

“Can I Start Again?”

Matthew 18:21-22, John 8:1-11

As a rule, we humans are an unforgiving lot. Usually, if you make a mistake or do the wrong thing, you don't get a **second chance**. If you fail a test in school, your bad grade goes in the grade book. If you do your job poorly, you get written up and maybe eventually fired. If you betray a friend or significant other, odds are good that your relationship will come to an end. Yes, sometimes you get lucky and are given a second chance. But most of the time, things don't work that way. I remember one time my dad wanted to go fishing at a local reservoir. To get to the fishing spot, he had to walk down a road that was blocked to auto traffic. But while he was down there, it started to rain – very heavily. So, my mom and I decided to take a chance and drive around the barricade to go get him. My dad then got behind the wheel to drive us home. Well, wouldn't you know it, just as we were just about to pull back onto the main road, Mr. Park Ranger showed up. My dad tried his best to explain the situation, and to elicit compassion for his rain-soaked self. As he concluded his plea for a second chance, my dad finished with the one-word question: Forgiven? Mr. Park Ranger looked at him and said, “No.” Dad got a ticket. No second chances there. And, for most of us, that's the way life is. But as unforgiving as we might be, the Bible shows us that God does not play by the same rules. In today's reading from John, we see a prime example of how Jesus extends God's grace into even the worst occasions of human sin and guilt.

Let's look at some components of this bad situation. We'll start with the Act: Adultery. A woman is brought before Jesus who has been caught in adultery. The accusation wasn't based just on rumor or suspicion. The Bible tells us she'd been caught in the very act. Can you imagine how traumatic and humiliating this would have been for her? Not only did she violate one of God's most sacred commandments, which would no doubt have brought guilt and shame on its own. But she was found out in the most embarrassing way possible. Now everyone knew, and there was no hiding from it. Her very life was on the line.

Have you ever done something you shouldn't have? Of course you have. We all have. Most of the time, our sin is a fairly private matter, known only to a few, or perhaps only to ourselves. That doesn't mean we've gotten away with it. Whether the sin is small or large, the knowledge that we have betrayed God and that we have forsaken our deepest principles takes root in us like a cancer. It eats away at us. It makes us feel badly about ourselves. It makes us feel guilty and ashamed. It may make us fearful of being caught and held accountable. And when we feel badly about ourselves, it's very easy to project those negative feelings onto others, becoming cranky, mean, and judgmental. In the classes I've taken on counseling, the teachers have always pointed out that the things we hate in others are quite often the things we actually hate about ourselves, but don't want to face. Of course, it's even worse when everyone knows our business and our sin becomes known to all. Earlier in my career, I had been through a difficult, conflict-filled committee meeting. In its aftermath, I sent out an email to a few people I trusted explaining what happened at the meeting, and in the process portrayed a couple people in a less than flattering light. That wasn't a good idea. I shouldn't have done it to begin with. But I felt even worse when one of the people I trusted forwarded my email everyone she knew. Yes, it was bad enough to have insulted a couple people behind their backs, but it was far worse for everyone to know it. Sin, guilt, and the exposure of our wrongdoing are all very painful things to us – in addition to whatever pain we have caused others.

The story goes on, as the woman is dragged before Jesus with a question about what should be done. It was clear to everyone that **the Old Testament Law specified her punishment as death by stoning**. Remember, this is the ancient Middle East. Even in our day, there are some who practice this horrendous form of punishment, even though it garners widespread disapproval. Back then, it was

just a matter of course. Once again, the woman must have been terrified. She faced immediate capital punishment with no chance for a trial or any kind of appeal.

When we sin; when we do the wrong thing, even if we don't intend to do harm, there are consequences. Not only do we suffer internally, but there are ramifications if we are caught. If our sin is bad enough, we may be punished by the criminal justice system. Much more frequently, our sins bring the punishment of being shunned, gossiped about, or treated poorly. We pay a price in our relationships. Sometimes our failings have a negative impact on our physical health. They always have a negative effect on our mental and spiritual health. Consequently, our entire lives are changed as a result of our guilt. It's like we fall down a hole that we can't climb out of, as the negative consequences build on each other and keep dragging us down. Lately, I've been watching a TV show called "Celebrity Rehab with Dr. Drew." Among the celebrities featured on the show is an actor named Tom Sizemore, who has had numerous run-ins with the law, and a well-publicized history of drug addiction. One thing that is evident in watching him is how much pain he is in. No doubt, his use of drugs began as an attempt to self-medicate against some pain in his life. But instead of making things better, the drugs have only dragged him down further. Now, in addition to whatever pain he faced before, he has serious career problems and, according to Dr. Drew, the show's host, his very life is in danger. (Not to mention you'd have to have totally lost all dignity and self-respect to be on a show like that.) But that's how sin – of any type – functions in our lives. It gets its hooks into us, and continually makes things worse.

Let's think also about **the crowd** that dragged the woman before Jesus. They weren't truly interested in justice or doing the right thing. Rather, they were **self-righteous and bloodthirsty**. And they were the religious leaders of the community! The Scripture tells us that they were primarily interested in trapping Jesus; in getting him to say something against their interpretation of the law so that they could make further accusations against him. So, on one level, they didn't really care about the woman at all. And notice the inherent injustice in the system. Where was the man she had been caught with? Was anyone punishing him? It wasn't about justice. It was a chance for the Scribes and Pharisees to trap Jesus, and to build their own reputations as upholders of truth and justice at the expense of a defenseless woman.

The ones who can be the most damaging to people trapped in sin are often those who should be the most help. The Scribes and Pharisees should have been concerned with the well being and restoration of the woman, and the man, who had been caught in adultery. In our day, it is often the religious community that is the most judgmental, cruel, and self-righteous. I was just reading the story of one woman who had been through a difficult experience of abuse, addiction, and other unhealthy behaviors. She was trying to get well, so a friend suggested she go to church. Her response: "That's the last thing I need; I already feel badly enough about myself." But rather than judging people, we should seek to emulate the example of Jesus.

Notice how our Lord Jesus responds to the situation: He is merciful. This isn't immediately apparent, because when the Scribes and Pharisees drag the woman before Jesus, his first response is to kneel down and start writing in the dirt. Over the years, there has been a lot of speculation about what he was writing. But John doesn't tell us, and so we can be pretty sure that what he was writing is not the point. The point is that Jesus was demonstrating utter disinterest in the agenda of the crowd. He wasn't interested in judging, condemning or punishing the woman. He wasn't interested in being put to the test by the Scribes and Pharisees. They were on a completely different track than Jesus; they were so far off the mark that he didn't even want to give them the time of day. But his indifference was not for the well-being of the woman, it was for the self-righteousness judgment of the mob. When Jesus responds to them, he completely derails their plan. "Let the one without sin cast the first stone."

And as Jesus returned to writing on the ground, the mob broke up. The older and wiser leaving first, followed by the younger, until no one was left.

When the crowd had left, Jesus stood up and addressed the woman, asking, “Where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one, sir.” And Jesus responds by saying, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.” Other translations put it this way, “Go and sin no more.” Note that Jesus **response is a chance for the woman to start again** with a clean slate. He doesn’t hold her sin against her. He doesn’t feel compelled to make sure she suffers any further for her wrongdoing. He just lets her go, free to start over as if she had never done anything wrong. Note also, that he does this without her confessing or even asking for forgiveness. And his injunction to “not sin any more,” isn’t based on the expectation that she will never do anything wrong again – Jesus knew better than that. Neither was he implying that this was her one last chance, and that all forgiveness would be revoked if she sinned again. It is a simple commission to move ahead with her life, to learn from her mistake, and to take a different path. She doesn’t need to let the rest of her life be defined by her sin, and neither do we need to let our lives be defined by our sins. Jesus’ mercy is for us, just as much as it was for her. His permission to start over again is for us too. He’s telling us, “I don’t condemn you. So get up, dust yourself off, and get on with your life with greater wisdom than you had before. Learn from your mistakes and sins, so you don’t repeat them.”

The literal minded among us might question how extensive Jesus’ mercy is. You might think, “Okay, he gives us another chance. But surely there is a limit to how many chances we get before he comes in wrath to destroy us.” Nothing could be further from the spirit of Jesus’ teachings. He comes to give us not just a second chance, but a nearly **exponential number of chances** to start over. It’s a good thing, too, because we need it. Notice what Jesus says to Peter in our reading from Matthew. Peter wonders how many times he should forgive someone who sins against him. Peter wants to limit it, so he proposes a number that stood for completeness in Jewish tradition. “Should I forgive as many as seven times?” he asks Jesus. But Jesus says, “Not seven, but seventy-seven times.” Other translations say “seventy times seven.” The point is not that Jesus is giving a legalistic number of chances for us to give others, but rather that there can’t be a legalistic number. And since Jesus teaches that we are to forgive others as God forgives us, we can hardly expect God to be less merciful than Jesus expects us to be. There is no limit to the number of times God will forgive us. There is no limit to the number of chances God will give us in this life to start again.

So, if you are like most people, and have some things in your life that you know aren’t for the best; if you struggle with personality traits or habits that you know are harmful or sinful; you don’t have to be trapped by them. God’s mercy and grace are yours. It doesn’t matter what you’ve done, or what the self-righteous people have said about you. Go on your way knowing that Jesus doesn’t condemn you. He offers you the gift of forgiveness and mercy freely, so that you can start again – wiser than you were before – hoping that next time you will make better choices, and more fully live up to your identity as a child of God.