stone tablets that Moses took with him at Mount Sinai that made up the Ten Commandments.

An unasked question that should have been obvious is "are any of these Ten more important than the others?" Another unasked question could have been "which ones of these have I broken?" Another unasked question that is often ignored is "would I want God to condemn me in the same way I am trying to condemn this person?"

Those three questions provide a good check list for ourselves when we are in the business of setting ourselves up as the judge of all the bad things we see happening around us in today's world. To be sure, there are a lot of things going on in the world that we would never even consider doing. However, there are many things that happen that are contrary to Biblical principles that are more-or-less acceptable in our present-day culture and sometimes people who are serious, committed Christians will find themselves doing them. It almost seems that we have divided sinful behavior into two lists: acceptable sins and unacceptable sins. Every now and then we may get a reminder that we have strayed from the right path and we may try to make a correction especially if the error is related to something we are doing that we should not be doing. However, this same conviction doesn't seem to operate as well when it comes to things that we are NOT doing that we should be doing.

Freed – 8:7-11

⁷ And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her." ⁸ And once more he bent down and wrote on the ground. ⁹ But when they heard it, they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. ¹⁰ Jesus stood up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" ¹¹ She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more." John 8:7–11 (ESV)

Whatever it was that Jesus wrote in the sand was likely convicting for those who brought the woman to the Temple area. These people were Scribes and Pharisees and so they were very familiar with the laws of Moses and that familiarity provided a basis for conviction. Jesus used that familiarity to drive His message home to them by challenging them to judge themselves. "If you have no sin, then do what Moses said." The fact that they walked away is one of the few positive signs we see in the gospel accounts regarding any redeeming qualities of those who were trying to discredit Jesus.

Again, we have no idea of what else Jesus wrote in the sand, but it was effective in that these religious leaders thought about what they were doing rather than just going along with the mob mentality of taking the law into their own hands and not considering the consequences of what precedents that might be setting.

Although there were other people around in the Temple area who were observing what had just happened, the important situation was just Jesus and the woman. Jesus' question was

about her accusers (which were many) and about those who would dare to condemn. None of the accusers were willing to pass a sentence (prescribed punishment) upon the woman. My guess is that there was never any intent on the part of the accusers to actually do anything to her. She was just a pawn in their ploy to cancel out any respect for Jesus the people had who had heard Him teach for the last several days.

Another important lesson we can learn from this interaction is that Jesus did not condone the sinful action of which the woman was accused. The word “forgive” was not used in the conversation which should teach us that “refusal to condemn” (impose punishment) is not the same as “forgiveness.” For example, a person may have embezzled money from an employer and yet be spared the punishment of going to prison, but would be required to return the stolen money. The requirement imposed upon the woman was repentance which is what Jesus instructed her to do.

Shining – 8:12-18

¹² Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” ¹³ So the Pharisees said to him, “You are bearing witness about yourself; your testimony is not true.” ¹⁴ Jesus answered, “Even if I do bear witness about myself, my testimony is true, for I know where I came from and where I am going, but you do not know where I come from or where I am going. ¹⁵ You judge according to the flesh; I judge no one. ¹⁶ Yet even if I do judge, my judgment is true, for it is not I alone who judge, but I and the Father who sent me. ¹⁷ In your Law it is written that the testimony of two people is true. ¹⁸ I am the one who bears witness about myself, and the Father who sent me bears witness about me.” John 8:12–18 (ESV)

During the Feast of Tabernacles, torches were lit and placed on two candelabras in the women’s court of the temple (the treasury was located in that court area). These torches commemorated the pillar of fire that led the Israelites during their wilderness wanderings. Just as Jesus had used the ceremony involving water to invite anyone who was thirsty to come to Him and drink, He now used the ceremony of the torches to declare Himself to be the Light of the world. Apparently, these torches provided the light needed to walk through the court area. Those who left that area would find themselves in the dark.

This contrast of light and darkness has implications regarding eternal judgment in that one of the criteria by which people will be judged is “according to light” or the measure of moral knowledge available to each person. In the setting there in Jerusalem, the Pharisees (in general) were the possessors of (or had available) the greatest amount of moral knowledge of anyone on earth at that time. The same thing could be said of our generation in our nation or in many other nations with Judeo-Christian heritages. We have available to us more moral knowledge than any other culture and yet we (as a nation) are making the same errors as those who are living in ignorance. Jesus specifically addressed this criterion in a later encounter with the Jews in John 9:41 following the healing of the man blind from birth. There He stated, “If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains.”

The ever-present Pharisees were there to challenge everything Jesus said in an effort to discredit Him. They started by stating a principle that a person’s testimony about himself was not admissible in a court of law. This is a principle that has wide acceptance in most cultures of the world and that is that “self-praise is no praise at all.” Many in our present-day society and especially those in the political arena are apparently unaware of this axiom.

Jesus did not challenge this accepted principle. It could be argued that He was the exception to the rule or that the rule did not apply to Him. The reason that self-praise is not generally accepted is that most people do not have a good understanding of their own make-up and especially of their faults. Many times, we “fool ourselves” and think more highly of ourselves than we should. It really is difficult to honestly examine ourselves. However, Jesus

did not have that problem. He knew His origin and His destination.

There are notable exceptions throughout the Scriptures in which men and angels who had a divine revelation gave sole witness to the validity of who they were and what they were doing. Matthew Henry pointed out that Moses and all the prophets as well as John the Baptist all bore witness of who they were and their mission in life. In the many examples of angels appearing to people, they would state who they were and give their message. There were not two or three witnesses in these cases. Of course, the Pharisees overlooked all these exceptions since this evidence did not fit their agenda of discrediting Jesus and His message. They also chose to ignore the witness of John the Baptist about Jesus and the testimony of the “voice from heaven” at His baptism. They also ignored the miracles which gave witness of Who He was.

Jesus then defined the source of the problem that was causing the Pharisees to not understand what they were witnessing: “You judge according to the flesh.” People today still struggle with having lives that are totally focused on the physical life and ignore any spiritual aspects of life. Everything is evaluated from an outward appearance and the result is that people are easily deceived. In contrast to the Pharisees willingness to be judgmental, Jesus told them that He was not judging anyone.

What about the statement Jesus made that the Pharisees judged according to the flesh? Was Jesus judging them or just stating the obvious? Most of the time people will accuse others of “judging” when they are “simply stating what is plain to see.” If we were to state that Wilt Chamberlain was a tall person, then that is not being judgmental but is stating a fact. If we said that he was too tall, then that may be bordering on judging. Arguments can be made that Jesus was stating that He judged no one NOW or that He was not carrying out “judgments in time or history.” This distinction is thought to be a valid argument since He followed that by the statement (v.16) “And yet if (in case) I judge . . .” This statement was likely an implication that on the day of “eternal judgment” He would be sitting as Judge of all. But even in that situation, He will be judging by what He has heard from the Father and by what is written in the word rather than His own whims or will.

From these verses, we can discover principles regarding divine, eternal judgment. One obvious principle is simply that God’s judgment is according to “truth.” The other three considerations that are evident in the Scriptures are that this judgment will be according to what we did, it will be without respect of persons, and will be according to the measure of moral light available to each person. We often picture “justice” as a blindfolded woman holding a balance or scale. That represents the criterion of non-partiality. However, we also realize that another all-encompassing consideration in judgment is the motivation or the intent of the heart and only the Lord is capable of knowing what is in the depths of our being. The “righteous judge” is not blindfolded but is all-seeing and all-knowing and nothing is hidden from Him. Unless He is our Light, then we walk in darkness.