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Stop It

John 8:1-11

Peter Hiatt @ The Sanctuary Downtown

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Last week, someone sent me some actual footage of an actual counseling session, which may revolutionize the way we do ministry:

["Stop It" – Mad TV clip #1]

I love this video, because I think that's what most people think counseling should be... and definitely what church should be:

You come to church to find out "what's good and what's bad."

Washing hands is good... that's fine.

Fear of being buried in a box, eating disorders, and relational problems are bad.

Then after I tell you what's bad, I'm supposed to say, "Stop it! Stop it!"

If I were to say that in Hebrew, I'd use the word *Shabbath* – it's where we get the word "Sabbath."

For 1500 years, God told the Israelites to *Shabbath* – Stop It ... and they didn't. They only got worse.

See, we think our will is ok, so all we really need is some more "knowledge of what's good and what's evil."

So we come to church thinking, "OK, Pastor, give me some of that 'knowledge of good and evil.' If only there was like a tree we could pluck it from ... but all we got is you, so tell me:

How long should I pray?

How much should I give?

Should I spank or use time outs?

Should I vote Republican or Democrat?

Give me the Law and tell me to 'stop it!'"

In our Scripture for this morning, Jesus tells a woman [John 8:11] to literally, "Go and from the now, sin no more." In other words: "Stop it." And it appears she does. But normally, "stop it" doesn't work so well. The woman in the video came to see Bob Newhart because she was afraid ... afraid of being buried in a box.

Ironically, just her fear of the box is already the box – she can't go home, she can't drive, she can't rest... and Bob Newhart tells her to "Stop it!" Yet the more he tells her to "stop it," the more she does it... the more she gets afraid ... the more she's buried in a box.

Sometimes people don't want to stop it. They don't like to stop it. They're compelled to not "stop it." And so we switch tactics.

["Stop It" – Mad TV clip #2]

So, the counselor tried to control her fear of being buried alive in a box with more fear of being buried alive in a box. Hebrews 2:15 tells us that Jesus came "to deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage."

Let me paraphrase: Jesus came to deliver us from the fear of death. Sin is lifelong bondage to the fear of death. Sin is faithlessness. It's not trusting God, and so it's fearing death.

Therefore, to say, "stop sinning," is to say, "stop being afraid of death!"
It is to say, "Stop being afraid of being buried alive in a box!"
And to say, "Stop sinning or else you'll be ... you'll be damned to Hell!"
It is to say, "Stop being afraid of being buried alive in a box... or you'll be buried alive in a box."
"Stop being afraid of death or you'll die."

Now, that may be true, but my point is: it doesn't help you to "stop it." It doesn't cause you to repent. And if we think it does, we just bury each other deeper in boxes.

I have three friends who were buried alive in boxes or shut in coffins... two of them with corpses. Satan wants us terrified of being buried alive in a box, so we'll be terrified of surrendering control, so we'll be terrified to trust, and he can control us with fear. And thus, we'll be buried in a box long before our bodies are buried in a box.

Well, in John 8, Jesus tells a woman to "stop it," and I think she does. John 8 follows John 6 & 7... now you may remember we spent several weeks preaching on John 6 & 7, and the very challenging topic of free will, and the idea that we are predestined for a good free will.

Most Americans tend to think we already have a good free will, and you see, if that's the case:

All we really need is some "knowledge of good and evil."

All we really need is more laws, lists, and rules, and we will "stop it."

And if our will happens to be weak, we'll fortify it with incentives and threats.

"Stop it, or else!" – Incentives... which actually strengthen our will, for we repress our will with more of our will.

We say, "Stop being greedy, so you can get streets of gold in Heaven."

And "Stop fearing death, or else you'll really die forever in Hell."

"Stop being afraid of dying a little, and be afraid of dying a lot."

"Love God, and don't be afraid or He'll judge you and fry you in Hell."

“Believe God loves you unconditionally ... or He’ll hate you forever.”
“Have faith... no more fear ... stop it, stop it, STOP IT!”

And we don’t.

Maybe we don’t need a new list and more threats.
Maybe we don’t need to fortify our old will.
Maybe we need a new will.
Maybe we need a new heart. (And by that I don’t mean BOB Newhart.)

[John 8]

They went each to his own house, but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. Early in the morning, he came again to the temple. All the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst they said to him, “Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now in the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?”

They did this to test him (Duet. 6:16 – “You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.”), that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.” And once more he bent down and wrote on the ground.

But when they heard it, they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus stood up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one, Lord.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.”

“Stop it. Stop sinning.”

And we ask, “Or what?”

Jesus does not mention an “or what.” No threat. How could He issue a threat if He refuses to condemn? And yet, this is a full-blown crisis for everyone involved. Crisis from the Greek *krisis*, which translates, “A judgment.” Everybody is caught in judgment. Everybody caught.

A few years ago, my friend Sharon Hersh gave a brilliant message on everyone that is “caught” in this story, and the gift it is to be “caught.”

You see, if the problem is our will, we won’t will to come to Jesus. We’ll have to be caught. This woman is caught. The punishment for her sin was death by stoning – an angry mob would hurl stones at you until you died. One might bruise your back, then one might break a finger, another crack your shin, and another crack your skull... while the mob reviled you and covered you with spit.

Death by stoning... Jesus doesn’t debate that; it’s Scripture (Duet 22:13-30).

The punishment for two people having sex before marriage is ... marriage.
The punishment for a married person having sex outside of marriage is death... but Scripture doesn't specify how. The Mishnah say strangulation in a pile of dung.

However, if a man sleeps with a woman betrothed, Scripture specifies the punishment – death by stoning, for both. (Which makes you wonder where the man is in this story?)

But you see, this woman was betrothed, and probably quite young. Ironically, it's the very crime that Jesus's mother would've been accused of.

Well, imagine how she feels... really just a girl... perhaps for the first time, she gave that most vulnerable and holy part of herself to a man. Such longing and such shame, and now she's stripped naked in the dirt before an angry mob and the man whom the people proclaim to be The Great Prophet.

She's thinking: "I'm going to be buried alive in a box..."

Why do people commit adultery? Isn't it because they long for life, communion, passion, joy? They long for life and they're afraid of death... afraid they'll miss some life and be buried alive in a box.

And what happens when people do commit adultery? Well, first, they hurt the one that they are promised to. There is a real wound, not an abstraction ... a broken heart.

1. They hurt the one that they are promised to, and
2. They begin to hurt themselves ... they begin to bury themselves alive in a box.

So, afraid of being buried in a box, they bury themselves ever deeper in a box.

Adultery ...

To walk away from faithfulness is to walk into faithlessness.

To walk away from the light is to walk into the dark.

To walk away from the truth is to bury yourself in lies, darkness, and death.

To walk away from the truth is to walk away from Jesus, and bury yourself alive in a box.

But now she was caught... the adulterer was caught. Jesus doesn't argue the crime or even the punishment. He just says, "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone."

The Law prescribed that the witnesses cast the first stone. Now why would someone **want** to witness this ... to watch this? And if they wanted to witness this, would they be without sin? And why would these fellows "want" to punish this sin? Perhaps they were like, jealous of this sin? In which case, they were committing the same sin in their hearts... which is the worst place to commit it.

You know, when my kids were little, I would punish them. But I didn't want to punish them, because I wasn't jealous over what they were being punished for.

Coleman used to eat dirt. I'd catch him in the back yard eating dirt and say, "Stop it!" "Stop it, or what?" ... "Well, you'll be full of dirt!"

But since Colman didn't understand the problem with that, I'd say: "Stop it, or I'll give you a spanking."

But I didn't want to.

I wasn't jealous of Coleman, thinking, "If he gets to eat dirt, I should get to eat dirt. I can't let him get away with that. I'm going to punish him." No, I might force him to stop, but only in hope that one day he would choose to stop; that his tastes, his desires, his will would change. And actually, it has. And now that it has, I say, "Buddy, you're free. You're free to eat dirt. I won't stop you." And except for football practice, he chooses not to eat dirt. He chooses pizza, and that is a good choice made in freedom. But as long as he secretly wants to eat dirt, that choice is not free, and he is not free.

When my sister was little, she used to eat the manure that my dad brought to fertilize the yard... and we'd say, "Stop it! Stop it! Stop it, Lydia!" "Stop it, or what?" ... "Stop eating crap, or ... you'll have to eat crap!" See? The crime is the worst punishment.

Julian of Norwich wrote:

"Sin is the sharpest scourge that any chosen soul can be struck with; it is a scourge which lashes men and women so hard, and batters them and destroys them so completely in their own eyes, that they think they only deserve to sink down into hell. But when the touch of the Holy Ghost brings contrition, it turns the bitterness into hope of God's mercy; and then their wounds begin to heal.

And so all shame will be turned into glory and into greater joy. And I am sure, by what I feel myself, that the more every well-natured soul sees this, in the kind and generous love of God, the more loath he is to sin."

In other words, if we really see sin, we'll hate sin and stop sinning. And if we love sin, we really haven't seen sin... which means we really haven't seen Jesus. It's like we're buried alive in a box.

BUT if we really see sin, we'll hate sin, and have compassion for sinners. We don't have compassion for sinners, because we're jealous of their sin. But if we really see sin and hate sin, we will not be at all interested in punishing sinners... unless that punishment helps free them from sin – that is, "get out of box."

But you don't free people from fear of being buried in a box with more fear of being buried in a box... unless, of course, that helps them see that they're already buried in a box.

St. Paul tells us that God sent the law, which is "Knowledge of good and evil." God sent the Law to "increase the trespass, that sin might become sinful beyond measure." (Romans 5:20) God sent

the Law so we could see we are already buried alive in a box... already dead in our trespasses and sins.

You see, the Law doesn't fix sin; it exposes sin.

The Law doesn't fix our will; it exposes our will.

The Law doesn't give us the power to "stop it"; it reveals that we can't.

We can't fix our will with our will, our flesh with our flesh, and fear with fear. The Law and threats don't fix our will, but actually tempt our will to become its own judge and savior... to become God ... to become sinful beyond measure.

These scribes and Pharisees in Jerusalem are about to become – or maybe are – “sinful beyond measure.” Who do they think they are? And who are they really?

[Ezekiel 16]

Thus says the Lord God to Jerusalem:

“And when I passed by you, and saw you weltering in your blood, I said to you in your blood: ‘Live’... And when I passed by you again and looked upon you, behold, you were at the age for love; and I spread my skirt over you, and covered your nakedness. ‘Yea, I plighted my troth to you and entered into a covenant with you,’ says the Lord God, and you became mine.”

These men holding the stones have been betrothed to the Lord, and now the Lord is standing in front of them... but they are in bed with the principalities and powers of darkness. They have become accusers (“Accuser” is a name for Satan), and they really are not accusing this girl – they’re accusing Jesus. They’re trying to trap Him, for they hate his mercy. Soon they will hand him over to the beast (The Empire of Rome). They will use their knowledge of good and evil to nail their Lord and Bridegroom to the tree of shame on the hill of the skull.

They are the unfaithful betrothed, whom the Law commands to be stoned. They’re fixing to stone themselves. Jesus bends down and writes in the dust. Perhaps He wrote the Law – “Thou Shalt Love.” But they hated Love ... they hated Mercy. God is Love – 100% grace. Burning, hot, eternal grace.

“Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.” They’re caught, just like the girl is caught. They drop their stones and walk away. They walk away. Jesus didn’t ask them to walk away. Does Jesus love them any less than that girl? No. They are His chosen people, and His bride that He came to redeem.

They walk away to hide their shame in a box (more sin).

They walk away from Jesus – The Way, the Truth, the Life, Light, and Reason.

If you walk away from the Way, you’re walking into lostness.

If you walk away from the Truth, you’re hiding in lies.

Walk away from Life, and you walk into death.

Walk from the Light, and you walk into darkness.

Walk away from reason and you’re going insane.

They are hiding themselves in outer darkness – hell.

They come to Jesus for judgment, and “the measure they gave was the measure they received.” But Jesus loves them, just as He loves that girl at His feet ... this adulteress, this daughter of Sodom. Jesus loves Jerusalem every bit as much as he loves her.

Listen to what the Lord says to Jerusalem, His bride, at the end of Ezekiel 16:

“I will restore their fortunes, both the fortunes of Sodom and her daughters, and the fortunes of Samaria and her daughters, and I will restore your own fortunes in the midst of them, that you may bear your disgrace... Was not your sister Sodom a byword in your mouth in the day of your pride, before your wickedness was uncovered? Yea, thus says the Lord God: I will deal with you as you have done, who have despised the oath in breaking the covenant... yet I will remember my covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish with you an everlasting covenant. Then you will remember your ways, and be ashamed when I take your sisters ... and give them to you as daughters... that you may remember and be confounded ... when I forgive you all that you have done, says the Lord God.”

He’s saying, “My Bride, I will strip you of your arrogance ... your bad will.”

How?

“By having Mercy upon your sisters Sodom and Samaria.”

You see, Christ’s mercy upon the adulterous woman is judgment on the scribes and Pharisees. It’s already stripping them of their pride. Soon, He’ll hang on the cross, having mercy on all creation. And that is the judgment on Jerusalem, His bride.

It strips Jerusalem of her pride, and in one generation, Jerusalem is literally stripped to the dust of the ground. But it’s not because He doesn’t love her. Just the opposite. He wants her to lie at His feet, like this woman of dust lays at His feet now... stripped of arrogance, ready to surrender to Love and become love.

Well, the woman has been caught, the scribes and Pharisees are being caught, and we are caught ... by Love.

Romans 2:1

You have no excuse ... for in passing judgment on another, you condemn yourself, because you the judge practice the very same thing.

Here’s another way to say it: (Gen. 2:17)

“But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for the day you eat of it, you will surely die.”

You see, sin is such a deep problem; we eat of it constantly, and don’t even know it. We come to church to eat of it: eat of the tree and judge ourselves, judge our neighbors, take the place of the judge.

“Pastor, give me some knowledge, so I can judge myself and judge others, and make myself in God’s image... so I can cover my sin, repress my sin, and stop it. Help me bury my fear with more fear, and construct an illusion that I’m OK... that I’m not already buried alive in a box.”

We try to fix sin with sin, flesh with flesh, fear with fear, our will with our will. So of course, we don’t stop it... we only enhance it. Jesus reveals that we all deserve to be stoned.

“They’ll stone you when you’re trying to be so good.
They’ll stone you just like they said they would.
They’ll stone you when you’re trying to go home.
They’ll stone you when you’re there all alone.
But I would not feel so all alone ... everybody must get stoned.”

According to the Law, the problem isn’t that this woman must get stoned. The problem is that everybody must get stoned. And yet, that means nobody has any right to throw any stones. Well, except of course ... Jesus.

[Robot Chicken video clip]

Be honest – that’s what we expect. And having read the story, that’s what we still expect... that when Jesus said, “I don’t condemn you,” He meant, “I don’t condemn you now ... but I’m coming back a second time, and if you haven’t stopped sinning, then I’ll kick your ass, stone the living daylight out of you, and bury you alive in a box... it’s Judgment Day.”

And so, we come to church afraid of death...
expecting to be healed through even more fear of death,
expecting the pastor to say, “Have faith, not fear ... or else you could be
buried alive in a box forever by God.”

Well, fear of God is the beginning of wisdom, and Jesus is wisdom... and this woman at Jesus’ feet is afraid. At last, she’s afraid of the right thing. Jesus said, “There is only One you must fear.”

“Fear is the beginning of wisdom,” and wisdom is Jesus, and Jesus is Love. Fear is the beginning of Love, but not the end.

I John 4:18 –
There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear, for fear has to do with punishment.

When she was thrown at the feet of Jesus, she was afraid, and then afraid only of Him. And now He asks her only one thing: “Where are your accusers? Is there no one left to condemn you?” He asks her to see that there is no one left to condemn her. There is now only One to fear, and that One, the Lord, looks her in the eye and says, “Neither do I condemn you.”

“I do not condemn you.”

He did not say, "I don't condemn you **yet**."

This is not just a second chance. This isn't a grace period. This is Grace ... period.

This is not a threat of what could be, this is what eternally **is**.

This is I AM;

 this is the heart of God;

 this is Jesus – "The same yesterday, today, and forever."

He says, "I do not condemn you. From the Now – this eternal moment – stop. Stop sinning. Sweetheart, stop burying yourself in a box. Stop burying **us** in a box."

"Sin no more." That's not a request. It's the Word of God. It's the Word that spoke creation into existence. It's the Word spoken into the dust to make Adam.

People speculate as to why Jesus wrote in the dust.

Some say He was writing the sins of those Pharisees.

 I doubt it, for "Love keeps no record of wrongs," says Scripture.

Some think He was writing the Law – "Thou shalt love."

 That may very well be.

Some think He was writing Jeremiah 17:13 – that adulterous Israel shall be written into the dust of the ground, like this woman placed in the dust of the ground before Jesus.

I like to think that Jesus, the Word of God and Breath of God, bent down to write in the dust of the ground, the way God bent down to breathe into the dust of the ground when He made Adam.

You see, God is fixing to make someone in His image; He is fixing to give her a new will, to give her a new heart ... Himself – the Heart of God.

"I do not condemn you." Period.

People say, "Well, what about judgment?" This **is** judgment.

John 5:22 – "The Father judges no one and has given all judgment to the son."

John 8:15 – Jesus says, "I judge no one."

He is the Judge who judges by not judging. His judgment is absolute, burning hot, fiery and eternal grace. And if you don't like that, you're screwed... you really are. Because ultimately, that's all there is – Grace. You can only hide in nowhere and nothing, darkness, lies, and death ... and even that comes to an end in the lake of fire and grace. You see, His judgment is grace. And it really is judgment.

John 3:19 – "*This is the judgment: the light has come into the world and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.*"

Those scribes and Pharisees hated God's judgment on that woman, and so condemned themselves to hell, and they'll stay in hell in this life and after, for as long as they hate God's judgment. Hell is hating God's judgment – grace.

But what about the woman? I think she's passed through judgment **[missing from notes]**...

I bet she's at least starting to love the Light... she loves Jesus, she loves God's Judgment, she loves Love. So when Love says, "Stop it," she wants to – she trusts His judgment; she has faith in grace; she has a new heart – Jesus' new heart. We think judgment is to determine whether or not we have a good heart. God already knows we have a bad heart. Judgment is how God gives us His heart.

Some will say, "What about justice? When someone sins, someone is hurt."

YES! God is hurt. All sin is sin against God. All sin is adultery committed against God. Jesus on the cross is His broken heart.

Like it or not:

Every time you lie, you break the heart of Truth – Jesus.

Every time you choose darkness, you crucify the Light – Your Bridegroom.

Every time you reject Love, you cast His heart into the pit.

Some will say, "What about the Law? The wages of sin is death."

YES, absolutely! You see, the woman was caught, Israel was caught, you are caught, and when Jesus says "Neither do I condemn you," He is caught. He planned to be caught from the foundation of the earth... from the moment Father, Son, and Holy Spirit said, "Let us make men in our image – the image of Love."

On the tree we call the cross, Jesus bears the sin of this woman caught in the act of adultery, the sin of all Israel, and the sin of the world.

"Behold the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world," because He wants to. He is the Heart of God, Judgment of God; He is the Will of God.

On the cross, He bears our punishment, and descends into our box. That woman, lying naked in the dust, but encased in shame ... she must have felt like she was buried alive in a box... she must have had her eyes closed until she heard a voice: "Woman, where are they?" She opened her eyes and realized Jesus was in her box. He chose to be with her in that place. Soon folks will forget about her and they'd come for Him.

Of the 3 friends I know of who were buried alive in a box, each as part of some satanic ritual ... each got out –or should I say, their hearts got out- when they realized Jesus was in the same box.

I was with two of them in prayer on separate occasions when God revealed it. In visions, they opened their eyes in absolute terror ... to see Jesus in the box. I honestly think those two experiences may be the most dramatic experiences of my life, and I only witnessed them vicariously. One friend screamed in joy, "My blood is on His robe!" The other saw things too great and too wonderful to explain here. But Jesus revealed His love in their place of shame, and perfect love casts out fear.

Do you see? This earth is a box. Your body will be buried in that box: your flesh and your stone heart ... and Jesus will bear them to destruction. But right now, he gives you Himself. He is the Resurrection and the Life.

On the night He was delivered up to death, He took bread and He broke it, saying, "This is my body, given to you. And in the same way, He took the cup, saying, "This is the New Covenant in My blood. Drink of it, all of you."

In the morning, He would bear the sins of the world.

And you are caught.
You are the woman caught in the act of adultery.
You are Israel caught in the act of adultery.

[picks up stone]

You are the Bride of Christ about to be cleansed.
You are caught.

You are "sinful beyond measure," and yet God is not disillusioned by your sin... for He never had any illusions about your sin. Only you did, and that was the box.

Now look. Behold, He says, "I do not condemn you. From now, sin no more. Stop. Rest."

"Behold the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world."

[drops stone]