

## Jesus Prevents Two Stonings

Devotional Reading: [Matthew 7:1-5](#)

Background Scripture: [John 8:1-11, 39-59](#)

[John 8:1-11, 56-59](#)

<sup>1</sup> but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.

<sup>2</sup> At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. <sup>3</sup> The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group <sup>4</sup> and said to Jesus, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. <sup>5</sup> In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” <sup>6</sup> They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.

But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. <sup>7</sup> When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” <sup>8</sup> Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.

<sup>9</sup> At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. <sup>10</sup> Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”



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<sup>11</sup> “No one, sir,” she said.

“Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.”

<sup>56</sup> Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.”

<sup>57</sup> “You are not yet fifty years old,” they said to him, “and you have seen Abraham!”

<sup>58</sup> “Very truly I tell you,” Jesus answered, “before Abraham was born, I am!” <sup>59</sup> At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds.

## Key Text

*“Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.”—John 8:11b*

God’s Law Is Love

## Unit 1: Love Completes, Law Falls Short

Lessons 1–4

## Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify the “I am.”
2. Explain the difference between “forgiving” and “not condemning.”
3. Write a prayer of gratitude for escaping condemnation in Christ.

## Lesson Outline

### Introduction

- A. Deciding the Game
- B. Lesson Context

#### I. A Woman’s Cause to Rejoice (John 8:1–11)

- A. Jesus Prepares to Teach (vv. 1–2)
- B. Change of Curriculum (vv. 3–9)

*Burning Answers*

- C. Life-Changing Lesson (vv. 10–11)

*Learning from Experience*

#### II. Abraham’s Cause to Rejoice (John 8:56–59)

- A. Jesus’ Day (vv. 56–58)
- B. Not Jesus’ Time (v. 59)

### Conclusion

- A. Following “I Am”
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

## How to Say It

Abraham	Ay-bruh-ham.
Absalom	Ab-suh-lum.
Babylonian	Bab-ih-low-nee-un.
Jerusalem	Juh-roo-suh-lem.
Messiah	Meh-sigh-uh.
Mosaic	Mo-zay-ik.
Pharisees	Fair-ih-seez.
Tabernacles	Tah-burr-nah-kulz.

## Introduction

## A. Deciding the Game

Referees can be much-maligned by coaches, players, fans, commentators—almost anyone who is watching the game. They are second-guessed, taunted, and even on occasion blamed for a team’s loss. Theirs is a difficult task. Referees must be quick and direct with their decisions. They must work together as a team to effectively officiate a game. And they must trust one another to know and care about the rules and work with integrity and skill to enforce those rules fairly.

The contest Jesus was called on to referee in today’s lesson was no game. At stake were Jesus’ credibility and a woman’s life. Who would come away from this confrontation crying foul?

## B. Lesson Context

The events and teachings recorded in [John 7](#) and [8](#) occurred during one of Jesus’ visits to Jerusalem for the Festival of Tabernacles (see [John 7:1–2, 37; 8:20](#)). God instituted this festival for two reasons. First, it was a time of thanksgiving during the season of the olive and fruit harvests (the September–October time frame). Second, it was a time to remember deliverance from slavery in Egypt (see [Leviticus 23:33–44](#)).

As something of an object lesson, many who celebrated this festival would live in tents (“tabernacles”) outside the city to reenact the 40 years that the Israelites had lived in tents while wandering in the wilderness. “Then they all went home” ([John 7:53](#)) closes the day before the events considered in the first half of this lesson (see [lesson 3](#)).

The second half of this lesson begins in [John 8:56](#). In [John 8:12–55](#) (not in our printed text), Jesus responded to questions from a crowd of both laypeople (some who believed him, others who did not) and Pharisees. Of particular interest to the following episode are the conversational threads about being Abraham’s descendants. Despite the Jews’ confidence that they were Abraham’s family, Jesus declared that their own actions revealed them to be children of the devil ([John 8:44](#); compare [1:13](#))! No crowd would respond well to being called children of the devil, and this crowd was no different. They went so far as to claim Jesus must be demon-possessed to think that if Abraham and all the rest of the prophets died, Jesus’ own followers would not ([8:52–53](#)).

We do well to note that the contrast Jesus set up can apply broadly to anyone who claims to be a child of Abraham (and therefore chosen by God, including Christians today) but acts in evil ways that contradict this heritage. Neither Jesus’ words here nor anywhere else justify violence against Jews, past or present.

### I. A Woman’s Cause to Rejoice ([John 8:1–11](#))

#### A. Jesus Prepares to Teach (vv. 1–2)

##### 1. but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.

Jesus routinely took time to be in his Father’s presence (examples: [Luke 5:16; 6:12; 9:18](#)). And *the Mount of Olives* was a common stop for Jesus when he was in Jerusalem. Given his prayerful habit, the

specific location, and no further information, we surmise that Jesus took this time to pray (consider [21:37](#); [22:39–45](#)).

The Mount of Olives first appears in the Bible in [2 Samuel 15:30](#), when David fled Jerusalem during Absalom’s rebellion (see [2 Samuel 15:32–16:4](#)). The spot was aptly named due to the proliferation of olives in this area, though the modern reader might suggest it was more of a high hill than a mountain. It did overlook the temple, sitting off to its east side. Other examples of reference to the mount of Olives in the Old Testament include [1 Kings 11:7](#); [2 Kings 23:13–14](#); [Ezekiel 11:23](#); and [Zechariah 14:4](#). The mount looms large in the Christian faith because it is the location of Jesus’ last night of prayer, betrayal by Judas, and arrest ([Luke 22:39–54](#)).

**2. At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them.**

Jesus often began his day very early in the morning (examples: [Matthew 21:18](#); [Mark 1:35](#); [Luke 21:38](#)). *The temple* was the place for religious teachers to meet with and instruct their students (example: [Luke 2:46](#)). *All the people* drawing near suggests that they were primed—through recent experience, word of mouth, or other means—to seek out Jesus’ teaching. *Again* points to at least one event that would have prepared the people to hear from Jesus on this occasion (see [John 7:14](#)). Teachers commonly sat as they taught ([Matthew 13:1](#); [26:55](#)).

## B. Change of Curriculum (vv. 3–9)

**3a. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery.**

The relationship between Jesus and *the teachers of the law and the Pharisees* was typically contentious (examples: [Matthew 23](#); contrast [John 3:1–2](#)). In the generations following the return from Babylonian exile, these two groups of religious leaders came into prominence in the Jewish faith. Their zeal for the law was commendable, intended to prevent the sins that had led to exile in the first place. Unfortunately, several factors, including mistaken expectations ([John 7:52](#)), vested interests ([11:48](#)), and hypocrisy ([Matthew 23:13–32](#)), prevented these leaders from seeing God’s larger picture and made recognizing his Messiah incredibly difficult.

How this *woman* was found *in adultery* but her partner was not is a mystery. There could be perfectly innocent reasons (on the part of her accusers) why this man was not present: he escaped, he fought them off, etc. The most cynical reading (which is refuted by Jesus’ instructions in [John 8:11](#), below) would suggest that the woman was unjustly accused or even framed by these religious leaders.

Gender dynamics of the time are the most likely explanation for the male adulterer’s absence. Especially in Roman culture, though also present to some degree in Jewish culture, adultery on the part of men was often considered an unfortunate fact of life. The women with whom they committed adultery, however, frequently were held to a higher standard and harshly punished for the role they played (see commentary on [John 8:5](#), below). This double standard dichotomy likely resulted in part from questions of paternity and inheritance should a woman become pregnant by a man who was not her husband (consider [Numbers 27:1–11](#)).

### What Do You Think?

How well do you adapt to a sudden change of plans?

### Digging Deeper

Could more flexibility in this regard open doors for ministry? Explain your answer.

**3b–4.** They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery.

Why would Jesus’ enemies refer to him as *Teacher*? We could assume that the honorific was slathered in sarcasm, since the teachers of the law and Pharisees largely did not consider Jesus to have any authority to teach (compare [John 1:38](#)). In addition, using the title might have been a ploy to the crowd that was gathered around Jesus. On the one hand, it could sound like they were being very respectful. On the other, it put the listening audience on alert—would Jesus answer as a learned teacher ought to, or would he reveal himself as a fraud?

### What Do You Think?

Based on verses such as [Matthew 18:15–17](#), what are some situations where it might be necessary to point out another’s sin?

### Digging Deeper

What considerations prevent you from pointing out *every* sin you witness?

**5a.** “In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women.

The teachers of the law and Pharisees devoted their entire lives to learning and living the Law of Moses faithfully. Given their long years of training and scholarly debate, they no doubt believed they had an edge on Jesus regarding questions of *the Law*. Direct reference to *Moses* was unnecessary to establish what law they were talking about; dropping his name, however, raised the stakes of giving any answer that would seem to undercut this revered lawgiver and the God who gave him the law (consider [Deuteronomy 34:10–12](#)).

Commands to stone adulterers (found in [Deuteronomy 22:20–21](#), [23–24](#)) were specifically linked to a woman’s promiscuity before marriage or during her engagement. In the first instance, the man with whom she had sexual relations apparently was unknown, so she alone would be punished. In the second, the man who was not her fiancé was also to be executed. According to the law, both parties were meant to be held accountable. At least ideally, women in Israel would not face harsher consequences than the men with whom they consorted. The guilty parties were both subject to the death penalty ([Leviticus 20:10](#); [Deuteronomy 22:22](#)). The harshness of this punishment reflects how repulsive God finds this unholy faithlessness ([22:23–27](#); [Ezekiel 22:11](#); [Malachi 3:5](#); compare [Romans 13:9–10](#)).

**5b.** “Now what do you say?”

For a clearer idea of Jesus’ apparent dilemma in answering *what do you say*, one should consider two key points. First, Jesus was known to be a friend of the sinners (examples: [Matthew 9:10–12](#); [Luke](#)

7:36–50). What would happen when he was faced with blatant sin, punishable by death? Second, under Roman law the Jews had no authority to carry out the death penalty. Religious leaders were endlessly frustrated that Rome was the final authority ([John 18:31](#)). On one significant level, this question had nothing to do with the woman, though her life hung in the balance. Instead, it was a question designed to trap Jesus and thereby discredit him (compare [Mark 12:13–17](#)).

## Burning Answers

One of the keys to good debate is mastering the art of asking trick questions. One of my high school debate teammates was particularly good at leading an opponent into a cleverly disguised trap. Such questions would start, “Would you say that ...” or “Is it fair to define your argument as ...” and finish with an emotionally charged phrase implying that the argument was based on the individual’s feelings or faulty sources. My classmate’s questions were designed to leave his opponent with no choice but to provide answers that burned their argument down.

The teachers of the law and Pharisees tried to trap Jesus in the same way. However, Jesus does not fall into traps (see [John 8:9](#), below). Answer honestly: Have you ever tried to trap Jesus with a question? Will you accept his answers?

—M. E.

**6–7a.** They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him,

This *trap* should be understood as a test of Jesus—fitting, given the teaching setting. Their motive was to discredit *Jesus*. If they were successful at discrediting him, they would, in turn, be able to bring a charge against him. This was not the first time Jesus’ opponents asked him seemingly innocent questions to have reason *to accuse him*. In those instances, Jesus always had a ready response (examples: [Matthew 19:3–9](#); [22:23–46](#)). When he *bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger*, the teachers of the law and Pharisees might have believed they finally had him stumped! Jesus, for once, seemed to be speechless.

What Jesus wrote or why he acted “as though he heard them not” (*KJV*) is unclear (see [John 8:7b–8](#), below). We could speculate based on the context and Jesus’ character and ministry up to this point. His pause, however, did nothing to deter the men from continuing to question him.

### What Do You Think?

What would be the best way for you to respond when someone asks a question to trap you?

### Digging Deeper

How can you control your emotions to give a wise response in such a situation?

**7b–8.** he straightened up and said to them, “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.

Rather than address the issue the teachers of the law and Pharisees presented, Jesus went to the

very heart of the matter. Whether the woman deserved to die for her sins faded to the background; Jesus' challenge was whether any of these men was *without sin*. Later Paul—an educated Pharisee himself—asserted that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” ([Romans 3:23](#)), and further: “the wages of sin is death” ([6:23](#)). Surely these legal minds also knew that every person was a sinner.

Jesus' statement was a pointed reminder that even those who studied the law and sought to obey its every word were still guilty of breaking it ([James 2:10–11](#)). And because of that, all of them—not just the woman—faced a death sentence. This should prevent any honest person from initiating the execution.

**9. At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there.**

Heartfelt conviction of conscience leads to repentance (example: [Acts 2:37](#)). Far from insisting that they were correct, Jesus' challengers accepted this humbling turn of events and *went away one at a time*. This movement started with the *older* accusers until Jesus was the only one left, suggesting something about wisdom that can come with age. Ironically, those who came to discredit Jesus and catch him in a trap were caught in their own trap and left without a sound.

The men who left were also the only witnesses to this crime. Without witnesses, no one was left in the crowd who was able to initiate punishment ([Deuteronomy 13:9; 17:7](#)). Thus, the question of whether Jesus would break Roman law for the sake of Jewish law was rendered void (see [John 8:5](#), above). The *KJV* translation “in the midst” reminds us of the learners who were still present, observing Jesus' interaction with the religious leaders and now with *the woman*. The lack of this phrase in the *NIV* emphasizes the intimacy of the conversation between Jesus and the woman.

### C. Life-Changing Lesson (vv. 10–11)

**10–11a. Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” “No one, sir,” she said.**

Jesus' response began with a pair of clarifying questions. Addressing the *woman* for the first time, Jesus' rhetorical questions were intended to confirm that the accusers were gone. Her address *sir* stands in contrast to “Teacher” ([John 8:4](#), above). While the previous title was used less than genuinely, the woman spoke to Jesus with respect.

**11b. “Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.”**

Jesus knew this woman's sin, whether this particular accusation was true or not (example: [John 4:16–19](#)). Just like her accusers, the woman's sin made her subject to death (see [8:7b–8](#), above). And being the Son of God, Jesus was entitled to enforce the death penalty, if he so chose (consider [Hebrews 10:28–31](#)). But Jesus gave the woman another option. He desired her to repent and thus *leave her life of sin*. In this act, we see an example of the choice between death in sin and life offered in Christ.

No further information is given regarding the woman's repentance. But based on other, similar interactions Jesus had, we might surmise that the woman did indeed find her heart changed by this interaction with the Lord (compare [John 5:1–14](#)).



### What Do You Think?

How have you seen acts of mercy attract people to Jesus?

### Digging Deeper

In what current situation(s) could your merciful intervention also be a call to repentance?

## Learning from Experience

I sheepishly walked into work five minutes late. A coworker glared at me and pointed out my untimely arrival to our manager. My coworker was understandably frustrated; my tardiness caused her to take her break late. But my manager just laughed. A few coworkers were around, so my manager asked them if they had ever been late. Every single one had, so she told them no one had any right to criticize me. As my boss, and someone who is always early, she could have chosen to discipline me or just allow the comment to stand unaddressed. She offered me grace instead. She also declared that I should not be late again because that would be taking advantage of her kindness.

The Pharisees, like my coworkers, were not blameless. But Jesus *was* without sin, so he could have condemned the woman. Instead, he offered her grace conditioned on repentance. Have you accepted Jesus' offer of grace? Does it show in your habitual conduct?

—M. E.

## II. Abraham's Cause to Rejoice (John 8:56–59)

### A. Jesus' Day (vv. 56–58)

**56. “Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.”**

Given that Jesus just asserted that the crowd's actions showed them to be children of the devil, calling *Abraham* their *father* implies that, if they were really his children, they would react as Abraham did. The man had received the promise from God that his own family would bless the whole world ([Genesis 12:1–3](#)). This promise is fulfilled in Christ ([Galatians 3:16](#)), giving Abraham reason to rejoice that Jesus' day had finally come. By faith Abraham believed this would be so. Because of his hope in God's promise, Abraham *saw it and was glad* even without living in Jesus' time ([Hebrews 11:8–12](#)).

**57. “You are not yet fifty years old,” they said to him, “and you have seen Abraham!”**

Given the antagonistic character of the conversation up to this point, it's no surprise that the Jews misunderstood what Jesus was saying. They knew Jesus was not even *fifty years old* in this time (compare [Luke 3:23](#)). He would need to be generations older than 50 to have *seen Abraham*! For context, Abraham was born about 2167 BC, which places his death at 1992 BC ([Genesis 25:7](#)). But readers of John's Gospel are well-aware that Jesus was not exaggerating his knowledge of Abraham—Jesus is from the beginning ([John 1:1](#)).

**58. “Very truly I tell you,” Jesus answered, “before Abraham was born, I am!”**

*Very truly* draws attention to the truth of what Jesus was about to declare. Not only did he know *Abraham*; Jesus predated the man (compare [John 1:1–5](#))! His claim here is weighty indeed. “I am” is God’s formula for self-identification ([Exodus 3:14](#); [Isaiah 43:10](#); [45:18](#); etc.). For anyone to use this formula in the same way was blasphemy ([47:4–11](#); [Zephaniah 2:15](#)). With this statement, Jesus’ audience heard him claim to be God.

In the Gospel of John, we notice Jesus making frequent statements about himself that involve God’s sacred name, I Am. For the sake of convenience, we can call these “the ‘I am’ sayings.” These sayings take two forms. The first form occurs when Jesus simply applied God’s divine name, I Am, directly to himself. He did this to stress his complete union with the Father ([John 8:24, 28, 58; 13:19](#)).

### B. Not Jesus’ Time (v. 59)

**59. At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds.**

[Leviticus 24:16](#) states that anyone who blasphemes the name of the Lord must be put to death by stoning. Their reaction confirms that they understood Jesus’ “I am” to be a claim of equality with God ([John 8:58](#), above). But the crowd was unsuccessful in the moment because *Jesus hid himself, slipping away*. The larger picture, however, makes clear that they were unable to stone Jesus because his time had not yet come ([John 7:6–8](#)).



**Go, and  
sin no more!**

Sheet 4—Fall 2023, *Adult Resources*, Standard Lesson Quarterly, Curriculum

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Lesson 4

Visual for [Lesson 4](#). Open the lesson by asking volunteers for examples of times when they experienced mercy and repentance.

## **Conclusion**

### **A. Following I Am**

Jesus was completely within his rights to condemn the adulterous woman, but he chose to offer mercy with his call to repentance. Jesus could have refrained from revealing himself as I am, but he chose instead to make himself known. We certainly benefit from Jesus' self-revelation and his merciful call to turn to him. Considering who Christ is and who he calls you to be, what repentance is necessary in your life? What "stonings" will you divert because of your love for Jesus? What rejoicing will you spread?

#### **What Do You Think?**

What is most challenging to you about Jesus' teaching and actions in today's lesson?

#### **Digging Deeper**

What is most comforting to you about his teaching and actions?

## B. Prayer

Lord, we all have sinned and fallen short of your ways. Lay our hearts bare so that we might repent and sin no more. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

## C. Thought to Remember

What cause has Jesus given *you* to rejoice?

## Involvement Learning

Enhance your lesson with [NIV Bible Student](#) (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at [www.standardlesson.com](http://www.standardlesson.com) or in the back of the [NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition](#)).

### Into the Lesson

Ask learners to share examples from childhood, school, work, etc., in which they or someone they knew broke the rules but did not experience the consequences of their wrongdoing. Then ask participants to compare how they felt when they were not punished versus when others were not punished. Consider whether the severity of an offense makes any difference in how the learners felt about themselves or others not experiencing consequences. For instance, does it matter if someone was physically harmed as well as emotionally harmed?

*Alternative.* Distribute copies of the “When Can You Break the Speed Limit?” exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Have learners work in small groups to discuss as indicated. *Option.* Allow learners to use their mobile devices to check your state’s traffic laws.

After either activity, work as a whole group to create definitions of *forgiveness* and *condemnation*. Write the definitions on the board for reference later in the lesson. Ask: What is the difference between “forgiving” and “not condemning”?

Make a transition by saying, “There are many circumstances in which we and others choose to break the law. We expect understanding and forgiveness for ourselves, but do we extend it to others? Today we are going to study a passage of Scripture in which Jesus is asked to condemn a woman who has broken the law. What will he do?”

### Into the Word

Invite a volunteer to read [John 8:1–11, 56–59](#) aloud. As a group, decide how the Pharisees might define *forgiveness* versus *condemnation*. Write these definitions below those that the class brain-

stormed earlier. Compare and contrast the definitions, then ask: How do these definitions show the hypocrisy of leaders who accuse others while breaking the law themselves? Ask the whole group to brainstorm ways the Jewish leaders broke not only the letter of the law, but the spirit of it. Share information from the commentary to add to the discussion. Invite learners to look at [Matthew 23](#) for additional ideas on keeping the spirit of the law.

Invite a volunteer to reread [John 8:56–59](#). Discuss in small groups: 1—What is Jesus publicly claiming in these verses? 2—How do Jesus’ identity and actions contrast with the attitudes and actions of the religious leaders? 3—What challenge does Jesus give to people who are forgiven?

## Into Life

Have the whole class focus on [John 8:15](#) to discuss Jesus’ challenge to the woman. Lead a brainstorming session for modern examples that show how one can extend forgiveness while at the same time urging people to repent. Be sure to encourage sensitivity as the groups talk through ways to do this in love and with an understanding of the person.

To conclude the lesson, distribute index cards and pens to participants. Ask learners to fill one side of their cards with examples of sins and mistakes for which God and other people have forgiven them. They can also include any laws of the land they have broken and not been punished for. Give learners one minute to repent of any ongoing sins for which Jesus has forgiven them.

*Alternative.* Distribute copies of the “Behavior and Motivations” activity from the activity page. Have learners complete it individually in a minute or less before discussing conclusions with a partner.

Read [John 3:16–17](#). On the other side of the cards, ask learners to write a prayer of gratitude for escaping condemnation in Christ. Challenge learners to spend time during the week reflecting on their actions.