

Where are Your Accusers?

A Sermon by Jill Richardson

I grew up on cop and courtroom shows. I loved the drama of catching the bad guy or seeing a lawyer convince the jury, in commanding tones of injured justice, that the defendant was innocent. Who knew the smoking gun was there all along? Where did that surprise witness come from? And of course, there was always Columbo's "just one more thing" that clinched the person's guilt.

Having worked in a law office and served on a jury, I'm now aware that television doesn't portray a courtroom quite accurately. We don't depict justice as it really happens.

This is nothing new. Courtroom scenes have always been played in different ways, sometimes in ways far from just. So, it's refreshing to look today at a trial of sorts that clearly veers toward injustice—but we get a plot twist that only Jesus can deliver. That twist has surprising relevance for the ways we listen to and believe women today.

We are in a sermon series on questions God asks us. Today's story—and the question God asks in it—isn't just a story about one person, or one trial. And it is especially relevant to today's culture.

John 8:1–6 (NLT): Jesus returned to the Mount of Olives, but early the next morning he 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.

Here's the setting. A crowd. Jesus teaching them. And what happens? This group of men interrupts the teaching to deposit a woman in the middle of the crowd, maybe with little clothing, since the text says she was "caught in the act." It's wrong on so many levels.

Have you ever been embarrassed in front of a group? I remember my tenth-grade spelling bee. At some point, I looked across the room at my crush. He was looking at me! I looked back. I flirted a little. I smiled, made eyes, and was generally overjoyed that he was looking right at me.

Until I realized that *everyone* was looking right at me—because it was my turn. And the entire classroom had seen my awkward tenth-grade attempts at flirting.

I have no idea if I spelled the word correctly.

This woman is completely vulnerable, at risk, and humiliated. This group of men has made sure of it.

The wording says they put her in front of the crowd. Like she is a stray fork or a plate of bad cafeteria food they can toss wherever they like. She is, in fact, their tool for entrapping Jesus. Little more.

She has no agency at all in this matter.

In a mock trial that should have been private and should, by law, have involved the guilty man as well, the men decide to make her shame public instead, because she fits their agenda.

Does this all sound vaguely familiar?

It's the way women have always been treated by power. Jesus isn't having it, as we'll later see. But what exactly is the problem with what the men are doing?

First, for men so intent on keeping the law, they break several.

1. They could and should have brought her privately if they wanted a court judgment. Though Jesus isn't a court judge, they're casting him as one in order to trap him. They brought her in public, to shame her and challenge Jesus. They wanted a dramatic lynching, and they wanted him holding the noose. It's not about justice, and it's not about her. She's collateral damage.
2. They could and should have brought both guilty parties. A man, however, would have demanded his rights. He would not have been as vulnerable. She had no rights. She was an easy target.
3. They could and should have brought the required two witnesses forward immediately. Except, well, for two people to actually witness adultery? They had to see it at the same time and place and have the same story. Adultery is generally a private event. They had to have known where and when it would happen. In other words, they used the woman to set Jesus up.

That's just a start at the injustice of it all.

It was a test of grace or truth. Would Jesus lean too far toward grace—let her go—and break the law? Or would he lean too far toward law—agree to stone her—and seemingly invalidate all he'd taught about mercy? He couldn't win with either choice, and that was the plan.

John 8:7–9 (NLT): 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 wrote in the dust.

When the accusers heard this, they slipped away one by one, beginning with the oldest, until only Jesus was left in the middle of the crowd with the woman.

They keep demanding an answer. They are impatient, wanting condemnation on their terms, their timeline.

So Jesus gives his answer. Fine. Toss a stone. Throw it. Hard. But only according to the law that you so carefully keep—the two witnesses have to go first. The crowd would know that was the law. The accusers would, too.

He demands that her accusers be the first to begin taking a life. If your testimony is absolutely truthful, he hints, this should not be hard. If you haven't misrepresented anything, exaggerated, told one tiny lie in this matter—what's more, if you haven't ever sinned—you're good. Go ahead. Throw a rock. But if there's any sin in you, no sin in what you're doing here, you might want to reconsider. Life is sacred—and they know that law, too. No one throws a rock.

Jesus is keeping law for them but enacting mercy for her all at once. Never cross Jesus when death is on the line.

John 8:10–11 (NLT): Then Jesus stood up again and said to the woman, “Where are your accusers? Didn’t even one of them condemn you?” “No, Lord,” she said. And Jesus said, “Neither do I. Go and sin no more.”

Then Jesus utters one of the most beautiful questions God asks in Scripture. “Didn’t even one of them condemn you?” What’s the truth for us here, in Jesus’s beautiful question?

No one has the power to condemn you except the Lord of grace and truth.

Condemnation is his alone to give or take away. In this life, people will shame us, hurt us when we’re vulnerable, treat us like an object to use, humiliate us, judge and condemn us. But they don’t have the power to make that final call.

Has no one condemned you? No, Lord.

In calling Jesus “Lord,” she is transferring power. She is admitting him as her master. She is transformed by that choice. Her accusers no longer have power over her. They can’t bring her shame, judgment, or hurt. Only he can—but he doesn’t.

As modern people far removed from first-century Palestine, we can’t fully grasp the revolutionary things Jesus did. We don’t know that culture, and we often don’t see his actions as they would have seen them. We prefer to take the obvious moral and assume “Jesus meek and mild” as the norm, except for that Temple table-flipping aberration.

But Jesus was not about the *status quo* then, and he isn’t now either.

He isn’t solely about setting her free here, although he certainly is about that. He’s about much, much more. He’s about the way we treat women, *still* treat women, two thousand years later.

He wasn’t having it then, and he’s not having it now. Look at some details.

She is surrounded by a circle of men willing to sacrifice her for what they want. For their purposes, it doesn’t matter who she is or what she’s done—yet it does. They’ve waited for this woman and this sin.

Think about it—there are sinners all over the place. All they had to do was find some disobedient teenager and haul him in front of Jesus. It could not be too difficult. Being disrespectful to your dad was a serious sin, too, and they could have probably found that on any block. Why not do that, rather than create a contrived drama with this woman and adultery? Why?

Because women and sexual sins were easy targets, just like they are now. It was easy to blame them then, and it still is.

To understand why, we need to recognize two things. First, sometimes we’re the woman in this drama. Second, sometimes, we’re the religious leaders.

It is terribly important that the “accused” in the story is a woman. In the first century, Judaism had stereotyped women as instigators whenever sexual sins were committed and labeled them as lacking the spiritual and moral fiber needed to uphold the law. The sexual passions of adolescence, for instance, were viewed as coming from the seductive attractions of females. The absence of the woman’s lover in the story is crucial.¹

In other words, what was she wearing? What did she have to drink? Where was she walking and when? How did she lead him on? You know the drill.

Jesus saw no man present at the kangaroo court. He did see a whole mess of men throwing blame at a woman. He saw a story that had been and has been since played out a thousand times. He saw a

woman, a co-image of God, used as an object of someone’s passion and then blamed for the outcome. The man got a pass. Don’t tell me Jesus isn’t relevant.

And oh, a third thing to recognize. Sometimes, we’re the audience.

It’s a gambit that has not changed. Vulnerable women are used by the powerful for their purposes. We see the news stories every day, and we don’t even register a reaction anymore to the Harvey Weinsteins, Larry Nassars, or Robert Morris.

The crowd watched the woman dragged before them, and they knew this was wrong. Yet no one stepped forward to say so. No one. They were too afraid of the powerful religious establishment.

It’s too tempting, and too dangerous, to watch #MeToo and #ChurchToo move across our vision, be outraged for a moment, and then move on.

Jesus confronts the whole mess. He sees a woman de-imaged before him by the religious leaders. When he forgives her and gives her back her dignity, he sends a powerful message to his audience.

See these women. Hear them. Don’t turn away.

If we’re the audience, we have some things to ask ourselves before we move on from Jesus’s question—Does no one condemn you?

- Do we listen to women’s stories?
- Do we disallow the tired stereotype of women as emotional creatures, or temptresses who make up stories to trap men?
- Do we raise girls who will respect themselves?
- Do we refuse to shame them or burden them with the sins of men and boys?
- Do we teach our boys that we are all responsible for our own sin?

Sometimes we’re the crowd, too afraid to speak up. Afraid to contradict the religious leaders of our day as well.

I love Jesus even more after this story. He’s not having it. Not then, not now. He won’t stand for people using women or for meting out unequal justice between the sexes. It’s radical. It’s beautiful. And we need to see it for exactly what it was and is.

Forgiveness, yes. A brilliant escape from the trap of law versus grace, yes. But there’s a greater point we can easily miss if we’re not paying attention—it’s a message of equality and dignity for women everywhere.

Notes

1. Gary M. Burge, *John*, The NIV Application Commentary (Zondervan Academic, 2000) ad loc.



Rev. Dr. Jill Richardson is a writer, speaker, pastor, author of five books, and contributor to three others. She cofounded a women’s advocacy group in her denomination and specializes in writing for a healthy church. She likes to travel, grow flowers, break into random musical numbers, and sit with a good cup of Earl Grey.