

Go and Sin No More

Jeremiah 31:31-34, John 7:53–8:11 (ESV)

March 18, 2007

“Has no one condemned you?” “No one, Lord.” “Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.” “Go, and...sin no more.” Short of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the Exodus of Israel from Egypt, this is one of the most remarkable stories in all the Scriptures. I did not say “incredible,” which means “unbelievable,” because this is one of those events which belief most warmly embraces. But is it remarkable in the sense of being amazing, appealing, engaging, and full of life and hope. If you are interested in forgiveness, if you have ever done anything wrong, if you would like for your life to be better tomorrow than it was yesterday or even than it is today, you will want to hear this word from God.

“Has no one condemned you?” “No one, Lord.” “Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.” A group of moral, upright, and self-righteous men dragged a poor woman in front of this upstart teacher from Galilee who also happened to be the Lord of the Universe. It seemed that it would work well for them that they could simultaneously uphold the ancient law of Moses and also, one way or the other, discredit Jesus before his rapt commoners. That was the plan. And yet, Jesus outsmarted them all. And more important than outsmarting them, he opened their eyes to their own shortcomings, he released the woman from her past, and he opened before her a whole new possibility for life. The Lord of the universe, the judge before whom we shall all stand at the end of time, did something here that was new, different, and life-giving. Are you interested in this?

“Has no one condemned you?” “No one, Lord.” “Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.” It is hard to know where to begin. It occurs to me that at least some of us, if not all of us, have been self-righteously condemnatory of someone at some time. Some of us who live in Virginia find it hard not to look down on people. Surely we are not so malicious as the villains in today’s reading, and yet there is a modicum of hope expressed even for them. They do not complete their plan. They do not trap Jesus. More to the point, they do not execute the woman. Instead, “they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones,” perhaps with some incipient awareness of their own need for forgiveness. But on to the main event.

“Has no one condemned you?” “No one, Lord.” “Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.” The unnamed woman neither denies nor contests her sin. There would have been no use in doing so. And not only would there have

been no use, but doing so would have compounded her sin. Denying sin is itself sinful. Her restraint in this regard indicates that she is already beginning to live into that new future which Jesus holds up before her. Can we share that with her? We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We have all done things we should not have done, and we have all failed to do things which we ought to have done. Let us neither deny nor contest this. There would be no use in doing so. And doing so would only compound our sin. We are the ones standing in the need of grace. We are the ones standing in the need of mercy. We are the ones standing in the need of forgiveness. We are the ones standing in the need of Jesus Christ.

“Has no one condemned you?” “No one, Lord.” “Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.” Jesus Christ, Lord of the universe, the judge before whom we shall all stand at the end of time, had here a perfect opportunity to condemn a miserable sinner. He declined to do so. How can that be? His declining to do so did not indicate that the sin was unimportant. His declining to do so did not suggest that the sin did not matter. His declining to do so certainly did not indicate that he condoned the sin. In fact, he told her to sin no more. We shall get to that in a moment. Moreover, his declining to condemn her does not even mean that her sin went unpunished. It did, in fact, result in an execution. Be he was the one executed in her place. What kind of judge is he?

“Has no one condemned you?” “No one, Lord.” “Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.” Are you beginning to realize how remarkable these words are? Jesus Christ’s refusal to condemn this woman was not a simple matter of indifference to her wrongdoing. Jesus Christ’s refusal to condemn this woman was not an expression of tolerance. Jesus Christ’s refusal to condemn this woman was nothing less than his agreement to accept her condemnation himself. She was not executed because he was executed in her place. Jesus Christ’s refusal to condemn us does not mean that our sin is insignificant or excusable. Jesus Christ’s refusal to condemn us does not mean we are worthy of his attention. Jesus Christ’s refusal to condemn us certainly does not mean that we are good people. Jesus Christ’s refusal to condemn us means that he has willingly taken upon himself the condemnation and execution that we have deserved. Thanks be to God!

“Has no one condemned you?” “No one, Lord.” “Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.” How do we live in the light of such forgiveness? How do we go forward from such a terrible past? How do we pay such a debt of gratitude to the one who died that we may live? He pointed the way: “Go, and...sin no more.” “Go, and...sin no more.” “Go, and...sin no more.” Can we do that? Can we do that even a little? God is not capricious. God would not ask of us what we could not do, even if we cannot do it on our own. That is to say, God does ask of us

what is humanly impossible, and then he helps us do it. Can we sin no more? Not on our own. But that is the future into which God is carrying us.

“Has no one condemned you?” “No one, Lord.” “Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.” This is the gospel of Jesus Christ. It was on the basis of this gospel that Augustine, writing nearly 1600 years ago in the closing books of his massive work, *The City of God*, offered the most profound analysis of the history of the human race and of individual human life which I have ever read. It was later incorporated *in toto* into the Westminster Confession of Faith. First, we were created with free will, so that we were *able* to sin, and everyone of us except Jesus Christ has exercised that option. Second, once we had fallen into sin, we were *not* able *not* to sin, in that our will was bound to be self-centered and self-interested in all our thoughts, words, and actions. That is where we were before forgiveness.

But third, once Jesus Christ has forgiven us, once he has declined to condemn us, once he has taken our guilt upon himself, once he has accepted our execution in his body, then we are able *not* to sin. I always add, “on a good day, for a brief moment.” Once we have been forgiven, it is possible for us not to sin. Once we have been forgiven, it is possible for us to have at least some thoughts, words, and actions that are not infected with self-centeredness and self-interest, to have at least some thoughts, words, and actions that are God-centered and God-focused, to have at least some thoughts, words, and actions that genuinely seek the well-being of those about us, even at our own expense. “Go, and...sin no more.” It may not last long. There is always the danger that we will be so proud of our sinlessness that we will fall back into even greater sin. But the ability not to sin is real, even if limited.

Fourth, having moved from being able to sin, through not being able not to sin, and into being able not to sin—from creation, through the fall, and into redemption—we shall finally be promoted from the church militant into the church triumphant, from this life to the next, where we will *not* be *able* to sin. That will be our greatest freedom when sin is no longer an option. That is the state of glory. There we shall finally fulfill the command of Jesus to sin no more. And yet, we can begin to aspire to it even here. We can begin to live in that direction. We can begin to hope in the life yet to come. We can begin to “lay aside...sin which clings so closely” (Hebrews 12:1).

“Has no one condemned you?” “No one, Lord.” “Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.” You see, Jesus did *not* say, “Sin no more, and then I will forgive you.” That would have been unbearable. That would have been impossible. That would have condemned us for all eternity. That would have left us without hope. But that is not what he said. Jesus did say, “Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.” Forgiveness comes first. Repentance comes second. Repentance is not a prerequisite for salvation. Repentance is a result of

salvation. Repentance grows out of salvation. Repentance is an expression of gratitude. Repentance is an act of obedience. Repentance is sanctification. Repentance is not what we do before the Christian life. Repentance is the Christian life.

It is promised in the writings of Jeremiah the prophet that the people of God shall receive a new covenant, not like the ones which their fathers broke but one written within, on their hearts. I submit to you not only that Jesus Christ came to institute that new covenant—that is well-documented, of course—but also that for the unnamed woman in today’s reading that gift occurred during his conversation with her. “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.... [T]hey shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.... For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.” Thanks be to God! And now in the mercy and providence of God this new covenant is being extended even to us, outlanders though we are, lower even than the least of the least. It is being extended to us!

This is the gospel of Jesus Christ. What is being offered to us today is not at all the condoning of who we are and what we have done. What is being offered to us today is the refusal to condemn us for the past and the strength and courage to make a new beginning. Are you interested? Short of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the Exodus of Israel from Egypt, this is one of the most remarkable stories in all the Scriptures. It remarkable in that it is amazing, appealing, engaging, and full of life and hope. If you are interested in forgiveness, if you have ever done anything wrong, if you have ever failed to do something good, if you would like for your life to be better tomorrow than it was yesterday or even than it is today, you will want to hear this word from God: “Has no one condemned you?” “No one, Lord.” “Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.” “Go, and...sin no more.”

To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

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