

WHO IS THE FRIEND OF SINNERS? (John 8:1-11)

Pastor Tom was in his study when his secretary buzzed him on the intercom, “There’s someone here to see you.”

He buzzed back, “Send ‘em in.” The secretary escorted a 5-year girl into the pastor’s office. The little girl was all dressed up and was the daughter of active members of the church. The secretary announced, “She has a theological question for you.” He nodded, and the secretary left.

Pastor Tom knelt down. He placed his hands on the girl’s shoulder and said, “Hello, honey. I’m glad to see you. What’s on your mind?”

The girl looked up. With great sincerity and genuine concern, she asked, “What are we going to eat in heaven?”

Nothing in Tom’s theological education had prepared him to answer this question. His mind raced as he searched for something to say. Finally, he explained, “Here on earth we have physical bodies and God gives us physical food. Up in heaven, we will have spiritual bodies, and God will give us spiritual food.” Tom paused waiting to see if that answer satisfied her.

The little girl looked at her pastor and replied, “Thank you.” The inquisitive 5-year-old left the pastor’s office. As she walked by the secretary’s desk, she leaned toward her and said, “He doesn’t know either.”

I confess, there are many questions to which I do not know the answer. There are plenty of questions that my theological education did not prepare me to answer. And, no doubt, there have been times, like with Pastor Tom, I have just pretended to know the answer. Today, I am going to ask a question to which I really do know the answer.

Last Sunday, we observed the hatred the Jewish leaders had for Jesus. They wanted to kill Him. They wanted to get rid of Him. They rightly viewed Him as a threat to their power and their plans.

The religious leaders had certain complaints against Jesus. In Matthew 9, Jesus called Matthew to be His disciple. You will remember that Matthew was a tax collector. As such, he had earned the hatred and contempt of his own people, the Jews. They viewed him as a turn-coat. He was working for their enemy, the Roman government. Israel was an occupied nation. They had been conquered by Rome and now had to pay taxes to Rome, a pagan people who did not honor their God as the one supreme God.

After Jesus called Matthew to follow Him, Matthew threw a party for Jesus. The only friends Matthew had left were other tax collectors who were just as despised as he was. Listen to what we read in Matthew 9:10-11.

¹⁰ And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples. ¹¹ And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

Let me frame for you why the religious establishment had such a problem with the fact that Jesus fellowshiped and spent time with tax collectors and sinners. The Jewish

teachers and scholars believed that their nation was being judged by God. The very fact they were an occupied nation was evidence of this judgment. The reason God was judging them, in their mind, was that there was sin in the land. So, it was the sinners, the bad people, who were responsible for the sad condition of their country. Just as it was wrong for a Jew to give aid to the enemy by collecting taxes, it was wrong for Jews to befriend sinners because they were the enemy.

Jesus knew and had heard their complaints against Him. In Matthew 11 and Luke 7, Jesus rehearsed their complaints. We read in Matthew 11:19, “The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look at Him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’”

Now, if someone said to you, “My, you are a friend of sinners,” you would take that as a compliment. In calling Jesus a friend of sinners, they were not complementing Him. They were insulting Him and accusing Him of colluding with the enemy.

This morning, we are going to look at a passage in which we find a sinner. This sinner was a woman, and if anybody ever needed a friend, it was this woman. Her story is found in the first 11 verses of John 8.

As we look at this passage, I want to ask and answer an important question. The question is this: “Who is the friend of sinners?” In my attempt to answer this question, we are going to consider who is not the friend of sinners, who really is their friend, and finally who should be.

The Hypocrite is Not the Friend of Sinners; He is Our Loudest Accuser

The scribes and Pharisees named in v. 3 have been called the nation’s “self-appointed custodians of conduct.” In this passage, however, they not really concerned about justice; they were bent on exterminating the one they viewed as Enemy #1. They were using this woman to get to Jesus. The one they really wanted to take out was Jesus.

They thought they had engineered an ingenious way to do so. There can be little doubt that this woman was set-up. How likely is it that you are going to stumble upon two people who are engaged in the very act of adultery? It is very unlikely that this was an accidental discovery.

It occurs to me that it takes two to tango, so to speak. The obvious question is, “Where is the man?” If this woman was caught in the act of adultery, where is her accomplice? I am guessing that if it wasn’t a Pharisee, the man had been hired by the Pharisees to get this woman in trouble, and he was promised that no harm would come to him.

This woman was a pawn in the hands of the Pharisees, and their goal was to checkmate Jesus. These men didn’t care about this woman’s life, much less her reputation. Who cares if she is stoned? Who cares if her family is shattered and her reputation ruined? She is nothing more than bait in the trap that is meant to catch the dangerous, controversial carpenter from Nazareth.

Their thinking was this: If Jesus says, “Yes, the Law of Moses teaches her life is forfeit. Go ahead and stone her,” two things would happen. First, He would lose the support of the people, and second, the Pharisees could complain to the Roman government, “Jesus is advocating things contrary to your law.” By law, only the Romans

could carry out capital punishment.

If Jesus said, “Give her a break. Let her go,” they could say that Jesus does not honor the righteous requirements of the Law of Moses.

Either way, they think they’ve got Him now on the horns of a dilemma, between a rock and a hard place.

In Matthew 23, Jesus eyed His religious critics and called them *blind guides*, *blind men*, and *blind fools*. Jesus’ favorite word for the religious elite was *hypocrites*. Six times in Matthew 23 and 8 times in that gospel, Jesus looked right at His loudest accusers and called them *hypocrites*. The Greek word for hypocrite was the word for a stage actor. In the ancient world, actors wore masks on stage.

It is from behind a mask that those who pretend to be something they are not dare to judge others.

In their book *unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity*, David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons reported that in a survey, 84% of the respondents claimed they personally know at least one committed Christian, but only 15% of them thought the lifestyles of those Christ-followers were significantly different from anyone else.

How is that we can have Jesus living inside of us by His Holy Spirit and yet not live a life that is obviously different from the world around us? Worse yet is to not live differently, act like we are, and judge others for not attaining our non-existent level of godliness.

If you are a sinner, and you are, and so am I, beware of hypocrites. They are not your friends. They will accuse you loudly. There is someone else or rather something else that is not your friend.

The Law of God is Not the Friend of Sinners; It is Our Harshest Judge

Others may stand and make accusations, but God’s Word pronounces judgment. The Pharisees weren’t lying when they said, “Moses commanded us to stone such women.” Actually, the Law didn’t say how, but it did stipulate, “If a man commits adultery with another man’s wife . . . both the adulterer and the adulteress must be put to death.” That is Leviticus 20:10, and we are told in Deuteronomy 22:22, “If a man is found sleeping with another man’s wife, both the man who slept with her and the woman must die.” Of course, the Pharisees ignored what the Law said about the man, but they remembered what it said about the woman.

Our loudest accuser may be the hypocrite, but we can be certain, our harshest judge is the Word of God. We have a tendency to overestimate our own goodness in God’s sight and underestimate the seriousness of our sin. I’ve met very few people who admit, “I’m a terrible sinner, and I deserve to go to hell.” Most people, when I ask them why God should let them into heaven, they say, “Well, I’m a pretty good person. I try to live right. I’ve never done any really, bad things. I’ve never killed anybody.”

The Bible offers a different estimation of us. It says, “There is no one righteous, not even one . . . All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one . . . for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:10, 12, 23).

The word *sin* literally means “to miss the mark.” The Bible also tells us the consequences of our missing the mark. “For the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23).

When you and I stand before the Law of God, the Law declares us “guilty” and condemns us as worthy of death. God’s Law is our harshest judge.

Have you ever watched carpenters erect the walls of a building? Before they nail the wall in place, they put a level to them. The level tells whether the wall is straight. That is all a level can do. A level can’t make a crooked wall straight. It can only tell you whether the wall is straight or how crooked it is.

In the same way, God’s law cannot make your crooked life straight. It can only show you how out of line your life really is.

When I was in grade school, every year the class would have a spelling bee. The entire class would stand. The teacher would go down the rows and give each student a word to spell. If the student spelled the word correctly, he or she would remain standing. If the student spelled the word incorrectly, that student had to sit down.

The winner of the class would compete with the other winners of the school. I imagine the winner of the school would go on to compete with the winners across the district. I don’t know. I never got that far. Eventually, the winners of each state would make it to Washington D.C. to represent their state in the National Spelling Bee. In the end, there is one winner.

My point is that in a spelling bee there is zero tolerance. If you misspell a single word, you must sit down. You are out. One misspelled word, one forgotten or incorrect letter means you are done. No one says, “Well, you got most of the letters right; you got more letters right than Suzi.” Just one mistake, and you are gone.

That is the way it is with God’s Law. If you transgress God’s standards just one time, you’ve blown it. How many cars do you have to steal to be a car thief? How many banks do you have knock over to be a bank robber? How many sins do you have to commit to be considered a sinner? Just one. How many sins do you have to commit to stand guilty before God and to be deserving of hell? Just one. That’s all it takes.

Obeying much or even most of God’s Laws will not justify you. The purpose of the Law is to show you that you are a sinner, and you need a Savior, that you need a Friend in High Places.

That brings us to the next truth.

Jesus, God’s Son, is the Friend of Sinners; He is Our Only Hope

Unlike the hypocrites in our story, Jesus did not accuse this woman. Unlike the Law, Jesus did not condemn the woman. What did He do? He befriended her. He went beyond the Law and offered grace. How did He do that?

He did that in several ways. Notice what we read in v. 3. They placed her in the midst. The NIV reads, “They made her stand before the group.” I doubt they gave her time to put on her Sunday clothes and check her make-up. Maybe they let her cover herself with a bedsheet. Maybe they took her just as they found her and paraded her through the streets.

What does Jesus do? Look at v. 6. He stoops down and doodles in the dirt. The eyes now turn from the woman to Jesus. I think that was His intent. **He shifts the focus from**

the woman to Himself, and that was a gracious act on His part.

There has been much conjecture as to what Jesus wrote. Was it the name of the man? Was it the sins of the Pharisees? It may not have been anything recognizable. He may just have been making indiscriminate marks. For me, the point is not what he wrote but what He did. He drew the attention away from her to Himself.

Jesus does the same for us. Satan is our accuser. He stands before God, points our way and yells, “Look at her. Look at him. Look at what they have done. Do you see all that sin?”

God replies, “No. I don’t. Jesus is in the way.”

Christian, Jesus stands between you and your sin. God sees Him, not you.

Jesus also silences her accusers. He didn’t defend what she did. He didn’t condone her actions. Rather, He said to the accusers, effectively, “Don’t judge this woman; judge your own heart.” He showed them that they weren’t qualified to be her judge.

The older ones dropped their rocks and left before the younger ones did. They were more keenly aware of their own sin. The older we get, the more we realize the wickedness of our own heart.

A preacher once said, “If you knew me as I know me, you would not sit her and listen to me.” He added, “But let me remind you, if I knew you the way you know yourself, I wouldn’t stand her and talk to you right now.”

In the end, **Jesus shows Himself to be the friend of this woman by challenging her instead of condemning her.** Jesus was the only one qualified to throw a stone, but He didn’t. Look again at vv. 10-11.

John Claypool once said, “God is more interested in your future than your past. He is more concerned for what you can yet become than what you used to be . . . God’s goodness is bigger than your badness; His willingness to forgive is greater than your power to sin.”

One of Garth Brooks biggest hits was a song he recorded early in his career. The name of it was *Friends in Low Places*. It is not exactly a song that inspires you to rise above your circumstances. These friends in low places are going to help him drink his troubles away. That approach doesn’t really take away your troubles. It just causes you to forget them for a little while.

When you have a relationship with Jesus, you have a Friend in the Highest Place. You have a Friend who sits upon the throne of heaven. He doesn’t help you to simply forget your troubles. He takes them away. That is the Friend sinners like you and me need.

We have looked at who the Friend of Sinners isn’t. We have seen who the Friend of Sinners is. I want you to notice one more thing—who should be the Friend of Sinners.

The Church Should Be the Friend of Sinners; We Are Sinners, Too

All of us qualify to fit in the category of “sinner.” None of us have been exempted from that group. We who are members of the Church are not better than those who have not yet joined a local fellowship of believers. There are only two kinds of people in the world—saved sinners and lost sinners, but we are all sinners. Saved sinners are saved not because they are good. They are saved because Jesus is gracious.

You and I have a responsibility to take the message of grace and lovingly share it with

those who have not yet embraced it.

There are a host of problems in our culture. Our job is not to stand above the culture and point out the problems, shake our heads and say, “Isn’t that just terrible?!”

Our task is to find points of brokenness and then ask God to use us as agents of healing and wholeness.

Two weeks ago, we looked at the feeding of the 5,000. There was a mass of people, and they had a need. They were hungry. Jesus looked at His disciples and said, “You feed them.” In other words, “You take responsibility for this problem. Do something about it.”

The disciples threw up their hands. They said, “Hey, we don’t have the money to solve this problem.”

Jesus asks, “Well, what do you have?” They reply, “Well, this boy over here said he is willing to donate his lunchable—five crackers and two sardines.”

Jesus says, “I can do something with that.” And He did.

We look around, and we see problems, big problems.

- There is chemical addiction.
- There is economic deprivation.
- There is sexual exploitation.
- There is gender confusion.

Those are just a few of the problems, and God expects us to do something. He wants us to take responsibility. We may not have the answers, but if we give Him our heart, our head, and our hands, He can use us to make a difference.

In 1995 Disney/Pixar released a blockbuster, animated film entitled *Toy Story*. Through the years, there have been four *Toy Story* movies. The theme song of those movies was written and performed by Randy Newman. The name of that song is “You’ve Got a Friend in Me.”

We need to sing that song convincingly to the world around us. Here are some of the lyrics, and I wish to personalize it to the church:

When the road looks rough ahead
And you’re miles and miles
From your nice, warm bed
You just remember what your old pal said
Boy, you’ve got a friend in the church
Yeah, you’ve got a friend in the church

You got troubles, I’ve got ‘em too
There isn’t anything I wouldn’t do for you
We stick together and see it through
‘Cause you’ve got a friend in the church
You’ve got a friend in the church

Some other folks might be
A little bit smarter than I am
Bigger and stronger too

Maybe
But none of them will ever love you
The way I do . . . You've got a friend in the church

Does the world have a friend in the church or have we settled for being a critic and a judge. Let's be a friend to a world in need. One of the best ways we can befriend our world in need is to introduce them to our best Friend—Jesus Christ.