

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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## The Finger of God: The Forgiveness of God

This morning, as part of the series, "The finger of God", our subject is the forgiveness of God. Let's turn to the opening verses of John 8: *"Now early in the morning He came again into the temple, and all the people came to Him; and He sat down and taught them. Then the scribes and Pharisees brought to Him a woman caught in adultery. And when they had set her in the midst, they said to Him, 'Teacher, this woman was caught in adultery, in the very act. Now Moses, in the law, commanded us that such should be stoned. But what do You say?'" This they said, testing Him, that they might have something of which to accuse Him. But Jesus stooped down and wrote on the ground with His finger, as though He did not hear. So when they continued asking Him, He raised Himself up and said to them, 'He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first.' And again He stooped down and wrote on the ground. Then those who heard it, being convicted by their conscience, went out one by one, beginning with the oldest even to the last. And Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst. When Jesus had raised Himself up and saw no one but the woman, He said to her, 'Woman, where are those accusers of yours? Has no one condemned you?' She said, 'No one, Lord.' And Jesus said to her, 'Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more'" (John 8:1-11).*

I should say at the outset that the earliest manuscripts do not include the passage I have just read. There are also differing views as to its authorship. But what is rarely disputed is that the passage is part of the inspired word of God. As such it reveals much about the heart of man and the heart of God.

The background to this event is the open hostility of the scribes and Pharisees to the Lord Jesus (see John 7:45-53). They had become increasingly frustrated in their attempts to undermine His ministry. As a result of this frustration they act in a most unfeeling and callous way by dragging a woman (see John 8:3), who had been caught in the act of adultery, before the Lord Jesus. They set her at the centre of a crowd of men, expose her shame and declare what the Law of Moses said in relation to such behaviour. Their interest lay not in the punishment of the women but in using her dreadful situation as a means to bring charges against Christ.

They believed they were, at last, able to trap Jesus by demanding what He thought should be done to the woman. If He suggested mercy should be shown He would be seen in opposition to the Law of Moses. If He recommended stoning He would be in conflict with Roman civil law.

But instead of responding to them Jesus bends down and writes with His finger upon the ground (John 8:6).

I think the Lord Jesus gives us a wonderful practical example of how to react when confronted by anger, rage and hostility. The need for calm reflection and considered action is essential. The Lord could never be rushed into action and we should never allow inflamed situations to provoke us into rash words and actions.

The passage presents to us the stark contrast between the accusing fingers of men and the finger of God. The scribes and Pharisees point their fingers, in self-righteousness, at the distressed woman. Then, in turn, they also point their fingers at the Saviour to demand a judgment they thought would lead to His entrapment. This behaviour is not uncommon. We often point our fingers to highlight the faults of others whilst choosing to ignore our own failures. Equally we can be quick to point the finger of blame at God. We rarely point our fingers at ourselves.

In response the Son of God bends down to write with his finger on the ground. Of course we don't know what the Saviour wrote but in Jeremiah 17:13 we read, *"O LORD, the hope of Israel, all who forsake You shall be ashamed. 'Those who depart from Me shall be written in the earth, because they have forsaken the LORD, the fountain of living waters.'"*

This interesting Old Testament Scripture clearly describes the spiritual condition of the scribes and Pharisees in their rejection of their own Messiah. It warns that those who forsake God would be written in the earth. Genesis 2:7 records that man was made from the dust of the ground but God breathed into Him to make him a living soul. We are body, soul and spirit but so many reduce everything to the material and forsake God. Many that forsake God have a cloak of religion. So it was with many of the scribes and Pharisees. They held the position of spiritual leadership yet failed to recognise their own Messiah or to display the gentle compassion and mercy God had taught them throughout

their history. It is interesting that when Joseph, at the beginning of the Gospels, discovers Mary is pregnant, he acts with compassion and discretion (see Matthew 1:18-25). It was this gentleness and consideration that equipped him to be the guardian of Jesus.

The Lord's writing on the ground was also in contrast to the giving of the Law in Exodus 31:18, *"And when He had made an end of speaking with him on Mount Sinai, He gave Moses two tablets of the Testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God."*

The original tablets of the Law demanded obedience and soon proved the inability of man to live by such exacting standards. But the Saviour wrote on the ground. God wrote the first tablets on a mountain top far above His earthly people. But Jesus writes on the ground. He was no longer above His people but amongst them. In fact John reminds us of this in the very first chapter of his gospel. He writes in John 1:10-13, *"He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God."*

Whilst everyone else looked with disdain at the woman before them the Lord Jesus looked down and wrote on the ground (John 8:8). You would have thought that what the Lord was writing would have interested the scribes and Pharisees but the hostility in their hearts blinded them to what was written. Their understanding of the word of God had only to do with punishment rather than forgiveness. So, instead of asking about, or looking at, what Jesus was writing and its application to them, they demanded He answered their question.

The Lord answers their question and as He does so it appeals to me that He stops writing with the finger of God upon the ground but points the finger of God at their hearts and consciences when He stands up and says, *"He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first."* Then Jesus immediately stoops down and writes again on the ground.

The standing and stooping of Jesus in this story is, I think, important. Do we want to deal with the God who stooped down in grace or the God who stands above us in judgement? And, as Christians, do we want to display the gentle lowliness of Christ that wins the hearts of men or to stand in judgement over them? Jesus warns us about judging others and Paul writes about true spiritual behaviour in Galatians 6:1 when he writes, *"Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted."*

It impresses me that God is omnipresent and omniscient and that He is the creator of all things. Yet His vast power is not only evident in the creation of the largest things but also in His ability to look into every human heart and expose its lost condition. He then pours His love and grace into the same hearts to bring about salvation. God is love (1 John 4:8) and that love is perfectly expressed in the Lord Jesus. It is the Lord Jesus who by the finger of God is able to touch each heart and look for the response of faith.

The pointing of the finger is so precise and powerful. We constantly do it to emphasise a point, or highlight something or blame someone. In Luke 11:20, the finger of God dismissed demons, *"But if I cast out demons with the finger of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you."*

In Mark 7:33-37, Jesus restores hearing and speech by the touch of His fingers. *"And He took him aside from the multitude, and put His fingers in his ears, and He spat and touched his tongue. Then, looking up to heaven, He sighed, and said to him, 'Ephphatha,' that is, 'Be opened.' Immediately his ears were opened, and the impediment of his tongue was loosed, and he spoke plainly. Then He commanded them that they should tell no one; but the more He commanded them, the more widely they proclaimed it. And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, 'He has done all things well. He makes both the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.'"*

In John 9:1-7, Jesus gives sight to one born blind, *"Now as Jesus passed by, He saw a man who was blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, saying, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' Jesus answered, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him. I must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day; the night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.' When He had said these things, He spat on the ground and made clay with the saliva; and He anointed the eyes of the blind man with the clay. And He said to him, 'Go, wash in the pool of Siloam' (which is translated, Sent). So he went and washed, and came back seeing."*

Here in John 8 the finger of Jesus that wrote on the ground unknown words was followed by the precise and powerful spoken word of God.

In Hebrews 4:12 we read, *"For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword,*

*piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart."*

You cannot escape the connection between the word of God written by the finger of God and the character of the spoken word of God.

The piercing effect of the word of God on soul, spirit and heart described in Hebrews 4:12 is what resulted in those who heard the words of Jesus. The word of God convicted their conscience and they left the scene one by one. The exodus began with the oldest and finished with the youngest. The implication is the older men knew full well the deep-rooted sinfulness of their hearts and the younger were following in the same path.

The finger of God describes how an all-powerful God is able to confront each of us as individuals with the reality of our failure and sin. And it also describes how He is able to pour His love and grace into each heart that responds to Him in faith.

However, in the case of the scribes and the Pharisees the effect was limited and short lived. They were convicted and that conviction prevented them from stoning the woman. But their hearts were not opened for what God wanted to do next - to forgive and transform. They simply went away convinced of their guilt yet unable to appeal to the Lord for forgiveness.

So, when Jesus stands up again He finds only the woman there (John 8:9-10). We should remember the woman had not willingly come to Jesus. There is no evidence of faith in her life. She had been dragged in her shame through the streets to be set before Him.

But what she discovered was a Saviour who, instead of condemning her, points the finger of grace into her heart and says, *"Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more"* (John 8:11). God knows who we are and everything about us. Nothing is hidden from Him. What He looks to do is to open our hearts to His divine grace and love and empower us to live for Him.

Jesus does not directly say to the woman that her sins are forgiven but that He did not condemn her and encouraged her to live a new life. Other characters with a similar background came to know the tender love and powerful salvation of Christ and went on to live lives of devotion.

We read in Mark 16:9 that the Lord cast seven demons out of the heart of Mary Magdalene. This woman who had been completely under the dominion of satanic power is saved and devotes the rest of her life to serving to Lord. This same Mary is the first to see the risen Lord Jesus and is asked by Him to give to the disciples the wonderful message, *"I ascend unto My Father and your Father, My God and to your God"* (John 20:17).

When Jesus entered the house of the Simon the Pharisee, in Luke 7:36-50, a prostitute came in and worshipped at the feet of the Lord Jesus (Luke 7:37-38). The deep need in her heart drew her to the Saviour. Her heart was open and desperately wanted forgiveness. Simon had little understanding of the woman's need but was repelled by her and expected the Lord to reject her (Luke 7:39). But Jesus says to Simon, *"Simon, I have something to say to you."* So he said, *'Teacher, say it.'* *'There was a certain creditor who had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. And when they had nothing with which to repay, he freely forgave them both. Tell Me, therefore, which of them will love him more?'* Simon answered and said, *'I suppose the one whom he forgave more.'* And He said to him, *'You have rightly judged.'* Then He turned to the woman and said to Simon, *'Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave Me no water for My feet, but she has washed My feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head. You gave Me no kiss, but this woman has not ceased to kiss My feet since the time I came in. You did not anoint My head with oil, but this woman has anointed My feet with fragrant oil. Therefore I say to you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little,'* (Luke 7:40-47).

We have no reason to suspect that the woman in our story about the finger of God (John 8:1-11) was any different to Mary and the woman in Simon's house. All of them were in desperate need and all of them were forgiven and set free to serve the Lord.

Her story reminds me of the beginning of Romans 8, *"There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit"* (Romans 8:1-4).

This woman was under the threat of death and cast before the One into whose hands all judgement is committed.

Instead of being condemned and punished she was forgiven and set free to live for Christ.

I see the finger of God as a metaphor for His precise interventions into the lives of those He wants to forgive and bless. Although the expression is not used often in the Scriptures the evidence of God working in this way is overwhelming.

What we need to consider is the effect of the finger of God upon us. The Lord stooped in such a lowly way to write in the ground. Are we living Christ like lives in this world which serve to challenge the behaviour of our fellow men and, at the same time, minister the grace of Christ in world which is so far from Him. Does the Lord have to stand before us as a righteous judge to convict us of self-righteousness or a lack of compassion and grace? Does He have to confront our anger, hostility and our finger pointing at others. I think these are the challenging features of John 8 as it presents to us the finger of God and the forgiveness of God.

May we, like Mary, serve the One who has set us free, may we, like the woman in Simon's house, love much because we have been forgiven much; and may we, like the woman cast down before Jesus, never forget we are no longer the servants of sin but free to follow, serve and worship the Saviour.

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