

Dating, Sex, Marriage
RUF, Fall 2012

Hope and Healing

John 8:2-11

"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:8-9)

Scripture Introduction

If you make it a habit of coming to RUF, which I hope you will, I think you'll pick up on a pattern. Over and over again, the Bible says two things to us – and this applies to how we work and play and worship just as much as how we date and relate:

- (1) We are all (myself included) flawed people. Not simply, "yeah, I know I have some bad moments," but, "I have badness actually living inside me." We are all "glorious ruins," as one theologian put it. Now, it's no fun to think about this. Honestly, it's disturbing. It's like looking at yourself in the mirror when you first get up in the morning... crusty eyes, hair out of place, drool on your chin... a scary sight. We'd rather stare at a cleaned up version of ourselves.

But here's the second pattern that I hope you hear over and over again at RUF...

- (2) Though we are all deeply flawed and broken, we are more loved by God in Christ than we ever dreamed possible.¹ God looks at you and says, "It is very good that you exist. I know you inside and out, the good, the bad, and the ugly, and I have not turned my face away." And strangely, this can be more disturbing than hearing about our flaws because none of us are really that comfortable with grace. Like good Americans, we want to earn what we receive. We want to believe that we are loved because we are worthy, not that God loves us in order to make us worthy. It's a strange twist.

So, if you come to RUF and you feel disturbed, it may really be that I am offensive, (and for that I sincerely apologize), but it may also be that grace is really very foreign among us. We may not have the stomachs for it. It may take a while before we can enjoy it.

On that note, tonight, I want us to talk about God's grace as it applies to our sexual and relational brokenness.

Studies show that young adults are unlikely to express having any regrets at all (congratulations, you're entirely too optimistic at this point in your lives!). And yet even so, most of us will admit that we live with some sexual regrets.² We concede already in our late

¹ This phrase comes from Tim Keller.

² Christian Smith, *Lost in Transition*.

teens and early twenties that we need some do-overs when it comes to romance... that we feel ashamed about pieces of our pasts.

What I want you to see tonight is that God's grace can cover your shame and transform you as a person. When it comes to regrets, what we often want is **a new past**, but God wants to make us into **new people**... and I want you to see how.

Tonight we're going to read about a woman with a past from John's account of Jesus' life. It's a treasured story in Christianity. As we read, I want you to pay attention to how Jesus treats her compared with the religious leaders. How does Jesus handle this woman in the midst of her shame?

Scripture Reading

Early in the morning (Jesus) came again to the temple. All the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst they said to him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?" This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her." And once more he bent down and wrote on the ground. But when they heard it, they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus stood up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more."

Prayer

Introduction

Our story doesn't require much setup. Jesus is teaching publicly in the Jewish temple, the place where rabbis would go to teach, and the religious leaders, the scribes and Pharisees, have hatched a plan to undermine his ministry. Their hopes hinge on this woman who is supposed to be the downfall of Jesus. But instead, Jesus makes her into his triumph.

I want you to see how he does it.

First, notice that the woman is **"exposed."**

I. Exposed (vv. 2-6)

John tells us in verse 3 that she has been "caught" in adultery. In other words, there is no question: she *is* guilty. And for her guilt, the Law of Moses commanded that she be stoned. That's how seriously marital fidelity was to be protected by God's people. No excuses, no tolerance. Covenants and promises are supposed to matter. They have a life or death weightiness to them.

But it's clear that the concern of the religious leaders is not really the sanctity of marriage. It is the ruin of Jesus. How do we know this? Well, where is the MAN? The Law prescribed death for the man as well! We see it too often even in our day – men are treated more leniently when it comes to sexual laxity than women. If a woman sleeps

around, she's called a whore; if a man sleeps around, he's high-fived by his buddies and called a hero.

As an aside, this is a double standard, and an evil one, that feminism has rightly sought to correct. But I think, maybe in the wrong way. Instead of fighting for women to possess the sexual freedom of men, I think we ought to be calling men to live up to their dignity and promises, and to stop congratulating themselves for disappearing when it matters most... to stop acting like boys.

Whatever has happened to the man, this woman has no one, and these religious leaders, these cowards, have dragged her out here to the temple to expose her publicly and to make her feel the burden of her shame... all as a ruse to trap Jesus between the demands of God's Law and the assurances of God's Mercy.

So this woman has become a prop in her own nightmare.

And her experience, I think, touches on one of our deepest fears. You know, there's a reason that a common recurring dream is hurrying to class, or somewhere else in public, only to find that you've forgotten to get dressed once you've arrived. You look down and you are naked and you have nowhere to hide. Everyone can see all of you and they are not impressed! We are all terrified of being exposed and publicly shamed.

And what strikes me here is that many of you have experienced this nightmare *in connection with religion*, just like this woman. For some of you, church has been a place where you have been dragged along and made to feel all alone in your sin. It's been the last place where you could be yourself, the last place where you could be open, because of the shame that would follow if others knew what happened in your bedroom last Saturday night, or the doubts that were swirling around in your own heart and mind.

If that's your story tonight, I want you to see that Jesus is different. He is not like these religious leaders. He is different. He has not brought this woman here to be publicly shamed...

... however, having her sin laid out before him, exposed in his presence, becomes the best thing that has ever happened to her. It is the beginning of a totally new life for her.

This is what I want you to see first:

Letting Jesus see us as we are is the best thing that can happen to us. Being vulnerable before him is where change begins.

What does this look like practically?

The Christian name for this is called, "confession." Confession is admitting to God in prayer what He already knows about you, trusting that it is better to be found by him than to hide from him.

Listen to what John writes about confession in another place:

"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

You can put insert any word into that verse for the word, "sin," to make it personal. Let me show you how it works.

If we confess our "lust", he is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

If we confess our "struggle with pornography", he is faithful and just to forgive and cleanse us...

If we confess our "doubts about God's existence,"...

No matter what you insert in the beginning of the sentence, it never changes the promise at the end... he is faithful and just to forgive us and cleanse us...

The religious leaders don't know this at the time, but they have brought this woman to the only place where sinners can be themselves, where they can be totally exposed and vulnerable, and yet still be safe.

Look at what happens next. After she is exposed, she is **"defended."**

II. **Defended (vv. 7-9)**

We have no idea what Jesus is writing in the sand, but look at Jesus' first words in the scene:

"Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her."

And they all slowly put down their stones and walk away.

It feels like that scene in *A Christmas Story* when Ralphie attacks the bully and beats the mess out of him. As modern people, we love these words. We love it when bullies get bullied, and we love the idea that no one is qualified to judge someone else.

But there's also something here that we don't love so much. Jesus is saying to the woman, the religious leaders, and to us that sin has completely levels us. Everyone is sexually broken. Jesus doesn't single out prostitutes, or porn addicts, or those attracted to the same gender, even those who have molested young boys under the guise of charity (as heinous as that is)... he puts us all in the same boat, and he takes away our right to play god.

But notice that he does keep this right for himself. Notice that while everyone walks away, Jesus remains as the only one worthy to judge.

This is the Gospel. Hear now the good news that Christianity proclaims.

The only One worthy to condemn you, is also the only One who can faithfully defend you.

And maybe you're thinking, "It seems like God is a softy! All this talk about justice, where is it? What happened to being all for marital fidelity? What happened to all the talk about how promises matter? Jesus just lets this woman slide."

But that's not what happens. What happens is that a few chapters later in John, **Jesus will actually take this woman's place.** On the Cross, the religious leaders will bring Jesus "bound" as one who has been caught, just like this woman, except under false pretense. On the Cross, Jesus will be undressed, and exposed, and shamed publicly, and mocked as a criminal, just like this woman. On the Cross, Jesus will be left all alone with no one around to defend him, just like this woman. On the Cross, Jesus will bear the stones of this woman's condemnation until he has no breath left in him.

God is not soft on sin. He takes it more seriously than we do, and that's why the Cross stands at the center of Christianity. It costs Jesus his own life and his relationship with the Father to defend us.

Whoever you are tonight, no matter how alone you feel, you have an advocate in Jesus. You have someone who is willing to go all the way to free you from your guilt and shame.

But there's more good news here. John wants us to know that Jesus not only makes us free, but that he changes us...

III. **Changed (vv. 10-11)**

How do we know the woman is changed?

It's very simple. Look at the name she gives to Jesus in verse 11. She calls him "Lord." That's the key.

She has entrusted her life fully to Jesus. He is the new object of her worship. It's no longer someone else's husband, or her reputation, or her dress size, or the dream of a white picket fence. Jesus is the one to whom she belongs in life and death.

And look at the confidence her new Lord has in her. Jesus says to her, "Go and from now on, sin no more."

Think about how radical that is! New obedience is possible for her. A moment ago, she was practically dead, and now Jesus has not only returned to her life but dignity as well!

Some of you are cynical about your capacity for change. I get this way about myself. I think to myself, "I'll never change. This is just who I am." (Which is a really bad excuse in marriage. Never say that.) But if anyone in the universe should be cynical about your capacity for change, it should be God. He knows you fully. And yet here he speaks, brimming with confidence, to all who would call him, Lord: "Go, and sin no more."

If you want to change, you have to change what you worship, which requires that you change what you name as Lord.

I want you to listen to the words of David Foster Wallace, one of the greatest writers of the last 50 years. This is what he said to college students at a commencement speech in 2005 at Kenyon College.

In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And an outstanding reason for choosing some sort of God or spiritual-type thing to worship — *is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive*. If you worship money and things — if they are where you tap real meaning in life — then you will never have enough.... It's the truth. Worship your own body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly, and when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally plant you.... If you worship power — you will feel weak and afraid, and you will need more power over others to keep the fear at bay. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart — you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out.

And so on.

What Wallace tells us is that what you worship, what you call Lord, defines how you live. He also says that whatever that is will eat you alive. It will enslave you.

But John wants you to know that Jesus is different. Instead of taking your life away, he will give it back, and confer upon you the freedom and dignity you were made to have.

Conclusion

I want to close our time tonight with a true story that I think gets at the heart of our passage.

Tony Campolo is a well-known speaker and a professor of sociology at Eastern College in Pennsylvania.

A few years ago, Tony flew to Hawaii to speak at a conference. The way he tells it, he checks into his hotel and tries to get some sleep. Unfortunately, his internal clock wakes him at 3:00 a.m. The night is dark, the streets are silent, the world is asleep, but Tony is wide-awake and his stomach is growling.

So, he gets up and prowls the streets looking for a place to get some bacon and eggs for an early breakfast. Everything is closed except for a grungy dive in an alley. He goes in and sits down at the counter. The overweight guy behind the counter comes over and asks, "What d'ya want?"

Well, Tony isn't so hungry anymore so eying some donuts under a plastic cover he says, "I'll have a donut and black coffee."

As he sits there munching on his donut and sipping his coffee at 3:30, in walk eight or nine provocative, loud prostitutes just finished with their night's work. They plop down at the counter and Tony finds himself uncomfortably surrounded by this group of smoking, swearing hookers. He gulps his coffee, planning to make a quick getaway. Then the woman next to him says to her friend, "You know what? Tomorrow's my birthday. I'm gonna be 39." To which her friend nastily replies, "So what d'ya want from me? A birthday party? Huh? You want me to get a cake, and then sing happy birthday to you?"

The first woman says, "Aw, come on, why do you have to be so mean? Why do you

have to put me down? I'm just sayin' it's my birthday. I don't want anything from you. I mean, why should I have a birthday party? I've never had a birthday party in my whole life. Why should I have one now?"

Well, when Tony heard that statement, he said he made a decision. He sat and waited until the women left, and then he asked the fat guy at the counter, "Do they come in here every night?"

"Yeah," he answered.

"The one right next to me," he asked, "she comes in every night?"

"Yeah," he said, "that's Agnes. Yeah, she's here every night. She's been comin' here for years. Why do you want to know?"

"Because she just said that tomorrow is her birthday. What do you think? Do you think we could maybe throw a little birthday party for her right here in the diner?"

A smile crept over the man's face. "That's great," he says, "yeah, that's great. I like it." He turns to the kitchen and shouts to his wife, "Hey, come on out here. This guy's got a great idea. Tomorrow is Agnes' birthday and he wants to throw a party for her right here."

His wife comes out. "That's terrific," she says. "You know, Agnes is really nice. She's always trying to help other people and nobody does anything nice for her."

So they make their plans. Tony says he'll be back at 2:30 the next morning with some decorations and the man, whose name turns out to be Harry, says he'll make a cake.

At 2:30 the next morning, Tony is back. He has crepe paper and other decorations and a sign made of big pieces of cardboard that says, "Happy Birthday, Agnes!" They decorate the place from one end to the other and get it looking great. Harry had gotten the word out on the streets about the party and by 3:15 it seemed that every prostitute in Honolulu was in the place. There were hookers wall to wall.

At 3:30 on the dot, the door swings open and in walks Agnes and her friend. Tony has everybody ready. They all shout and scream "Happy Birthday, Agnes!" Agnes is absolutely flabbergasted. She's stunned, her mouth falls open, her knees started to buckle, and she almost falls over.

And when the birthday cake with all the candles is carried out, that's when she totally loses it. Now she's sobbing and crying. Harry, who's not used to seeing a prostitute cry, gruffly mumbles, "Blow out the candles, Agnes. Cut the cake."

So she pulls herself together and blows them out. Everyone cheers and yells, "Cut the cake, Agnes, cut the cake!"

But Agnes looks down at the cake and, without taking her eyes off it, slowly and softly says, "Look, Harry, is it all right with you if...I mean, if I don't...I mean, what I want to ask, is it OK if I keep the cake a little while? Is it all right if we don't eat it right away?"

Harry doesn't know what to say so he shrugs and says, "Sure, if that's what you want to do. Keep the cake. Take it home if you want."

"Oh, could I?" she asks. Looking at Tony she says, "I live just down the street a couple of doors; I want to take the cake home, is that okay? I'll be right back, honest."

She gets off her stool, picks up the cake, and carries it high in front of her like it was the Holy Grail. Everybody watches in stunned silence and when the door closes behind her, nobody seems to know what to do. They look at each other. They look at Tony.

So Tony gets up on a chair and says, "What do you say that we pray together?"

And there they are in a hole-in-the-wall greasy spoon, half the prostitutes in Honolulu, at 3:30 a.m. listening to Tony Campolo as he prays for Agnes, for her life, her health, and her salvation. Tony recalls, "I prayed that her life would be changed, and that God would be good to her."

When he's finished, Harry leans over, and with a trace of hostility in his voice, he says, "Hey, you never told me you was a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to anyway?"

In one of those moments when just the right words came, Tony answers him quietly, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning."

Harry thinks for a moment, and in a mocking way says, "No you don't. There ain't no church like that. If there was, I'd join it. Yep, I'd join a church like that."

This is the kind of church that Jesus came to build. A church for prostitutes. A church for the sexually broken. A church for sinners. A church for people like you and me, for hope and healing and change.

The grace of God is greater than all your sin. Trust that Jesus can defend you. Consider naming him as your Lord tonight.