



## **UNCHAINED: Addiction**

**John 8:1-11**

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Through the course of these first weeks of the new year, we are focusing on some of the current and past situations, places, and events in our lives for which we harbor guilt. The guilt that we hold on to from the disappointments and failures of our lives often lords over us, holding us captive to the remembrance of those things and those times we have disappointed not only ourselves, but family, friends, coworkers, and the community around us. Perhaps more than any other power of evil, guilt doesn't like to relinquish control. It maintains an emotional and spiritual presence in our hearts and our minds. Because guilt is always lurking about, reminding us of the times we tried and failed, we find ourselves chained to our past – perhaps even chained to our present – with little personal hope to move forward in life.

Our hope in this season is to find freedom in forgiveness, allowing us to break free from the chains of guilt to live into a life filled with God's grace and witnessing to the love of Christ. To help us find such freedom in forgiveness, we are spending some time each week looking at some of those places in life where guilt strikes hold – naming the places in our lives for which we harbor guilt.

This week we are looking at the guilt that is associated with addiction. To help us understand how God's forgiveness offers us hope to break from the guilt of addiction, we're starting with our scriptural text for the day, found in the Gospel of John.

The story that John offers is a powerful one that speaks against the very condemnation that guilt seeks to maintain, like chains shackling us to our past.

The temple leaders have been trying to trap Jesus into offering a false teaching – a pseudo-truth that would prove his disagreement with the laws and authority of the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus goes to the temple early in the morning. And, like he had in days prior, people saw him enter and went over to hear him teach. He sat down with his crowd and he began to teach them.

Grasp the picture of the setting. There, in the temple of Jerusalem, Jesus is sitting down, likely on the floor, and people are surrounding him, yearning to hear his teaching. Talk about a scene in the temple – no question why the temple elders didn't like Jesus. He was stealing their disciples! Who wantonly stands by as a new teacher comes in and starts teaching those in the community who have always looked to you for advice on life and faith?

So the scribes and Pharisees – the temple leaders, who may be feeling a little bit of jealousy at Jesus' following – approach Jesus with a woman who the text tells us had been caught in the act of adultery.

Admittedly, there are times I have wondered whether or not this woman was actually an adulteress. I've wondered if this Biblical story is just another example of men taking advantage of a woman to push their own agenda. Let's not pretend like that's only a recent phenomenon. But, I digress, as the author includes this detail, that this woman was caught in the act of adultery.

So, the Pharisees and scribes bring the adulterous woman before Jesus, and they have her standing there before everyone – all of them – everyone who has come to hear Jesus teach. The question they are going to ask Jesus is not some side conversation, they are seeking to make this event as public as possible.

They say aloud, probably ensuring everyone can hear their question, asking most haughtily, "Teacher, we caught this woman in the very act of committing adultery. The law of Moses commands us to stone such a woman. What do you say we should do?"

In case we aren't paying attention, John, the author, adds some narration here, saying, "They did this test [Jesus], so that they might have some charge to bring against him."

You may have wondered why I think this text to be an example of men in power using a woman to push their own agenda; this verse says it all. These men are not here to actually charge this woman with adultery. I don't even think they care about the sin of the woman – I don't think they care what happens to her. The text indicates to us that these men are only looking to trap Jesus into a corner where he has no choice but to vacate his own teaching, or to speak against the Biblical law, which was established in the ancient days of Moses. They are looking for nothing more than to test Jesus so that they can have a charge to bring against him.

Jesus' response is perhaps a teaching moment in and of itself. Jesus, being so publically questioned, in an attempt at such a public humiliation, lowers his head and disengages from the conversation. In what is perhaps one of the most confusing moments of Biblical narrative, Jesus bends down and starts to write on the ground. What he writes is of great interest to faithful believers today, and perhaps always has been and always will be. I've heard more than one person say asking Jesus what he wrote on the ground is one of their top three questions to ask when they meet the Savior face to face.

Don't get me wrong, I too have always wondered what Jesus started scribbling on the ground. But the more I learn the writing practices of the gospel authors, the less I think what Jesus wrote is of importance. If what he wrote was of such importance, wouldn't John have included it in his telling of this story? Perhaps Jesus' writing on the ground is not important because of *what* he wrote. Perhaps it's important because his writing on the ground is an intentional act of turning his attention away from the Pharisees and scribes.

Honestly, I think Jesus' disengagement from the questioning at hand is in and of itself an act of great grace. Do you know how hard it is to disengage from such entrapment? As the story goes on and we start to think about the situation at hand, I think Jesus is giving them that moment to turn and leave without being publically humiliated in front of the crowd that is no doubt still very attentive to the lesson being offered by the Teacher.

A quick lesson from the law of Moses would be helpful to understand the awkwardness of the silence that took place while Jesus turned and began drawing on the ground.

Multiple times in the Hebrew Scriptures, including in Leviticus 20 and Deuteronomy 22, we see the law of Moses naming instructions regarding what to do in the case of adultery. In each case the law says that both the woman and the man, the adulterer and the adulteress, were to be put to death. It says, "both of them shall die – the man that lay with the woman, and the woman."

Furthermore, Deuteronomy offers a couple of instructions about the proceedings for a capital punishment case. In the case someone has committed an act that should, by law, result in death, there must be two witnesses brought forth to testify to the act. Without the presence of the witnesses, the charge and punishment cannot stand.

The Pharisees and the scribes, the religious leaders, without doubt know well the full law of Moses, including these details about a possible death sentence for adultery. But in bringing this woman to stand trial before Jesus, they have brought neither the man of the adulterous act nor any witnesses. Why? Because their intent isn't to charge the woman with adultery; she's a pawn. They are seeking to find claim against Jesus.

So there they are, waiting for Jesus to respond. He gave them ample time to think about what they were doing, but the Pharisees and the scribes think themselves too good to back down from the one who is teaching the lesson in the Temple that day. They kept on questioning Jesus. Finally, Jesus straightens up and speaks to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."

Jesus again focuses back on the ground, turning his attention away from the Pharisees and the scribes. Not that Jesus thinks like I do, he offers far more grace than I, but I imagine him thinking to himself, "Guys, I am trying to help you out. Couldn't you just humble yourselves and walk away when you had the chance to keep your dignity."

Slowly, one by one, starting with the elders in the group, the Pharisees and the scribes begin to depart. Soon, none are left standing there, save the woman they had brought with them.

So often when this story is told, the focus ends up being on the woman and her sin of adultery being forgiven. After all, she's the one standing there at the end. And, to be fair, Jesus does offer her forgiveness; in the final verse of this story Jesus says to her, "I do not condemn you

either, go and sin no more.” There is a great glimpse of Jesus offering forgiveness to the woman, as he offers her a word of grace that frees her to leave the temple that day and to have another chance at living freely. But perhaps the story isn’t about the grace extended to the woman. Perhaps it’s not a story of her adultery. That which Jesus offers this woman, extending to her forgiveness, seems tertiary to the pardoning of the guilt and the sin of the Pharisees and the scribes.

Even as he is speaking directly to the woman, Jesus focus is still on the Pharisees and scribes. He says to her, “Where are *they*? Has none of *them* condemned you?” Her forgiveness is not simply a product of what Jesus has to offer, it is a byproduct of the grace offered in the dismissal of the Temple leaders.

You may wonder, how does Jesus offer them grace? How is their forgiveness witnessed as an extension of Christ? What is the sin they committed that even required the extending of God’s grace and forgiveness?

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It is a rare occasion to find any person who does not have a dependency upon an emotional, physical, or mental stimulus. The reality of life in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is that around every corner there is another external force calling for our devotion. The seeds of addiction are perhaps always there for each of us ... “kernels of destruction sown into fertile psyches that seek escape from the ever present internal dialogue, the constant battle between the self we are impersonating and the self we wish to be.”<sup>i</sup>

We are all prone to be addicts. We all love something more than we should. Some of these addictions are more obvious than others. But for all of us, whether addicted to the obvious or the subtle, addiction is perhaps the default position we take as sinners – we tend to love that which we are called not to love.

Yet, like the Pharisees and scribes, we have a tendency to focus on the perpetual sin or fault in other’s lives, which allows us to become numb to the addictive habits in our own lives. Or, perhaps knowing we have demons in our own lives, perhaps in the hope of dumbing down our own failure to overcome addictive behavior, we convince ourselves to focus on the actions of another, affixing our attention to the more compelling act of calling out *another* and drawing attention to *their* depravity than doing the hard work of *naming our own*.

Such a mentality is supported in our culture. That kind of behavior fits in well. “The world eggs us on to judge others. It expects it of us.”<sup>ii</sup> Especially when the judging involves calling out the missteps of others. Like the religious leaders calling out the visible sin of the woman, it is our safe place to call out others for their visible dependencies to named and physical substances. Doing so allows to ignore the dependency we have to worldly pleasures and societal norms.

If the past year has taught me anything, it's that we have a long way to go in naming and identifying the detrimental nature of addiction in our society – and I'm not talking about alcoholism and narcotics. The addictive stimuli of power, wealth, prestige, pride, popularity, and power (did I name that one already?) ... the addiction to emotional and mental stimuli are perhaps more detrimental to our society, because they are written off as normal in our 'succeed at any expense' morality. Don't get me wrong, the dependency we have to narcotics, including alcohol, is something worthy of our attention; such addictions play their own role in hurting the lives of individuals, families, and communities at large. But it is all too common, and increasingly acidic among our national leaders, to call others out for their sinful dependencies, while ignoring our own addictive highs. In doing so, any person who seeks to call out others while ignoring their own dependencies, plays into the very trap of the Pharisees and the scribes.

"Everyone, be they religious leaders or accused sinners, [is invited by Jesus] to reexamine his or her past [and present] actions and start afresh."<sup>iii</sup> Jesus offers each, the Pharisees, the scribes, the woman, and everyone who is listening in that room and through the text, the hope of new life – the hope of a future that is not bound by the events of the past.

Whether you have found yourself in a role similar to these religious elite, addicted to the power of prestige and the lure of 'rightness,' or you have found yourself in the shoes of the woman, addicted to sinful joys, like that of physical desire, Jesus says you are given new life and a new hope in the love of God. So I invite you today, as together we seek to break free from the chains of guilt that leads us to addictive dependencies to false gods, false powers, temporary highs, and narcissistic goals, to witness Jesus as he offers you the opportunity for a new start. Christ isn't always going to call you out in front of everybody, but in his gracious act of drawing in the sand, Jesus is extending you the love of one who offers second chances. Second chances for those who are hiding their sin, and second chances for those whose sin is displayed for all to see. Christ asks, "Is there no one left here to condemn you? Neither do I – go, and live free of the weight and chains of your guilt – free of your sin." Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Susan P. Watts. *Another Round: A story of addiction, forgiveness, and transformation*. Philoworks Publishing LLC: Memphis, 2013.

<sup>ii</sup> Nancy S. Taylor. *Feasting on the Gospels, John, Volume 1: A Feasting on the Word Commentary*. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2015.

<sup>iii</sup> Gilberto Ruiz. *Feasting on the Gospels, John, Volume 1: A Feasting on the Word Commentary*. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2015.