

The Influential Christ: His Situational Agility

In this series, “The Influential Christ” we are looking at those qualities of Christ that drew people to him. We are trying to better understand what kind of person Jesus was, what were those qualities that seemed to draw people to him, so much so that many were willing to follow him even to their death. As we ourselves strive to live under the influence of Christ, modeling our own lives after Christ, hoping that we too might have a Christ-like influence in our world. So, this morning we continue by looking at another quality, what I like to call the situational agility of Christ.

I have shared with you before about a time in my life when I found it very difficult to believe in the divinity of Christ. For various reasons, in my life at that time the whole idea of Jesus as the divine Son of God just seemed implausible to me. It was a very unsettling time and I will always be grateful for mentors and friends whose gentle and patient faith shepherded me and enabled me to find a way back to faith. But during that time I remember distinctly thinking that if I couldn't believe in Jesus as God, I could at least more seriously investigate who Jesus the man was. Looking back on that time, I think part of my faith struggle was that the Jesus I had believed in up until then wasn't human enough. Many of the great heresies of the church have been the denial of either the divinity of Christ or the denial of his humanity.

During those days I remember reading through the gospels again looking for the man Jesus and discovering things that had escaped my notice before. And the more I saw Jesus the man, the more I began to see just how cool Jesus was. I noticed no matter how threatening or dangerous the situation he was in might be, he seemed to always know just what to say. Nothing seemed to intimidate him. He was courageous. Courage is defined as “the quality of mind to meet danger and opposition calmly and with firmness.” That’s Jesus. He frequently faced dangerous opposition and he did it so calmly and with such deftness, or what I would call situational agility. He wasn’t intimidated by the religious leaders who were constantly testing him.

One of my favorite “cool moments” is in Matthew 21 at the temple when the chief priests confronted Jesus. *“By what authority are you doing these things?” they asked. “And who gave you this authority?” Jesus replied, “I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John’s baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or of human origin?”* This is a really tense and potentially dangerous situation for Jesus. But notice how with this simple response Jesus ties these chief priests into pretzels. *They discussed it among themselves and said, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will ask, ‘Then why didn’t you believe him?’ But if we say, ‘Of human origin’—we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet.” So they answered*

Jesus, "We don't know." Now don't forget, these Jewish leaders are the smartest guys in town. No one gets the best of them. But Jesus did. They tried to trap him and he turns around and springs the trap on them. I love the way Jesus answers and ends this story and shows his situational agility. Jesus essentially says, *"Okay, you don't answer my question, I don't answer yours."* Isn't that just cool!?

There are many scenes in the gospel that reveal the situational agility of Jesus. One of my favorites is in John 8, where we discover that Jesus is not only a great teacher, he is also a skillful hunter. Unlike many in this part of the world, I've never been much of a hunter. I'm too soft hearted. The first time I ever shot a bird I couldn't sleep for days. I caught a fish with my grandpa once and later when my grandmother skinned and cooked it, I cried when we all sat down to eat it. A real hunter is not so sensitive. Perhaps you've heard the story of the two hunters who wanted to hunt on a farmer's land. One went to the farmhouse to ask permission. The farmer agreed on one condition. He had an old horse that needed to be put down and he didn't have the heart to do it. If the hunters would kill his horse he'd let them hunt on the land. The first hunter agreed and then decided to play a trick on his buddy. When he got back to the truck his buddy asked him, "Well, what did the farmer say?" "He said we can't use the land and he was a real jerk about it. I'm so mad I think I'm going to go and shoot one of his horses." Then he grabbed his rifle and went over to the stable and shot the horse. Almost

immediately though, he heard a second shot. When he whirled around to see what it was, he saw his buddy standing over a dead cow. “Well, if you were going to shoot his horse, the least I could do was shoot his cow”

No one gets shot in John 8, nevertheless, it is a “hunting story.” Several people are setting all kinds of traps for all kinds of prey. Hunters have different reasons for setting traps. Sometimes traps are set to catch bait for even bigger game. Other times traps are set to reduce the population of unwanted varmints. And then there are traps set to bag a trophy catch. Still other hunters are concerned with capturing a wounded or sick animal so they can help care for it. All four of these traps are in this story. Lets read it beginning in verse 3.

The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and

asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" "No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin." (John 8:3-11)

The first two traps in the story are set by the Scribes and Pharisees. Their first trap was simply to get some bait in order to catch bigger game. So they go out and catch a woman in the act of adultery. The phrase implies there were eye witnesses to her sin and the implication is that the women may very well have been entrapped in order that to get clear evidence to convict her. I'm told such entrapments were not uncommon in those days for husbands who were trying to catch wives they thought were being unfaithful. But notice, in our story no man is brought, only the woman. Adultery is difficult by oneself. As they say, it takes two to tango. It's actually possible the man was simply used to set up the woman and was conveniently allowed to escape. In any case, the woman is taken to Jesus immediately and very publicly. It looks very much like this woman is not the main prey, she is simply small bait used to catch a bigger prize. That would be Jesus.

That's not hard to understand. What a great trophy catch for the Pharisees' wall. Jesus has been teaching at their expense in the temple. Now is their chance to get even. So, with the bait squirming there on the ground before him, they set their trap: "The Law of Moses says we should stone this woman. What do you say?" It's a clever trap. If Jesus says, "Stone her" he is no "friend to sinners."

Not only that, if he advocates her stoning he will be in violation of the Roman law, which prohibits the Jews from carrying out capital punishment. On the other hand, if Jesus says “Release her” he is breaking Moses’ law and can be discredited as a spiritual authority. If Jesus just ignores her and walks away, he can be accused of forsaking her. What can Jesus do?

A lesser man might be undone by this, but for Jesus it was only another occasion to demonstrate his amazing situational agility. Jesus bends down and starts writing in the dust with his finger. Here, by the way, is a great Bible mystery. What did Jesus write? The Bible doesn’t say. Not to worry though, the Bible’s silence rarely silences bible scholars. There are all kinds of theories. Some say Jesus is so overwhelmed with the evil and shameful behavior of these men that he just bends down and stirs the dust to collect himself. Some say he’s writing a list of the sins of these accusers. I’m told the Greek word used here actually means “to write against, to accuse.” Some say he’s calling their attention to the words of Jeremiah 17:23 *O Lord, all who forsake you will be put to shame; Those who turn away from you will be written in the dust, because they have forsaken the Lord.* My favorite theory is that Jesus is writing the names of various mistresses these men had known far too intimately.

Now its time for the next two traps in the story, both of them set by Jesus. First there is an immediate need to reduce the population of some religious

varmints, the official name of the species is hypocrite. So, Jesus sets a trap for them. *If anyone of you is without sin, let him throw the first stone.* What is Jesus saying? Is he saying that since none of us are perfect we should never judge one another or hold each other accountable for our sins? Is he saying that since all of us have made mistakes, all of us have sinned, who are we to judge others and punish them? Would that make sense? Think about it. None of us are perfect drivers, who are we to authorize the police to give out traffic citations. None of us are perfect students, who are we to insist that tests should be graded. Do you think Jesus' words here suggests that sinning and breaking God's law is not a serious problem? I don't think so. The Law was important to Jesus. He said, *I came not to abolish the Law but to fulfill it* and *Be ye perfect even as your father in heaven is perfect.* The Law was important to Jesus, but no less important were people.

In the introduction of his gospel John includes these words. *The law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.* Jesus did not come to abolish the law but to help people understand the law in the context of God's grace and truth. Jesus shows the difference between God's perspective and that of the Pharisees on the law, the righteous and the sinner. To the Pharisee the purpose of law is to show who is a sinner and who is righteous. To God the purpose of law is to expose all of us as sinners and show that all of us need saving. To the Pharisee the world is divided into two groups, them and everyone else, the

righteous and the sinners and these righteous Pharisees had little love for sinners. To God the world is divided into people and Him, and he has great love for people.

The Pharisees *appear* to be against sin, but there were several sins that didn't seem to bother them much at all. Jesus' teaching exposed the Pharisees' sin, their hypocrisy, their clever ways of getting around the Law's moral demands. The Sermon on the Mount particularly addressed how they distorted the law's purpose. Rather than confront their sins, the Pharisees used the law to promote themselves.

Jesus on the other hand may have appeared to be soft on sin, but not really. How can someone say that anyone who exchanges a throne in heaven for a cross on earth is soft on sin? No, Jesus could never be accused of being soft on sin, but soft on sinners, well that is a different thing. When Jesus sees men exploiting the law to abuse a sinner while ignoring their own sins, he has to step in. So he sets his trap and snares the religious varmints one by one until finally they are all gone.

Now its time for Jesus' final trap, a gentle snare, carefully set to apprehend a creature that has been wounded and is suffering. This woman has been wounded by her own sins and the sins of others. Her temporary value to those "righteous men" is now gone; they no longer need her for bait now that their prey has escaped, so she is discarded, left alone, abandoned. That's what the evil one does to us so often. He catches us, uses us, wounds us then abandons us. But here is an

irony. In God's eyes, the Pharisees and scribes that have just left are no less wounded than this woman; they just don't know it yet.

In God's eyes there are really only two kinds of people I think. Not those who are sinners and those who are not, but those who have seen their sin and those who have not. Jesus came to help us see our sin and when we do it is a painful sight. We feel condemned, unworthy, lost. But Jesus came not just so we could see our sin, but even more so we could see our Savior; he came so we might find our value and worth in the love of God. This is what Jesus is trying to show this adulterous woman, that God loves her. In God's eyes this pathetic wounded sinner is a precious, worthy soul. In God's eyes, even with so much of her life wasted, there is still time for greatness. Things look so differently when we look at the world through God's eyes rather than the world's eyes. As the apostle Paul has written. *So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.* (2 Cor 5: 15-21)

So, Jesus sets the final trap in this story, a gentle trap to rescue a wounded sinner. To draw her to his sacred snare, the most enticing bait of all is used, mercy.

“Women, where are your accusers? Has no one condemned you?”

“No one sir.”

“Then neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin.”

Does this final trap work? Does Jesus catch this woman? Does the woman repent of her sins and give her life to God. Or does she return to her past mistakes and waste this opportunity to change? We don't know. The scriptures are silent. Which tells me that this story is not so much about this woman as it is about those who claim to be righteous, those who claim to represent God. This story is about two very different kinds of hunters, and their different traps. Both hunters saw value in the woman, but for very different reasons. To the self proclaimed righteous hunters, she was just bait to be used to catch a bigger prize, she could help them bring home the trophy which would serve their pride and enhance their righteous reputations and make them feel better about themselves. But to Jesus, this woman, created to be a magnificent reflection of the glory of God, full of life and joy, vibrant, radiant now lay before him injured, her reflection shattered, her spirit wounded by sin. So, the gentle hunter would capture her, nurse her back to health and set her free to be the glorious creature God intended her to be.

And so this story confronts us with a question, “What kind of hunters are we?” “What kind of traps do we set for the people around us:?” Here is one good way to know: How do people who have been wounded by sin feel in our presence? Do they feel accused, abandoned, left alone or are they drawn into the heavenly

snare of love and mercy, hearing from us words very much like the words of the divine hunter: “Neither do I condemn thee. Let’s go now and leave this life of sin.” Jesus displayed in this episode the extraordinary agility. He applied both God’s grace and God’s law to a situation that had the potential to do great harm and brought from it instead great healing and the hope of salvation. God help us to handle our own difficult situations with a similar gracious agility.