

Big idea: Jesus is loving in a way that draws together mercy and grace, so that sin is rightly confronted and dealt with, and change is created.

FCF:

Application:

1. Jesus is love...

When we deal with such a controversial topic as 'Jesus is love', we have to be careful that we don't stoop to 'straw-men' – to convenient and false descriptions of what other's think.

That being said, I reckon if I asked people on the street to explain what 'Jesus is love', or 'Jesus is loving', means, they would give me one of two answers:

- 'Jesus is love' means that Jesus accepts everyone as they are.
- 'Jesus is love' means that Jesus does not judge a person.

In essence, I think that if you boil these statements down, these understandings down, then 'love' is revealed as 'approval', 'acceptance', or at least 'a blank cheque' for me to be who I am.

That raises all sorts of questions about how define 'love' and live 'love', as well as how we deal with what Jesus reveals in what he says and does in the Bible.

So, when I say ‘What I love about Jesus is... he is loving’, what does the Bible say?

PRAYER...

As we begin, let me be clear about two aspects of what we will be thinking about today.

First, the concept of ‘love’ in the Bible is massive – multi-faceted, context-driven, complex, and diverse, under God’s revelation. We will not be dealing with every aspect of it, let alone every context of it.

Second, and this is the corollary, what we are thinking through today could have been differently discussed depending upon the passage. For example, if we had looked at John 13:1 and following, the slant would have been towards the love expressed within God’s community. We will not cover every aspect, or every passage, today – and you breath a sigh of relief! But that also means that we might not answer all your questions today – a great spur to read further, study more, of God’s word!

2. A big week... (John 7)

Jesus has had a big week.

If you scan back over the chapter leading up to this episode, Jesus has been in Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles. A feast to celebrate the harvest intake, it was connected with water and light. It was the most popular of the festivals, and the population of Jerusalem swelled considerably.

Jesus went 'secretly' (7:10). His reputation preceded him. The crowds were looking for him, talking about him, deciding about him. Rumours were swirling concerning him. And the Jewish authorities were searching for him.

The week that followed was one of revelation – Jesus spoke clearly about his nature (as God's chosen messenger, as doing God's chosen work), about his mission (to offer 'living water'), about the opposition to him (those who opposed him wanted to kill him, and were working against the law of Moses). The week that followed was one of debate and argument and judgement about Jesus' identity. And the week that followed was one of active attempts to arrest Jesus, to remove him from the national stage and consciousness.

At the end of that week, Jesus remained, the rumours remained, and the opposition remained.

3. A contested scene...

READ vs.2...

The scene that we are about to spend time in is a contested scene. It doesn't just portray a contest – it is itself a contested story. Put simply, the earliest and most reliable manuscripts of John's Gospel do not have this section in them. Certainly later copies do, but not the earliest and most reliable.

To put it bluntly, it has a number of inconsistencies – the Pharisees and scribes never appear together in John; the attempt to trap Jesus seems a little strange AFTER their attempt to arrest

Jesus. Moreover, a number of scholars have pointed out that its language and mannerisms are very similar to Luke's Gospel.

That being said, as Don Carson points out, 'there is little reason for doubting that the event here described occurred, even if in its written form it did not in the beginning belong to the canonical books' ('The Gospel according to John' (Apollos: 1991): p.333).

The nature of the detail (the way in which Jesus is described as bending and standing and writing) and the way in which the event unfolds speaks to a real event.

4. A contested scene...

Jesus began the day where he always spent the day, doing what he always did – he was in the Temple and the crowds came to him. It was public. It was transparent. It was open.

Look at verses 3-6... READ.

The religious leaders bail him up. The coalition is unique in John, but not in the other gospels. They come to Jesus with a woman and a question – did you see it there in verses 4-5?

If you read it quickly, you might not pick up the slightly off slant of the situation. After all, adultery is wrong, and the sentence is prescribed in the Old Testament.

Slow down, and you realise the discrepancies. If she was caught in adultery, then where was he? The portion of the law referred to, in at least Leviticus 20:10, says both must die, but does not

prescribe stoning – in fact, it all depends upon whether the woman was single, married or betrothed. You see, the key issue was not the woman's sin, was it? The key issue was made clear in verse 6: this was a pretence to trap Jesus. The issue is not sin and judgement – the issue is their desire to kill Jesus.

Matthew's account at this point makes clear the guilt not just of the woman but, more significantly, of those who brought her before Jesus. As the experts in the law given by God – the law that was to be upheld so that God's people could represent God to the world – these men were shown to be opportunistic hypocrites: a woman condemned and a man set free, a woman used as a stalking horse, a woman publicly shamed and regarded as disposable for a larger victim, a man renowned for his perfection and good deeds and righteous living being set up. What a shabby scene!

Jesus' response is appropriately dismissive – of the accusers and their questioning. Don't worry about what Jesus is writing in the dirt – no one knows! But take the imagery for what it is – Jesus has no interest in the games of these men, or any interest in participating in their grossly unjust sin.

They persist in badgering him. And we must grasp the vivid 'eyewitness' feel of this moment – the physical description of Jesus, and the sound and noise of the questioners speaks to something observed.

Jesus' response is well-known – **look at verse 7... READ.**

Jesus' words are like a scalpel, exposing so many levels.

On one level, the law that these men were referencing made it clear that the witnesses were to be trustworthy, non-participants in the sin, more than one, and the first to throw the stones (Deut.13:9, 17:7).

On a slightly deeper level, Jesus' words expose the complicity of these men. They might not have been guilty of adultery, at this moment, but they knew their own minds and hearts; moreover, their actions at this moment speak of their sin in other areas – entrapment, lying, hypocrisy, and even murder!

On the deepest level, Jesus exposes the nature of their hearts as sinful. The nature of the plan of these men shows that they have desired to take on the role of God alone – they have taken upon themselves the role of judge, jury and executioner: they have taken to themselves the right, and role, and responsibility, of God alone to judge someone eternally. For the woman, this is played out in their wilful use of her as an object of disposal. For Jesus, they seek his destruction.

In this sense, Jesus' words expose the heart of all sin, in all humans: to take upon ourselves the role of God, and to seek to be God instead of God. He poses the question to these men: 'Who are you to take on the role of God?'

As he bends down to write again, the men seem to be silenced. In fact, their gradual response shows the truth of Jesus' exposure – **look at verse 9... READ.**

The men gradually leave. The older ones show the advantage of age and experience, leaving first. Finally, Jesus is left alone with the woman.

Look at verses 10-11... READ.

Jesus' first question is obvious, but it gets the issue out in the air.

Jesus second response is where the rubber hits the road. In two parts, he displays the heart of what has just happened, and what he is on about.

His first statement is quite clear: he does not condemn the woman. In essence, he refuses to join the sinful hearts of the men who brought her, who desired to take on God's role for themselves.

This is a remarkable statement when we remember that Jesus himself has the right to forgive sins – and that places him as God, with God. And, yet, as a human, in this situation, Jesus leaves eternal judgement where it belongs: in the hands of God.

But, please don't hear Jesus wrongly. He has not ignored this woman's sin, nor has he swept it under the carpet. **Look at his second statement, in verse 11... READ.**

The guilt of this woman has never been in question, and Jesus himself confronts it. Having experienced the mercy of Jesus, having received what she did not deserve (a form of pardon), her life must change – she must step away from the heart that seeks

to be God, and come and live under God, with God where he belongs – in charge! In fact, this is a clear command from the lips of Jesus – ‘Go and from now on do not sin anymore!’

We are never told if this woman truly repented. We are never told if this woman truly turned back to God. We are never told if this woman responded appropriately to this mercy, this grace (and that is what it truly is – receiving what she did not deserve). I suspect that this is because this short section is not about the woman, but about Jesus, and how he dealt with sin, and the contrast with the religious leaders of the day – and perhaps us!

5. But, what about ‘love’?

And this brings us to the question at hand – what a strange choice of passage to describe ‘Jesus is loving’, a passage that makes no mention of ‘love’, ‘grace’, or ‘mercy’. Why this passage when there are others like John 13?

Well, I want you to consider the way Jesus dealt with this situation.

First, Jesus recognized where he stood before God. And he understood God was God, and he was human. This impacted on how he dealt with sin and judgement.

Second, Jesus did not ignore the sin in front of him, nor did he sweep it under the carpet, dismiss it, or rationalize it. He dealt with appropriately, with God as God.

Third, sin having been dealt with, Jesus commanded change. As the woman felt the consequences of her sin being dealt with as it should be, she was commanded to change, to repent, in her life.

This is an important sequence to recognize because it drives to the heart of how Jesus expresses his love. We can say that because of the way love is described as revolving around Jesus, and how sin is dealt with, in the other two passages we read today – Ephesians 2:1-10 and 1 John 4:7-12.

In both of those passages, sin is recognized for what it is: present in the heart of humanity, and a direct challenge to God and his rule and role and authority. In both those passages, sin is not minimized, not dismissed, not rationalized, and not avoided – sin is dealt with. In both those passages, the one who deals with sin is the one all humans commit sin against: God. In both those passages, the way sin is dealt is through Jesus – who enters into this world because of God's, and his, love for those who rebel against God. In both those passages, Jesus dealing with sin in love actually creates change in people's lives – in the whole flow of humanity: it takes the dead and makes them alive, it takes the enemies of God and reconciles them to God. That change is captured so clearly in Ephesians 2 – there is a change in the walk of people for whom their sin is dealt with – they cease walking one way, and walk another way; or, in 1 John 4, they cease lacking in love and now live with love abounding.

Jesus displays that collection of actions and attitudes that show how God deals with the sin of humans, in a way that is surprising but relieving:

- It is God's role to deal with sin.
- God deals with sin through Jesus – confronting it as it is, and judging it as it should be.
- This transforms the lives – or, should – of those who have had their sins dealt with by God.
- This is driven by love – and is an expression of grace and mercy – the giving of what is not deserved, to those who deserve condemnation.

6. Jesus is love...

What I love about Jesus is that he is loving – he is the expression of love. This doesn't give us a definition of love, nor does it cover every facet of love, but it shows us that love is at least this: the confrontation of our sin, under God, that completely transforms our lives, giving us what we do not deserve (REPEAT).

I love this for three very simple reasons:

- My sin is dealt with, as God designed.
- My sin is dealt with, as I don't deserve.
- My sin is dealt with, and my life is transformed.

In a world that offers so many different permutations for love, and so much misunderstanding about love (and Jesus), this is so wonderful – it deals with our greatest need, it deals with it rightly and amazingly, and it brings transformation that we desire!

In this world, this week, wouldn't that be love worth spreading around?