



Links Players

Changes in the Rules?

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?” 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. (John 8:3-7, NIV)

I was golfing with my brother-in-law the other day and snap hooked one into the bushes on the left off the tee. It was ugly—not OB but not particularly playable, either.

Assessing the damage, he said, “You know, there’s been a rule change. You can either move this ball two club lengths from where it sits, under that bush, and play it with a one stroke penalty or take a two stroke penalty and play it from the nearest spot on the fairway.”

This change was news to me! I’ve since googled “new rule for unplayable lie.” I am still not convinced my brother-in-law had it right. Nevertheless, rule changes do happen.

In today’s passage, the Pharisees bring an adulteress to Jesus and ask him whether she deserves the death penalty. According to God’s law, as delivered to Moses, she does. The trick is that the Romans didn’t approve of their Jewish subjects administering capital punishment.

The trap for Jesus was that if he said not to execute her, he’ll be playing by the rules of the Romans but not God’s rule. And if he says to go ahead and do it, he’ll be complying with God’s law, but the Romans will see him as having stepped outside his lane.

So he tweaks the “death penalty –for adultery” rule and adds the stipulation that anyone present who is without sin can start throwing stones.

The Pharisees all leave. Had they been able to google “Pharisees-without-sin,” they’d have come up with crickets.

This “anyone without sin” wrinkle is new. Previously, no requirement existed that those doing the stoning had to be without sin. Of course, it goes without saying that there had never previously been anyone present who was without sin—until now. So the Pharisees shuffled off.

The woman noted that Jesus—the only one remaining other than her—wasn’t gathering stones. His parting comment was, “They didn’t condemn you? I don’t either.”

This woman, who no doubt expected to exit the event in a pine box, got a surprise acquittal.

The rule didn't actually change, though. God's law was satisfied because there was an execution for her sin. It would happen sometime later, on a cross outside of Jerusalem. The technical term for this is "vicarious atonement." I can't atone for you; you can't atone for me. We're sinners. But Jesus can and did do it for all of us. He took the penalty for her.

This exchange is good news for her, and good news for us. Good Friday is what it's (appropriately) called now.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank you that your Son identified with sinners in his incarnation and baptism, and that he atoned for those same sinners, including us, on the cross.

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Peter Muller

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