

**Title:** Asking Jesus: Grace

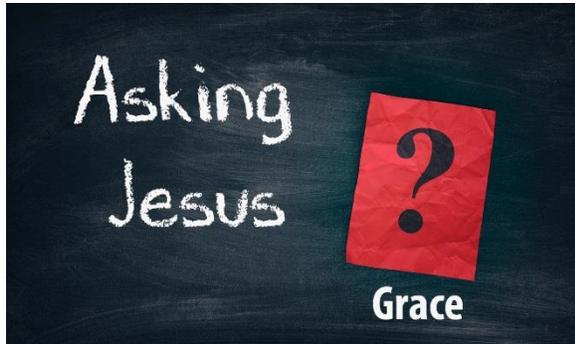
**Date:** April 1 & 2, 2017

**Preaching:** Senior Minister Randy Spleth

**Scripture:** [Matthew 26:6-13](#)

**Text:** [John 8:2-11](#)

**E-mail:** [Randy Spleth](#)



Sometimes a statement is really a question. Sometimes a question is really a statement. We'll see this today when we look at a couple of questions. They are "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" (John 8:10b) They aren't my questions; Jesus asks them because asking questions is what Jesus does. I've nicknamed him "asking

Jesus."

If you are new this morning, we are making our way to Jerusalem by looking at the many questions Jesus asks. We arrive next week. Palm Sunday begins a week of questions. In order to get us all on the same page about the questions of Jesus, let's spend a minute in review.

Our starting place was an invitation to explore the questions that Jesus asks. When we do, we explore our relationship with him. "Why are you searching for me? What are you looking for? What do you want me to do? Jesus offers questions for self-reflection sake, to discover something about our identity. It is like he is holding up a mirror. "Who do you say I am? "He is creating a path for self-reflection and understanding because his questions are for our benefit. Jesus doesn't ask because he needs an answer. Jesus knows that our faith is shaped when we explore his questions like "Why are you afraid?" "Why did you doubt?" That was week three.

Last week, Jesus addressed the issues of abundance and scarcity, something that has to do with material possessions like food. But they also address matters of the heart and soul, things like compassion and tolerance, generosity and love. "How many loaves do you have?" is a capacity question, not just of baked s but of spirit. It is why he follows it with "Do you not yet understand?" (Mark 8:21) Jesus wants us to do an inventory of the heart, to search our souls and discover a capacity to embrace his abundant life.

There is soul searching that goes on in today's story with a statement that is a question and a question that is a statement. It is all about someone being caught right smack in the middle of doing something wrong. Can anyone relate?

I can. Many of you know that I went to TCU. How about those Horned Frogs? They were not in the final four but they did win the NIT Thursday night, destroying a team that has a Hoosier connection, Georgia Tech. If you aren't a basketball fan, ask an IU alum for an explanation.

Getting caught right smack in the middle of doing something I knew was wrong is a story from my first year at TCU. I wasn't a month into my freshman year. It happened at the Honors Program fall retreat. After all the presentations were over on Friday night, three of my new found friends and I decided that it was too hot to go to sleep. September in Texas can be that way. Next door to the campgrounds was a small recreational lake, really just a big pond with an artificial beach and docks out in the middle of the lake, diving boards and water swing. There was even a big slide.

Even though we knew it was wrong, even though we knew we'd be trespassing, we thought, "Nobody is going to find out." So, we jumped the fence, pulled off our clothes and dove into this dark lake for a midnight swim. We were having a great time until one of my new found buddies decided that he wanted to go down the water slide. At least that's what we thought happened because just about the time he hit the water, someone turned on a switch and stadium lights all around that little pond lit it up the lake like it was the middle of the day. It was a like a spotlight had been turned on and we were caught right smack in the middle of doing something wrong.

My buddies and I never swam so fast in our lives. We never dressed so quickly. We ran as fast as we could, jumped the fence back into the retreat center, breathed a sigh of relief that we hadn't been caught only to immediately find ourselves confronted by the dean of the honors program who simply said, "What are you boys up to?" "Just taking a walk" I said even though my hair was dripping and my shirt was on inside out.

I wish that was my most embarrassing moment of being caught; it's not. But it is the only one I'm going to tell you about. There are moments in lives, times in everyone's life, when we do something wrong. There are decisions we make to do something that we know isn't right. There are decisions that are made when we are young and foolish and depending on what it is, can have consequences for the rest of your life. Sometimes, it is a weak moment giving in to temptation, and when over, we would give anything if

we could go back and act differently. Other times it's not a moment. It is a season of our life and when we come to our senses, we realize we blew it. We look back and wonder, "What was I thinking" or "I wish I can go back and act differently." Can anybody identify? Of course you can because we've all been caught right smack in the middle of doing something we absolutely know is wrong.

If God were to catch you right smack in the middle of doing something you absolutely know is wrong, what would God do? If you ever wondered, you don't have to any longer because Jesus answers this question with a question.<sup>1</sup>

She was caught right smack in the middle of doing something wrong. There is no dispute about this. Even though John thankfully leaves out all of the voyeuristic details, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery." (John 8:4). Do you hear them click their teeth and shake their head in disgust when they say, "the very act."

She was a married women being unfaithful to her husband. You don't have to have a committee of moral enforcers like the Pharisees to tell you that's wrong. Your own conscience tells you. God has given every one of us a conscience. When we do something wrong, we don't need a committee. Our conscience tells us. That's why we feel dirty and unclean on the inside. They found her in bed, dragged her out to the temple to Jesus, interrupted his teaching and said, "In the very act!" Can you imagine how embarrassed she must have been?

There is something a little odd about the story. You may have noted what is missing. I think most everyone agrees that it takes two to commit adultery. If she was caught "in the very act" where is the other actor? There is no mention of the other party involved. Maybe nobody cared about the man involved. Or maybe this confrontation in the Temple wasn't really about adultery after all.

You can quickly come to this conclusion as the story unfolds. They say to Jesus, "'Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?' They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him." (John 8:5-6a) In telling the story, John at least has the decency to tell us what this is really about. It isn't about the woman's sin. It is about setting a trap for Jesus.

This scene with the woman and the questions Jesus is about to ask, comes at a critical point in the ministry of Jesus. While his message and ministry is gaining increasing support among the population, there is growing concern

among the religious and political leaders. They fear the implications of his popularity and are committed to finding a way to have him arrested. In fact, the very day before this encounter, the chief priests and Pharisees argue about it; Nicodemus defends Jesus. So this isn't really what it appears to be. In front of everyone, the accusers made a case for her death, determined to prove to the crowd that Jesus didn't have the courage to follow clear-cut Law of Moses. But if he did condemn her and incite the crowd to stone her, the Roman authorities would step in and arrest Jesus. By the first century, they looked down on anyone but them meting out capital punishment. The trap was set between Jewish Law and Roman rule. Either way, Jesus was in a jam.

Jesus does a fascinating thing. "Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground." (John 8:6) Was he just buying time to collect his thoughts? Just as John leaves out the bedroom details, he leaves out what Jesus wrote in the dirt. There are lots of theories. He wrote down the sins of the accusers. He wrote down a sentence he would deliver, a common practice in the Roman court system. There is a parallel in the book of Daniel when a mysterious hand wrote the death sentence of the king of Babylon. May he was just doodling in the dirt to irritate the accusers and vent his own anger.

They keep pestering Jesus, pushing for an answer. Finally, "...he straightened up and said to them, 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.'" (John 8:7a) Jesus, is that a statement or a question? Jesus are you answering us or questioning us? Sometimes a statement can be a question.

It's brilliant. As Jesus' words settle over the crowd, I think you could have heard a pin drop. And then, you hear stones hit the ground, because once they realized his answer was really a question, all of the clinched fists began to open. The self-righteous indignation fueling their outrage was instantly cooled because who isn't guilty of some failure of judgment, some selfish act, and some hurtful choice, a lie or a leap in a lake? Who hasn't been of being caught in smack dab in the middle of the act? In fact, they were all caught, right then in there, smack dab in the middle of an act called judgment.

Which is of course the point of the statement that really is a question. If Alex Trebek had been there, he would have corrected Jesus with his standard Jeopardy line. "Jesus, please put your answer in the form of a question." But there was no need. They all understood and one by one they left and as they did, Jesus went back to writing on the ground.

Now, it is just the woman and Jesus, who is doodling. What was he writing this time? Jesus straightens up and asks two questions. "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" (John 8:10). There he goes again. Asking questions. Or are they questions. You decide. You've been caught in the very act, pulled in front of a crowd. They know. You know. You knew when you decided to do something wrong and you condemned yourself. You'll always live with the consequences. It's that God given conscience and the regret, shame and failure that lives inside us when we sin and fall short. It's more statement than question because of what she feels. But she responds as if it is a question.

"She said, 'No one, sir.' And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.'" (Matthew 8:11)

There it is. The story in summary. The questions Jesus voices here don't illumine for us Jesus' opinion about adultery; they're not even meant to illustrate his considerable political skill. These questions were raised to remind the crowd and remind us: Jesus wasn't sent to condemn; rather, he came to offer life-giving grace. If Nicodemus, the very Nicodemus that sought Jesus out under the cover of darkness to learn from him, the very Nicodemus that had the previous evening defended Jesus before the Sanhedrin, if Nicodemus was in the crowd on this day, and it is reasonable to think he was, and if, he was slow to make his exit, he might have turned around said to this woman, "He told me this a few years ago."

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." (John 3:16-17) This story of the woman caught in the very act is an illustration of that last verse, "not to condemn but save. Or, you can simply call it grace.

The gift Jesus gave the crowd that day, the gift Jesus gave the woman that day, and the gift we modern Christ followers receive is this: Jesus is not afraid to tell the truth about what it means to be human. Every encounter we have with God should be filled with that kind of truth telling, acknowledging where we have failed, where we have fallen short, where we are caught in the very act of our sin. But at the same time, every encounter is an opportunity to be covered with grace. He didn't come to condemn but to save. That's grace. Will you accept it? That's the question.

It there in this story, isn't it? I think I see it. Jesus walks away. The stunned women, the one caught in the very act stands alone, head hanging in shame. She looks down at where Jesus had written in the dirt as the

words echo in her heart. "Neither do I condemn you." And on the ground, she sees a question mark. How does she respond? How will you?

---

<sup>1</sup> Right Smack in the Middle of Sin, Larry Moyer, retrieved by subscription @preachingtoday.com.