

## 2CH Sunday at 7.30

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Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

### No condemnation

Presented by Margaret Hall

#### Introduction

It's one of life's little paradoxes that what's meant to be enjoyable and helpful can somehow turn into a burden. Take the weekend newspapers. If we've bought them we feel we ought to be reading them, and might be missing something if we don't. Yet they take up so much time.

Sometimes I do read things that strike a chord and prove helpful - like the comment one writer made on what she called the Fraud Squad - "those sneaking little voices inside our heads that, no matter how hard we try, however much we succeed at what we're doing, still whisper to us, 'Who are you kidding?' Their job is to tell us we're frauds, to remind us of our inadequacies and accuse us of our failings."

The columnist went on to suggest light-heartedly that by the time she's ninety she might have realized she's an OK person after all. Or she may not. Self-condemnation can easily become a state of mind from which we can't shake ourselves free.

#### I

Accusation and condemnation were heavy in the air one day in the Temple in Jerusalem. Jesus was teaching the crowd who'd gathered to hear him, when he was interrupted by a posse of the religious authorities, thrusting in front of him a woman caught in the act of adultery. They reminded Jesus that Moses had commanded such women be stoned to death. What did Jesus say?

In the hush that followed, Jesus said nothing. He simply knelt down and wrote with his finger on the ground. The religious leaders sensed they'd got him on this one and renewed their attack. What should they do with this woman? What's his answer? The crowd watched and waited - transfixed by the drama unfolding before their eyes. The terrified woman sprawled on the ground, sinking under her burden of guilt and the fear of death. Her smugly self-righteous accusers, flushed with their own cleverness. And Jesus, kneeling and writing.

The background to this scene, provided for us by one who witnessed it, was that the religious authorities had already failed twice to arrest Jesus. To this point in John's account of Jesus' life, he's already referred three times to what was then common knowledge in Jerusalem - that the religious leaders were looking for a way to remove Jesus - permanently. They wanted to kill him. This woman could be their chance - at least to seriously discredit him. If he said she shouldn't be stoned to death, he'd be disagreeing with Moses, their greatest prophet, through whom God had given the Ten Commandments. Moses was so highly revered, the crowd might be incensed enough to turn on Jesus. At least they'd see he couldn't possibly be the Messiah, because no true Messiah would ever contradict Moses.

If, on the other hand, Jesus said the woman should be stoned to death, he'd be contradicting the Roman law which forbade death by stoning. Publicly opposing the laws of the occupying forces was not a safe thing to do.

But the men seeking his life were seriously underestimating the imperturbable, unflappable Jesus. Never at any stage was he intimidated by the authorities. Nor was he bound by society's conventions and expectations. There are several instances in the Gospel accounts, of Jesus defending helpless, despised women against powerful men - in those days an unthinkable thing to do. He denounced the hypocrisy of men who appeared to be upholding the law while bending it to suit themselves. Moses' law concerning adultery actually stated that both people involved - the man and the woman - should be stoned. Who the man was, was surely known. He must have been seen, because to be accused of adultery you had to be caught in the act. But somehow the authorities had let him go. Only the woman had been dragged through the streets of Jerusalem to be irreparably shamed. Jesus saw through the holier-than-thou attitudes these men were famous for to the murderous hatred in their hearts.

## II

Jesus knew what was in the hearts of the men who'd dragged before him the woman caught in adultery. So when he finally straightened up, he said, "If any of you is without sin, let him be the first to cast a stone at her." Then he bent down to write on the ground again.

With that one sentence Jesus saved the woman's life. He must have known not one of her accusers would dare to claim publicly to be without sin, knowing the Jewish Scriptures as they did. They realized their best option at that point was to retreat - which they did, beginning with the more senior of them.

Some in the crowd may have guessed the woman was a mere pawn in the authorities' schemes to get Jesus. According to the Jewish laws which governed death by stoning, the first person to cast a stone had to have witnessed the crime. There also had to be two witnesses. Adultery being an essentially private act, finding two witnesses surely wouldn't be easy, normally. Either somehow they'd contrived it, or there *weren't* two witnesses. If that were so, no one would identify himself as a witness - in case it came out that he wasn't.

However all that may be, by the time Jesus straightened up for the second time, they were gone. Jesus said to the woman, "Where are they? Has no one condemned you?" "No one," she said. He said, "Then neither do I condemn you. Go now, and leave your life of sin."

Jesus' response fits well with other things we know about him. While never condoning sin, he was known as the friend of sinners. He was full of compassion for the harassed and helpless. He knew himself to be the fulfilment of the ancient prophecy about the Servant God had chosen, God's beloved in whom he delights. As Isaiah so poetically expressed it, the voice of that person would not be heard quarrelling or crying out in the streets. Nor would he break a bruised reed or snuff out a smouldering wick.

Above all, Jesus knew what was ahead of him - how God in his infinite wisdom and love was about to bring together what seem to us to be two conflicting claims - the claims of justice and mercy. God's justice requires the damage sin does be paid for, and Jesus knew how it would be paid for once and for all - by his death on a cross. He also knew that, by that same act, the floodgates of mercy would be opened, for every sinner who wants full and free forgiveness.

But the truth is, forgiveness isn't free. It always comes at a cost, with someone choosing to accept the loss that's been inflicted, and endure the pain of it. Life's greatest losses are to do with the relationships for which we exist. They are lost when we deny God the central place in our lives that belongs to him and fail to love our neighbour. All that lack of love causes damage. In every age since time began, unspeakable damage has been done by human indifference to God and to each other.

### III

God loves the world so much he takes very seriously the damage our self-centredness does. All the brokenness in the world matters so much to God, that he did the only thing that can fix it. He himself paid the cost of the damage in order to provide forgiveness. As the old hymn says, *'He died that we might be forgiven.'* He bore the judgement we've brought on ourselves - separation from the Source of life. By simply trusting his death was for us, you and I can be forgiven for the damage we've done. Our physical death then becomes a door opening into life that's not damageable, where relationships are no longer broken by our very human self-centredness.

There's an African story about a boy who was playing around one day with his catapult and shot dead his boss's biggest and best hen. He was horrified at what he'd done, but not wanting to lose his job, he buried the evidence. Unfortunately a fellow-servant saw him, and seized the opportunity to blackmail him. He demanded he do his work, as well as his own. The boy's life became intolerable. He was doing two jobs for one wage - all so his guilt wouldn't be discovered. Finally, too worn down to continue, he decided there was only one way out. He fronted up to his boss and confessed to killing his best hen.

"I know," said his boss. "I saw you do it. I saw you bury it. I was concerned about you - and ready to forgive you. I've been waiting for you to come and tell me."

He thought of all those long, weary days at the constant beck and call of his blackmailer, while all that time, his boss had known all about what he'd done and was waiting to forgive him. That day, from sheer gratitude, he did his work better than he'd ever done it before, very happy to know that when his blackmailer appeared to order him around, he was free to refuse. Forgiveness had stripped the blackmailer of his power to accuse.

The freedom Christ bought for us at the cost of death on a cross is eternal freedom from the penalty we deserve for the losses we've inflicted. It's freedom now from sin's power to enslave us. It's freedom from accusation. Those freedoms are beautifully summed up in the words of Graham Kendrick's song:

*The price is paid, see Satan flee away,  
For Jesus crucified destroys his power.  
No more to pay, let accusation cease;  
In Christ there is no condemnation now.*

Satan's referred to in the Bible as our Accuser. He works away at keeping us bogged down in the past, reminding us of our follies and failures, pushing us to beat ourselves up over the wrong-headed things we've done and the good things we've left undone. But the opening words of Kendrick's song invite us to move on, to enter into all the privileges and enjoyment of our new status as fully forgiven sinners:

*The price is paid, come let us enter in  
To all that Jesus died to make our own.*

### Conclusion

When God himself has stamped us NOT GUILTY, who would want to go back to a life of indifference to him? It's as unthinkable as a butterfly struggling out of its chrysalis, spreading its beautiful wings, then folding them up again and trying to squeeze back into its dried-up cocoon. It's not that we never commit another sin. Sadly, we do that every day. But our attitude to sin has changed. We have no inner peace until we ask again for the forgiveness Christ's death provides. When we've been stamped NOT GUILTY, the direction of our life, as well as our status before God, has changed.

Jesus said, “Those who believe in me are not condemned. Those who don’t believe in me are condemned already.” Turning away from him means we’re left with no one to speak up for us before God. That’s the choice we all have - to hold on to our sin as the religious leaders did, or be set free as the adulterous woman was - free from shame and free from condemnation.