



VIRTUES FOR DISCIPLES

MERCY

God's Nature, Our Challenge

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Introduction

Alive in the Word brings you resources to deepen your understanding of Scripture, offer meaning for your life today, and help you to pray and act in response to God's word.

Use any volume of **Alive in the Word** in the way best suited to you.

- **For individual learning and reflection**, consider this an invitation to prayerfully journal in response to the questions you find along the way. And be prepared to move from head to heart and then to action.
- **For group learning and reflection**, arrange for three sessions where you will use the material provided as the basis for faith sharing and prayer. You may ask group members to read each chapter in advance and come prepared with questions answered. In this kind of session, plan to be together for about an hour. Or, if your group prefers, read and respond to the questions together without advance preparation. With this approach, it's helpful to plan on spending more time for each group session in order to adequately work through each chapter.

- **For a parish-wide event or use within a larger group,** provide each person with a copy of this volume, and allow time during the event for quiet reading, group discussion and prayer, and then a final commitment by each person to some simple action in response to what he or she learned.

This volume is one of several volumes that explore the theme **Virtues for Disciples**. Each of us is called to be a disciple, a follower of Christ. The life of a disciple is challenging but it is the most fulfilling way to live. Called by name by the God who created us, we are shaped by the teachings of Christ and continually guided by the Holy Spirit. As we grow more deeply into this identity as disciples of Jesus Christ, we discover the valuable virtues that mark God's people.

Jesus and the Woman Caught in Adultery



Begin by asking God to assist you in your prayer and study. Then read through John 8:2-11, the story of the woman caught in adultery.

John 8:2-11

²Early in the morning he arrived again in the temple area, and all the people started coming to him, and he sat down and taught them. ³Then the scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery and made her stand in the middle.

⁴They said to him, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. ⁵Now in the law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?” ⁶They said this to test him, so that they could have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and began to write on the ground with his finger. ⁷But when they continued asking him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” ⁸Again he bent down and wrote on

the ground. ⁹And in response, they went away one by one, beginning with the elders. So he was left alone with the woman before him. ¹⁰Then Jesus straightened up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” ¹¹She replied, “No one, sir.” Then Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go, [and] from now on do not sin any more.”

After a few moments of quiet reflection on the story, consider the information provided in “Setting the Scene.”

Setting the Scene

“Jesus Christ is the face of the Father’s mercy. These words might well sum up the mystery of the Christian faith” (*Misericordiae Vultus* 1). Pope Francis opens his proclamation of the Jubilee Year of Mercy with powerful words about the place of mercy in our faith.

What is mercy? Compassion toward someone who is suffering? Forgiveness of one who has caused harm? Kindness beyond what the law demands? Mercy is all of these. Mercy lies at the very heart of the nature of God.

The vivid and memorable encounter between Jesus and a woman accused of adultery in the Gospel of John is one of the clearest expressions of Jesus’ mercy, revealing Christ to be the face of God’s loving forgiveness. Jesus does not condemn the woman as justice would demand, but he responds with the gift of abundant compassion.

When you hear the word “mercy,” what words, people, or actions come to mind?

The word “mercy” comes from the Latin *misericordia*, meaning “to suffer with” (literally, a miserable heart). Throughout his life Jesus remains close to those who are suffering—the poor, the marginalized, the sinful, and the sorrowful. His mercy allows him to touch the hearts of those most in need of God’s love. We remember Jesus’ compassion each time we pray the *Kyrie eleison* at Mass, calling upon Christ to show us the same forgiveness he showed to the woman accused of adultery: “Lord, have mercy; Christ, have mercy; Lord, have mercy.”

Understanding the Scene Itself

The entire passage will be considered a few verses at a time. The questions in the margin (as above) are for discussion with others. If you are using these materials on your own, use the questions for personal reflection or as a guide to journaling.

²Early in the morning he arrived again in the temple area, and all the people started coming to him, and he sat down and taught them. ³Then the scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery and made her stand in the middle. ⁴They said to him, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. ⁵Now in the law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?” ^{6a}They said this to test him, so that they could have some charge to bring against him.

Time markers in the gospels are always meaningful. This passage begins with a note that Jesus arrived in the temple early in the morning—a time of light returning after the darkness of night. Immediately following his encounter with the woman caught in adultery, Jesus will turn back to the crowd he was teaching to remind them, “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12). Throughout John’s gospel there is a strong theme of light versus darkness, beginning with its opening proclamation that “the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (1:5). From the first words that mark the time of Jesus’ meeting with the adulterous woman, the gospel writer signals that this early morning encounter will bring light into darkness.



Not only time, but the setting of place holds important symbolism. In this story Jesus is preaching in the temple area in Jerusalem. By teaching in a site of such significance, central to the religious practice and faith of the Jewish people, Jesus risks the ire of his enemies. Yet he knows his truth comes from the Father (John 7:16-18) and thus rightly belongs in this holy place.

Jesus has gathered a crowd around him in the temple when he is interrupted by the scribes and Pharisees. These two groups seeking to challenge his claims to authority are part of a growing opposition to Jesus, as seen in John 5:1-18 when the Jews sought to kill him for curing a man on

the Sabbath and in John 7:32 when the Pharisees tried to arrest him. By presenting Jesus with the case of a woman caught in adultery, the Pharisees and scribes hope to trap him into violating the law of Moses which calls for adulterers to be put to death (Lev 20:10; Deut 22:21-22).

As in other disputes between Jesus and religious leaders throughout the Gospels, this moment of crisis becomes a conflict between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law's truth that Jesus has come to fulfill (Matt 5:17). Yet Jesus recognizes the situation as not only a test to trap him, but also a life-or-death decision for the accused woman. The gospel writer increases the intensity of the drama by the physical description of the scene: the woman standing in the center, the crowd encircling her, the angry adversaries ready to stone her, and everyone's attention on what Jesus will do next.

^{6b}Jesus bent down and began to write on the ground with his finger.⁷But when they continued asking him, he straightened up and said to them,

“Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.”⁸Again he bent down and wrote on the ground.

The next time you pray “Lord, have mercy” in the penitential rite at Mass, imagine how this accused woman might have hoped that Jesus would have mercy on her. What sin in your life do you pray that God will have mercy on?



Jesus' quiet response to the vengeful mob ready to cast stones stands in stark contrast to their persistent questions. As they continue to ask him about her fate, he first chooses silence over words, literally bending down to get below the angry fray. As powerful as Jesus' words will prove to be once he does speak, transforming the tenor and tone of the tense situation, his initial silence is equally remarkable. The weight of this silence calls to mind another dramatic exchange within a later life-or-death moment of judgment in John's gospel: the tension between Jesus and Pilate in which Jesus chooses silence in the face of Pilate's fearful, escalating questions (John 19:8-9). John portrays Jesus in both conflicts as refusing to respond to agitation, yet unwavering in his resolve toward truth.

Jesus' body language in these verses is also striking. First he bends down, then rises back up. This motion can be seen as foreshadowing his passion and resurrection: the sacrificial bending down of his very self and the triumphant rising to new life. Jesus' movement also symbolizes God's mercy, which later Christian writers would describe in terms of salvation and resurrection: "But God, who is rich in mercy, because of the great love he had for us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, brought us to life with Christ (by grace you have been saved), [and] raised us up with him" (Eph 2:4-7).

The symbolism of Jesus' movement holds hopeful promise for the adulterous woman who is herself caught in the balance between life and death. As her accusers stand ready to stone her,

In the midst of an angry mob, Jesus does not respond immediately but first chooses silence as he writes on the ground. When have you chosen silence before speaking? What difference did it make?

Have you ever wanted to condemn someone quickly, but then decided to take a step back from the situation? How did your attitude change with time?

Jesus offers her freedom as he turns the moment of judgment back on the crowd. He compels each person present to examine his or her own conscience, creating an unexpected ending and setting a universal challenge in response to the hostility directed at one woman. We can imagine the crowd—scribes and Pharisees as well as Jesus’ followers—stunned into silence as he bends back down to let his words sink in. Their reaction might have resonated with the surprise of the guards who failed to arrest Jesus immediately before this encounter: “Never before has anyone spoken like this one” (John 7:46).

This passage is the only place in the gospels where Jesus is described as writing, an act that has fascinated Christians for centuries. John gives no indication what Jesus might have written in the dirt, although some interpretations have suggested that he was writing the sins of the woman’s accusers. His action echoes the writing of the Ten Commandments by “God’s own finger” (Exod 31:18). This powerful connection affirms Jesus’ divinity: he writes with the same authority as God because he is God. Yet now he writes on soft ground instead of hard stone, suggesting the compassion of God’s mercy. Ultimately this story is about the lavishness of God’s love, a compassion that confounds the world’s standards and offers undeserving sinners forgiveness that reaches far beyond the justice we would rightly deserve.

⁹And in response, they went away one by one, beginning with the elders. So he was left alone

with the woman before him. ¹⁰Then Jesus straightened up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” ¹¹She replied, “No one, sir.” Then Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go, [and] from now on do not sin any more.”

The drama of the scene disappears as quickly as it escalated. Since all who were ready to stone the woman were sinners themselves, all had to drop their stones as they recognized their own sinfulness. Beginning with the elders who would have cast the first stones (but who also may have been the wiser ones who could recognize their own sinfulness), every angry accuser is forced to admit his own sinful nature and let go of his judgment.

The woman is now left alone with Jesus: the only one who is without sin and therefore the only one who could be justified in stoning her. Yet here is the miraculous work of mercy: he does not. Jesus speaks to her with kindness and love. He sends her forth with renewed hope and a second chance at life.

It is important to note that Jesus does not dismiss the sinfulness of adultery. When he instructs the woman to “Go and sin no more,” he acknowledges that her actions did constitute sin. But his parting words to her also remind us of the forgiveness and freedom we experience each time we admit our own sinfulness



Who are people in your life that you need to show mercy toward?

in the sacrament of reconciliation. The priest's final prayer of absolution sends us forth by reminding us that God is the source of mercy: "God the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of His Son, has reconciled the world to Himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins" (Rite of Penance). God's mercy does not leave us where it found us, sinful and sorrowful. It sends us on our way in love and hope, calling us to conversion and deeper faith.

*God's mercy
does not leave
us where it
found us.*

Jesus' final exchange with the accused woman echoes his encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:4-42). She, too, was in a situation of sin, living with a man who was not her husband. She, too, was faced with an obvi-

ous imbalance of power in the presence of Jesus: sinless/sinner, male/female, and Jewish/Samaritan. Yet Jesus looked deep into the heart of the situation and spoke to her with merciful love, as she recounted later: "He told me everything I have done" (John 4:39). She went on to share her experience with Jesus, and many Samaritans in her town began to believe in him because of her testimony. We can wonder if the adulterous woman's encounter with Jesus might have a similar lasting impact.

This passage paints a picture of Jesus as a loving judge: the kind of judge we hope we might face at our last judgment. While mercy is sometimes translated as justice, God's justice is not simply a mathematical calculation based upon the letter of the law, but an overflowing mercy

springing from unceasing love. Jesus' lingering message to the woman (and to each of us) echoes his earlier proclamation that he came for salvation, not condemnation: "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:17).

Praying the Word / Sacred Reading

Return to the passage in John 8:2-11, reading it slowly and prayerfully. Now imagine yourself into the scene as you ask God to open your heart to new perspectives on the story.

If you are using this study with a group, allow for time to read the full passage silently. Then you may wish to have one person read the reflection below while the others consider the questions quietly.

Imagine your greatest sin, your deepest, darkest secret, now exposed and laid bare for the whole world to judge. Imagine yourself encircled by an angry mob, ready to take your life. Imagine yourself desperate for help and silently pleading for mercy.

When have you been the accused one? When have you been afraid to face God?

Now imagine yourself as one of the Pharisees. Imagine your righteous anger at a wrong gone unpunished. Imagine your desire for justice to be done and for your deepest beliefs to be upheld.

When have you been the Pharisee? When have you wanted God to be on your side?

Pope Francis reminds us that mercy is at the heart of God's love for us: "God never tires of reaching out to us" (*Misericordiae Vultus* 19). When have you felt God reaching out to you in your time of need?

Now imagine yourself as one of the people who came to listen to Jesus preach. Imagine your surprise when you see this wise teacher confronted. Imagine your wonder when he turns the whole situation upside down.

When have you been the crowd? When have you been changed because of what you have witnessed God doing?

What do each of these different perspectives teach you about God's mercy?

Living the Word

The next time you find yourself in the midst of a heated debate or angry confrontation—whether with a friend or family member, coworker or stranger, in person or online—consider how you might follow Christ's example: bending low to get below the fray, taking time in silent prayer to see the heart of the situation, and rising up again to show merciful love by your words and actions.

What happens when you hold back from your initial desire to condemn? What changes inside of you as you “drop your stone” and remember your own need for mercy? How do you experience God's presence, perhaps in a new or surprising way?

