

Ps 27:1,2
 Ps 7:4
 Ps 1:1,2,3
 Ps 36:3
 Ps 20:3,4
 Ps 119:40,41
 John 7:37-8:20
 Deuteronomy 16:18-20
 1 Peter 5:1-11
 John 8:12

Yarrow, June 20, 2010

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ!

We receive this morning from the hand of the Lord a number of new office bearers, 3 elders and a deacon. It is clear to us all that these four brothers, together with the existing office bearers, are to give leadership in the congregation. But what is this leadership to look like?

The people of Israel in Jesus' day had leaders too. The Romans were the political leaders, but when it came to religion and the consequences of how one viewed the world, the Pharisees and teachers of the law were the acknowledged leaders. But they certainly did not rule with sensitivity to those in their charge. For their instruction and ours, the Great Office Bearer Jesus Christ set the better example.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

THE FAITHFUL OFFICE BEARER JUDGES ACCORDING TO GOD'S STANDARD.

1. The failure of the Pharisees,
2. The standard of the Lord,
3. The lesson for the leaders.

1. The Failure of the Pharisees

You will have noticed, congregation, that the passage we read from Scripture this morning includes a portion that is headed by those bracketed words, "The earliest and most reliable manuscripts and other ancient witnesses do not have John 7:53-8:11." That fact (plus the differences in language used) leads to the conclusion that John himself did not write the words contained in those 11 verses. Commentators also largely agree that if you read John 7 and 8 without these 11 verses there is a continuous and logical flow to John's argument. The temptation, then, is to remove this section about the adulterous woman from the Bible, and declare it non-canonical.

To offset that temptation, there are a number of other realities that argue in favour of retaining this piece of Scripture. For many, many centuries these verses have been considered part of the Bible, and given God's providence that counts for something. Jesus' conduct as described in this passage is also fully according to the precepts of the Lord in the Old Testament, so that this passage very much has the 'flavour' of Scripture. Though it's true that John 8:12ff follows naturally onto the last part of John 7, it's also true that the passage about the adulterous woman illustrates very clearly a point that Jesus has been making in the wider context of John 7 & 8.

What place, then, does the passage about this woman have in the Gospel of John? John himself wrote that Jesus said and did much more than could ever be contained in his gospel (see John 20:30). There is no reason to think that other bits and pieces Jesus did were never passed on for the edification of the church, be it in oral or written format. It would appear that someone –we do not know who– wrote down the details about the adulterous woman, and someone one day

slipped it into the gospel of John at this point as an example illustrating the point Jesus had been saying in the surrounding verses.¹

However that may be, it is fact that in the providence of God this passage is today in Scripture at the place it is, and we need to respect that. To understand the flow of thought in John 7 & 8 we need to remove it from our analysis, and yet when we look for an example of what the application of John 7/8 looks like we need to look at this passage. To say it in modern terms: this portion of the Gospel of John is best read with the passage on the adulterous woman placed in an inspired footnote. With that in mind, we can turn now to the passage before us.

According to chap 7 Jesus was in the temple of Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles (7:2,14). In the course of the Feast Jesus spoke words that made people wonder whether He was the Christ or not (7:40ff). The chief priests and Pharisees even “sent temple guards to arrest Him” (7:32), but they declined to do so on grounds that “no one ever spoke the way this man does” (7:46). That comment in turn generated the discussion of the concluding verses of chap 7. The Pharisees condemn Jesus (vss 47ff), and Nicodemus shows the wrong of their condemnation: “Does our law condemn anyone without first hearing him?” That, of course, is a reference to a passage as Deuteronomy 1:17: “Do not show partiality in judging; hear both small and great alike.” Notice the reference to “hear”! So Solomon can tell his sons, “He who answers before listening – that is his folly and his shame” (Proverbs 18:13). Despite this requirement of the law, the Pharisees’ condemnation of Jesus stands: “Look into it,” they challenge Nicodemus, “and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee” (vs 52). So they feel justified in condemning Jesus without hearing Him.

The narrative then continues in 8:12. Our translation says in this verse that “Jesus spoke again to the people.” Yet that doesn’t catch what the Greek says. For the Greek is put together in such a way as to tie in directly with the preceding paragraph; Jesus is responding to the Pharisees’ condemnation-without-hearing. Further, the Greek doesn’t mention “the people” here; the Greek says that “Jesus spoke ... to *them*.” In context, the word ‘them’ has to refer to the Pharisees. Look at vs 13: “the *Pharisees* challenged Him....”

In His reply to the Pharisees who condemn-without-hearing, Jesus brings forward two images. Jesus first identifies Himself as ‘light’; “I am,” He says, “the light of the world.” This word is Jesus’ answer to the Pharisees’ statement that Scripture says no prophet will come from Galilee. They are wrong, for Isaiah had spoken about how the Lord God would honour “Galilee of the Gentiles” by causing the people of living there to see “a great light” (9:1f). The fulfillment of that prophecy was the fact that Jesus Christ Himself grew up in the land of Galilee so that its people – including those of Nazareth– were privileged with having “the light of the world” grow up in their midst. Then He adds the second image, that of ‘following’, and puts the two together with these words: “Whoever follows Me [that is, the light] will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

The two images together produce a picture of Pharisees walking along, in darkness, searching for the way, unsure of where to walk. Then Jesus says to these persons walking in the dark: “I am the light.... He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness....” ‘I am the light’, says Jesus. But you can’t take hold of Jesus and carry Him yourself (like a candle or a torch) and then walk where you will. Rather, says Jesus, you need to ‘follow’ Me, ‘follow’ the light. If you follow Me, if you follow the light, you shall not walk in darkness; you’ll rather know where you’re going. More, than you’ll have within yourself the ‘light of life’. That’s the picture.

The picture is not new to the Bible. Think, for example, of how the people of Israel departed from the land of their bondage, from Egypt. God Himself went before them in that pillar of cloud as their light, and the people followed. God was literally light before them, showing the

¹ See further Philip Comfort, *New Testament Text and Translation Commentary* (Carol Stream: Tyndale, 2008), 285ff.

way. This was the pattern of their travels through the desert. Says Moses in Deuteronomy 1: the Lord “went in the way before you to search out a place for you to pitch your tents, to show you the way you should go, in the fire by night and in the cloud by day” (vs 33). That picture is symbolic for all God’s leading in the lives of His people, and so David can say, “the LORD is my light” (Ps 27:1).

Yet how does the Lord function as light for His people?? The cloud did not continue to shine in front of the people after they entered the Promised Land. Then again, it didn’t have to. And that’s not only because the people had arrived in the Promised Land, but that’s also because the Lord had Moses write down His statutes and ordinances for the people’s benefit, and He commanded the Levites and the priests to teach this Word to His people. So David could say in Ps 119: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (vs 105). Because the Word is the light that shows David the way to go, he can add, “I have taken an oath and confirmed it, that I will follow Your righteous laws” (vs 106). And Solomon can tell the people, “These commands are a lamp, this teaching is a light, and the corrections of discipline are the way to life” (Prov 6:23). Like the cloud at the time of the Exodus, the Word is the light God’s people are to follow.

Jesus uses this Old Testament material in His reply to the Pharisees. They judge Jesus without properly hearing Him. If they would walk in the light of Scripture, they simply would not condemn rashly and unheard. Jesus is the fulfillment of Old Testament Scripture, and so functions as light on the path of life just as the Scriptures function as light; the Pharisees and the people need to follow Him just as they ought to follow the Scripture.

There’s now the question: what would following Jesus on the issue of condemning others unheard look like? Here where the footnote about the adulterous woman has its place in the story.

2. The Standard of the Lord.

While Jesus was teaching the people in the temple courts, the teachers of the law and the Pharisees interrupted His instruction by marching a woman into His classroom. This woman, they announced to Jesus (and so to His audience) had been “caught in the act of adultery” (John 8:4). In front of this classroom of witnesses they wanted to know whether Jesus agreed with the command of Moses that she be stoned (vs 5). Their motive in asking the question was to trap Jesus (vs 6). If Jesus said Yes, she’s to be stoned, Jesus would be encouraging behaviour contrary to what Israel’s Roman overlords tolerated and so get Himself a name as a rebel. If, on the other hand, Jesus respected the law of the Romans, He’d be seen as unfaithful to the command of God. Either way, thought the teachers and the Pharisees, they’d win and Jesus would lose.

Jesus, though, bent down and began writing on the ground, then finally straightened up with this comment: “If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her” (vs 7), and He kept on doodling on the ground. The result? One by one, beginning with the eldest, they all left.... Then Jesus spoke those well known words to the woman: “Has no one condemned you? Then neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin”

What needs to have our attention, brothers and sisters, is how the teachers of the law and the Pharisees worked with God’s Word. Consider the following:

- Moses in Lev 20 had given to Israel this instruction: “The man who commits adultery with another man’s wife, he who commits adultery with his neighbour’s wife, the adulterer and the adulteress, shall surely be put to death” (vs 10). Note the insistence of the passage: both the man and the woman guilty of adultery had to be put to death. Well, here was a woman caught in adultery. Jesus’ opinion was not needed, for God’s Word was so very clear. Yet the sentence prescribed isn’t being carried out; the scribes and Pharisees are playing games with the command of God for the purpose of trapping Jesus. Here’s an attitude to the Word not befitting the Word of *God*.
- That the scribes and Pharisees do not treat the Word of God with the respect God requires for His Word becomes evident from further inconsistencies. God’s instruction in Lev 20 demanded that both the adulterer and the adulteress receive the same punishment: death. This particular woman, say the scribes and Pharisees to Jesus in vs 4, was caught “in the very act”. Question:

where was the man? Did the man then not get caught in the very act? How's that possible?? You see: this is partiality – they'd nail the woman, but leave the man. That's not simple obedience to the Word; that's blatantly misusing God's Word.

- In Deut 19 Israel received this instruction: "One witness shall not rise against a man concerning any iniquity or any sin that he commits; by the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established" (vs 15). More, in Deuteronomy 17 the Lord stipulated that "the hands of the witnesses must be the first in putting [the wrong-doer] to death" (vs 7). But see: John 8 speaks of no witnesses. Vs 4 does not say: "Teacher, we caught this woman committing adultery, in the very act"; vs 4 says: "Teacher, this woman was caught" in the act. The difference is important. Where were the witnesses? The scribes and Pharisees have taken the report of whoever, and now go public with an accusation that for them is hearsay. That's against the law of Moses. While they appeal to the law for justice, they themselves are sinning against the law.

What we have? These teachers and Pharisees condemned this woman rashly. In the way they dealt with this woman they did not follow the pattern set out in the law. Here is an example of what Jesus said to these same scribes and Pharisees on a different occasion: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone. Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!" (Mt 23:23f). Care for the woman and her reputation they don't; they'd sooner sacrifice her in their efforts to find fault with Jesus Christ. So they drag her publicly before Jesus and tell the whole world that she's an adulteress..., and don't you think she ought to be stoned – cluck, cluck, cluck.

How different was Jesus' response! You can imagine: everybody is looking at this woman – terrible sinner.... And there's suspense in the air; shouldn't she be stoned?? And Jesus just doodles on the ground.... Should adulteresses be stoned?? The law is very clear; Jesus need not address that point. But the law was equally clear about the role and task of witnesses. And there were none. There were only other sinners – no, not other adulteresses, but people who believed gossip and people who embraced evil motives. Hence Jesus' words: "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her" (vs 7). And He doodled on....

One by one the teachers and Pharisees left, uncomfortable with where this was going.... The concluding conversation was harsh and at the same time merciful: "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" "No one," she replied. "Then neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin." No condemnation.... But sin was called sin, and in that she was not spared! And that's mercy, for she had to repent for her salvation's sake.

Yet all sin does need atonement, not just adultery, for God had said that the wages of any sin is death. Jesus knows well that this woman is a sinner and so ought to die. Then why does He not issue that instruction? That, congregation, is because the revealed Word of God included the instruction that *He Himself as Lamb of God die for the people*. Jesus spares the woman because there are no witnesses to her sin. But Jesus knows that He Himself will need to die *for her*.

What we have? The teachers and the Pharisees were quick to judge, and in this case for very wrong motives. Jesus refused to judge unless the conditions set out by the Word of God were fulfilled. Meanwhile, the woman's sin drive Jesus to the cross.

What this anecdote does in the context of John 7 & 8? It serves, congregation, to *illustrate* what following the light of the world looks like. That's our last point this morning,

3. The Lesson for the Leaders.

The light of the world is Jesus Christ. That is: Jesus Christ by His perfect obedience to the Word of God shows others how to work with Scripture. Shall leaders in Israel judge a sinner without hearing the facts? Might innuendo and hearsay be sufficient reason to condemn anyone's

reputation?? God's good law does not allow that kind of thing. So Jesus refused to cast judgment on this woman. By that refusal to follow hearsay or even public opinion, Jesus shone a light on the actions of the Pharisees when they condemned Him unheard. In Jesus' light, and so in the light of the Word of God, the Pharisees' conduct is obviously below par. Says Jesus in 8:15 to these Pharisees: "You judge by human standards; I pass judgment on no one." That's not to say, Jesus continues, that He has no opinion on things. Vs 16: "But if I do judge, My decisions are right, because I am not alone. I stand with the Father, who sent Me." And the Father has made clear in Scripture how one is to form opinions on the things others do and so how to form a judgment on the person.

Then yes, brothers and sisters, these scribes and Pharisees had the Word of God, that Word by which God would lead His people. But these leaders were not about to 'follow' God, were not about to receive the Word of God as a lamp for their feet and a light on their path. They read that word and subjected it to the insights and desires of their own minds. As a result they could find in that Word of God justification to point at sin in another, and at the same time were adept at finding explanations why that same Word did not condemn themselves. They could insist that the other obey the Word carefully, 'follow' God, but had worked out to a fine art the trick of disembowelling God's commands so that they could 'follow' God when and how they chose. They were, in the words of our text, walking in darkness.

How different the attitude that Peter prescribes in 1 Peter 5! Notice the instruction of vs 2: be "eager to serve." What that service looks like? "Not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock." Not harsh judgment, not unfeeling criticism, but only speaking according to the word of God.

That requires so much humility and self-denial. But this, my brothers, is the nature of the office to which the Lord calls you. See Ezekiel 34....

The leaders of Jesus' day failed the people, judged them unfairly, set for the people a bad example. We receive from the Lord new office bearers today. What example do we expect from these brothers? As they come into the homes of the congregation, shall they quickly speak words of judgment here and condemnation there? We from our part realize very well that that is not edifying, and so we even resent it. But human nature is depraved, and so we certainly cannot go by whether we appreciate such judgments or not. The word of God is our light, and we need to follow it – also in matters of passing judgment. More, that word is fulfilled in Jesus Christ, and so we need to follow His example. When did He pass judgment? Only, congregation, when the Lord God passed judgment! The Lord God gave no place for the woman to be publicly condemned in the absence of witnesses, and so Jesus refused to label her as an adulteress. At the same time the Pharisees oozed self-righteousness in the way they were prepared to condemn Jesus without a fair hearing. That judgment was as wrong as their condemnation of the woman.

Where that leaves us? The office bearers we receive today, and indeed all office bearers, need to judge with righteous judgment. It will not do, like the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' day, to read the Word legalistically, applying it without love to condemn the splinter in the neighbour's eye while ignoring what that same Word says about the beam in one's own eye. As office bearers you need to 'follow' Christ, and that is to offer evaluations of the circumstances you observe *according to the standard of God's revealed Word*. Nothing else is good enough; anything else serves only to scatter the sheep of the Lord.