

Title: Thawing an ice cold justice - John 7v53-8v11

Purpose: To see practically the alternatives to JUSTICE whereby it maybe tempered with God's precious MERCY.

INTRODUCTION

THINGS "FROZEN" CAN BE VERY POPULAR:

- take the movie (*SHOW* 2 images) the Guardian Newspaper had the headline:

"Frozen-mania: how Elsa, Anna and Olaf conquered the world"

It has become the biggest animation success of all time at the box-office grossing over \$1.2 bn.

of course very recently another amazing popular thing has benefitted from the effects of freezing

- now I'm talking about Niagara Falls (*SHOW* 2 images)

It is pretty amazing when the waters are crashing over in Summer time, but even more amazing when you have all these ice structures to enjoy.

HOWEVER: we should not always put together the notion of "freezing" alongside that of popularity.

Not "frozen over" BUT "frozen out"

This morning we come to a passage of Scripture which, it would appear, has experienced *not* so much "freezing over" BUT being "freezing out".

The passage that I am referring to is there in the NIV from John 7 verse 53 through to chapter 8 and verse 11.

Ring-fenced

Now in your bible, especially if you are using the NIV (New International Version), you will find that this section for this morning is "**RULED OFF**" or you might say "**RING-FENCED**" and it has some wording along the lines of:

"The earliest and most reliable manuscripts and other ancient witnesses do not have John 7v53-8v11"

Anecdote OR Authentic?

And the **key question** that we have to face at the outset is simply this:

- Q. Is this section, here at the start of John 8, **an ANECDOTE?**
(nothing more than a bit of fabricated story that was doing the rounds perhaps a few centuries after Jesus' time)
- OR Q. Is it, instead, a piece of **AUTHENTIC**, Holy Spirit inspired, Bible-text?

And it is important we touch upon this because I wouldn't want any of you thinking that this is the first time that Pastor Hedley has preached on a passage that actually shouldn't be in the Bible at all!!

The basic facts

The basic facts are that:

- this portion does not appear to be in the majority of the ancient Greek manuscripts. Six of them omit it altogether, two leave a blank space, HOWEVER there is still one of the old texts that has it (Codex Bezae Cantabrigensis)
- the early church fathers, do not comment on this passage, HOWEVER Jerome in the 4th Century (who produced the Latin Bible) knew it and included it.
- both Ambrose and Augustine, key figures in the developing church of the 4th Century, both knew this story
- not only this, we can **trace it back even earlier because** the church historian Eusebius says that Papias (who lived not much beyond 100 AD) told of a story where: “a woman who was accused of many sins before the Lord”.

Q. So how are we to look at this section?

- anecdote OR authentic?
- spurious OR scripture?

Augustine’s hint

Well, I think that Augustine gives us a hint – he says that the story was removed from the text of the gospel because “some were of slight faith” and also to “avoid scandal”.

People felt that this story might give “undue license” to women making them believe that committing adultery was not really so very bad and could always be forgiven.

So I guess we can understand why this particular story got off to a somewhat shaky start – simply because people felt that perhaps, in those days of pagan immorality, this was too dangerous a story.

Certainly FF Bruce, the noted NT scholar, speaking of this passage describes it as: “a fragment of authentic gospel material”.

What a shame that today’s passage, for over 3 centuries, was effectively FROZEN OUT.

Well from a passage that was FROZEN OUT now to a woman who similarly had the unpleasant experience of being essentially “FROZEN OUT” by her own people.

Q. How do you see yourself?

Sometimes when you go to an interview for a new job, they have a tendency to ask difficult questions and one of them can go something along the lines of:

So Q. **How do you see yourself** over the next 3 or 5 years?

And of course it is a very probing a very penetrating question.

And for this story, (which is essentially a three way story involving this woman, the religious leaders (the institution) and then Jesus himself), I want you to keep this question in your mind: Q. So how do you see yourself?

Q. What resonates with you?

And I think one way that you can do that is to ask yourself as we go through:

Q. Where, and with whom, do I find myself resonating?

Our structure

I want to start with the woman, go on to the Jewish leaders and end up with the Lord Himself:

1. The Woman

So true to life

The bible is ever realistic to life and this is one of the endearing and reassuring things about Scripture, you know that it is true precisely because it is so true to life – it doesn't give you some sort of idealised vision of reality.

The Prodigal Son parable

Even the parables of Jesus, though they are made up stories to make a point, are nevertheless extremely life-like and perhaps you recall that one we call the Prodigal Son.

A father has two children and the younger one decides to run away from the father and to live life without being tied down and held back by rules and regulations.

He goes far away from the father so that communication is all but lost and begins to live a riotous life. To start with this would have been great fun:

- feasting every day
- new friends by the dozen
- maxing out on pleasure

However, as we all know, there's no such thing as a "free lunch" and it wasn't long before his money began to run out along with his luck and he started to be in need.

His need didn't go away, though his friends did, in fact his need took on the status of a LIFESTYLE.

He ended up finally in pig-sty left with nothing but sadness and many regrets.

The Prodigal Daughter

I think it fair to say that if this younger son was the Prodigal Son, then this woman would probably fit the description of the Prodigal Daughter.

Now we are not giving a detailed run down of this woman's life.

What we do know is that she is a sinner and that now she has been caught out.

(As Numbers 32 verse 23 says: "...you may be sure your sin will find you out").

Q. Was she just unlucky?

- An unguarded moment of sudden passion
- Someone who was really just the wrong person, in the wrong place, at the wrong time

Well we only need to look at Jesus' parting words to the woman to know our answer:

Verse 11 "Jesus declared, 'Go now and leave your life of sin'."

Even if this does not convince you that she must be something of a wicked woman, have a think about what is going on here. We know that the Pharisees are constructing a perfect trap for Jesus.

Q. Do you think it was just their "lucky day"?

Q. That this woman had just managed to somehow get herself caught in the very act?

Remember that the committing of adultery was not the somewhat trivial and all-too-common offense that it might be considered to be in our rather liberated, Western, post sexual revolution culture.

No the Law of Moses had this to say about adultery:

Leviticus 20 Verse 10 "If a man commits adultery with another man's wife—with the wife of his neighbour—both the adulterer **and the adulteress** must be put to death."

No all of this has the hallmarks of a person who has been well and truly setup. This woman, precisely because she was caught in a sinful way of life was just the sort of person that the Pharisees were looking for.

I can imagine that they knew where they might find this woman, perhaps they had their scouts sent out to watch this woman, to see where she went, to see who she was seeing and then to "lie in wait" so that they could be the necessary "live witnesses"!!

In good company

Now whilst you might be thinking:

"Well you'll always get one or two who'll go the whole way and not restrain themselves like the rest of us!!"

We should notice that, to some extent, she is in good company:

- think back to our long-term invalid that we were considering last week. Jesus parting words are almost identical – indicating that he needs to deal with his "life of sin"
- go back a little bit further to the woman in **John 4** – that one we labelled the "Bad Samaritan" – she had had 5 husbands and was on her 6th!!
- if we were to nip into Luke, we could bring back to mind that private dinner party Jesus attended with Simon the Pharisee – when a sinful woman came and wept, kissed his feet and anointed them with perfume.

So truly our Prodigal Daughter is not so very unusual.

So I wonder: **Q. HOW DO YOU SEE YOURSELF?**

You might say – yes, I agree that like this woman, I also am someone who is not exactly free from sin.

And for you when you explain what you have in mind by sin you mean essentially breaking God's law (and naturally that

is one of the Bible's own definitions: 1 John 3 verse 4 "Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness."

However, sin, is a lot wider than this rather clinical definition. Let me try and explain:

The Sexual Theme in the OT

In the OT the **Sexual Theme** comes up quite a lot and it is used as a common metaphor for two different things – (Jeremiah chapter 2 supplies both of them together in nice BOLD RELIEF):

- **FIRSTLY** it is used in a very beautiful way to signify the **INTIMATE LOVE** of God for his people and we see the delightful image of a **lover** and his **beloved, bridegroom** and **bride**:

Jeremiah 2 verse 2 "I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the desert..."

However, a little further on, we read of a sad transition:

Verse 32 "Does a maiden forget her jewellery, a bride her wedding ornaments? Yet my people have forgotten me, days without number. How skilled you are at pursuing love! Even the worst of women can learn from your ways."

Hence we are introduced to the second usage

- this **SECOND usage** is no longer the INTIMATE LOVE for God but **rather the IDOLATROUS LOVE** for other things.

Verse 5 "What fault did your fathers find in me, that they strayed so far from me? They followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves."

Then we get the sexual imagery used to describe it (which is actually very "uncut" in the original Hebrew):

Verse 20 "Long ago you broke off your yoke and tore off your bonds; you said, 'I will not serve you!' Indeed, on every high hill and under every spreading tree you **lay down as a prostitute**." (Note: "spread your legs!!")

In the verses that follow, God's people are described as being **exactly like an animal in heat**:

Verse 23 "How can you say, 'I am not defiled; I have not run after the Baals'? See how you behaved in the valley; consider what you have done. You are a swift she-camel running here and there, a wild donkey accustomed to the desert, sniffing the wind in her craving— in her heat who can restrain her?"

You see SIN is *not* just a bit of law-breaking – no SIN is breaking God's heart.

Sin is every bit as devastating as ADULTERY and the pain of divorce.

This is why the SEXUAL METAPHOR or picture is used BOTH for God's INTIMATE LOVE and for our IDOLATROUS LUST.

So:

Q. How do you see yourself?

Q. A million miles away from this woman?

OR perhaps

Q. A bit more of a kindred spirit – knowing that addictive cycle that seems to have great power over you – perhaps even

an addictive power to drag you off to your loves and your spiritual lovers?

Let's move quickly on to this group of teachers of the Law and Pharisees that have been the instrumental parties in bringing this woman to Jesus - #2 then and what I'm simply going to call:

2. The Jews

Reading from Verse 3: *READ* Verses 3 through to 6 *READ*.

It's not hard to see what they are doing.

We've already said that they most likely had framed this woman for their own purposes knowing her weakness, the fact that she was one with a somewhat broken-down lifestyle.

And they are intent on not simply:

- stitching up this woman BUT ALSO
- spearing Jesus upon the horns of a dilemma

You see:

- IF Jesus sides with the Jews and says – yes you are right, the Law of Moses pronounces that the wages of this sin is death
THEN
He will be showing disrespect to the Roman Law which says that the Jews have no right to carry out capital punishments.

Not only that Jesus would also have lost the the popular support of the people as “friend of sinners and tax-collectors”.

Now on the other hand:

- IF Jesus veers the other way and says “No! The woman should not be stoned.” then he will be clearly setting himself up against the Law of Moses and will be quickly hauled before the Sanhedrin and discredited as a heretic strongly undermining his message as one who has come not to abolish the Law but to fulfil it.

Jesus bends down

The passage proceeds in a very fascinating way – the second half of Verse 6 says:

“But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger.”

There are at least two questions that this action begs:

- ONE is to ask: Q. Why is he doing this?
You could think that Jesus is sort of playing for time, trying perhaps to give himself a few moments to think out his strategy.

It could be that he is wanting to allow time for the people to show their true colours, to deliberately make these accusers repeat their ugly charges to let their sadistic cruelty emerge clearly.

- the SECOND is to ask: Q. What exactly is he writing?

The short answer is: “We don’t know”.

One interesting possibility is noted by William Barclay – he says:

“By far the most interesting suggestion emerges from certain of the later manuscripts. The Armenian translates the passage this way: ‘**He himself, bowing his head, was writing with his finger on the earth to declare their sins; and they were seeing their several sins on the stones.**’ The suggestion is that Jesus was writing in the dust the sins of the very men who were accusing the woman.”

See how the Jews respond – Verse 7 starts: “When they **KEPT ON QUESTIONING HIM...**”

They were like hungry animals at a feeding frenzy wanting their pound of flesh – they were not going to go quietly.

The Prodigal Son story

Think back for a moment to the Prodigal Son story. Remember how there were actually 2 sons and not one and how the elder brother was so very angry and full of accusation towards the younger prodigal.

How, even though the Father in the story pleaded with him and gave him time to reconsider and showed him what grace and forgiveness looked like – this son was just full of anger and resentment.

That parable – would benefit by being renamed the Parable of the Prodigal Family:

- the younger son wasted the Father’s love big time (BUT he did repent and come back)
- the Father himself showed great prodigality in lavishing love on the son receiving him back
- the elder brother wasted the Father’s love even bigger time because he stayed within the fold, and kept all the rules (he kept the Law) but inwardly he was devoid of love and devotion.

In reality he wanted to do what the younger son had done, but instead he choose to seethe with anger and to be bitter and unloving.

So I wonder whether we are excellent at PICKING OUT and POINTING OUT the sins of others.

Making completely sure they don’t get away with any breach of God’s word.

I wonder whether we are good with STONES!!

So:

Q. How do you see yourself?

Q. A million miles away from these Jews?

OR perhaps

Q. You sense you have a bit more of that elder brother spirit within you?

Well let’s close this loop by observing #3:

3. The Lord

Jesus does not disappoint them. He gives them an answer:

Verse 7 “...If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.”

You have to say that Jesus never ducks things – especially when the issues at stake are so high and the outcome for someone’s life is so much on the line.

A problem with principles

You know that principles are very useful and important in life – and the Scriptures are full of many really key principles that we are to extract and roll-out into our lives.

So e.g. “spare the rod and spoil the child” enshrines a key principle of discipline that we do well to observe – yes it can be tempting to continually indulge our children and to rarely if ever discipline them.

However there can be a problem or perhaps a pitfall with principles and that is the need to realise that they are PLURAL and not SINGULAR.

Q. What do I mean? Well simply that there are usually MULTIPLE PRINCIPLES are need to be balanced at one and the same time.

For the Jews, it was an open and shut case – she broke the Law, she is a sinner and there must be JUSTICE DONE.

The problem is that this leaves no room has no regard for the PRINCIPLE OF MERCY.

Parking tickets

Let me illustrate this a little.

When you are walking along the road in town and you see a car stopped where it shouldn’t be and you see a traffic warden writing out a ticket – and at that moment maybe you feel all is well with the world because people really should not be allowed to park their cars on double yellow and get away with it.

Ok – revise the scenario a bit – YOU have parked your car on double yellow because you needed to quickly collect your friends kid from school because they are not well – and as you emerge you see the parking warden standing at the rear of your vehicle noting down the number.

Q. Do you think that this is the time that JUSTICE should be done OR that MERCY should be applied?

You see when it comes to being PRINCIPLED, we need to pause and think over whether there are other principles that might need to feature in the mix.

The Prodigal Son Parable

Let me return one more time to the Prodigal Son parable and ask:

Q. What really is the best name for it?

- Q. The prodigal son? – Because the younger son was so wasteful with his father’s wealth squandering it on riotous living

- Q. The prodigal sons (plural)? – Because the elder brother was just as bad, squandering all the privileges of being constantly in the love of the father – BY BEING RESENTFUL and ANGRY INSIDE – this anger becoming fully apparent when the younger brother returns.
- OR MAYBE Q. The prodigal family? – Because we really cannot do justice to the story by seeing all the different ways in which the Father throws around his unwarranted love and mercy.

He let's the younger son go (at great cost to himself and risk to his estate and reputation)
 He runs out to receive & protect the son from the ire of the community when he returns empty-handed
 He gives him even more blessing by bringing the community together to welcome and accept him back
 He goes out to the elder son in great humility to plead with him to come and extend forgiveness too.

You see the reason I bring us to this parable while we step our way through John 8 is that it seems to map on so closely to this real everyday account.

The truth is that this story is being played out and replayed in a situation near you.

And it invites us to see whom we most resemble.

See how Jesus administers MERCY

Jesus balances in the PRINCIPLE OF MERCY (whilst not ignoring the Law and the reality of JUSTICE).

We see this MERCY in a couple of ways:

- see how he has REGARD EVEN FOR THOSE THAT ARE ATTACKING THE WOMAN

Both times that Jesus stoops down to write on the ground are actually little evidences of his kindness.

In the one he allows the situation to develop its true gravity so that they accuser can really hear themselves – they need to know and behold the depth of hatred that is in their voices and their clamour for justice.

Also in the second time, he gives them time to think and then slink away one at a time without him staring them done and exacting a penalty of humiliation from them.

- see too HIS REGARD FOR THE WOMAN

"Has no-one condemned you...then neither do I condemn you..." (Verses 10&11)

Q. Do you remember those tremendous verses that we came across in John 3 when we were looking at the encounter Nicodemus had with Jesus?

John 3 verses 16-18 "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. **For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.**"

The apostle Paul confirms that wonderful truth in Romans 8 and the opening verses:

Romans 8 verses 1-3 "Therefore, **there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus**, because through

Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so **he condemned sin in sinful man....**”

So Jesus does not desire to CONDEMN people – Q. Does this somehow mean that he must therefore be CONDONING or somehow EXCUSING sin? (This did seem to be something of the feeling of some).

Well very clearly Jesus covers this angle and UPHOLDS the other PRINCIPLE of JUSTICE and says: “Go now and leave your life of sin.”

The point is that Jesus knows that in our own strength we cannot uphold JUSTICE 100% and so he has done that upon the cross for us and by the infilling of the Holy Spirit, he gives us the empowering to live a God honouring and sin-avoiding life from that point on.

This is what the cross of Jesus is all about that unfathomable intersection of both JUSTICE & MERCY.

CONCLUSION

Q. So how do you see yourself?

- Maybe a bit like the woman – caught in the clutches of sin and needing the strength of a Redeeming hand for rescue and yet knowing the “freezing out” by religious people around her
- Maybe a bit like the Jews – dominated by that self-righteous demand that JUSTICE has to be served and feeling within a certain ice-coldness that desperately needs to be melted
- Maybe you have been on the receiving end of MERCY – and now you are better able to TEMPER the incessant demands of JUSTICE with the LOVING ADVANCES OF MERCY

So - Q. **HOW DO - YOU SEE YOURSELF?**

Let us pray...AMEN