



# COME & SEE

## UNFILTERED

**Sunday 14 May 2023**

SERMON TRANSCRIPT

We tend to present a far more polished self to the world than is reality – I did not look this good when I woke up... and my hunch is that neither did you! But what happens when the filters are taken off and our life suddenly loses its shine? This week we explore from John 8 what Jesus thinks about us when He sees us at our worst:

*At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. 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. 10 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 8:1-11)*

For many people today, their Facebook, Linked In, Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok feeds are projection portals – where we project to the world, the person we want them to see. Pre-social media days, our photo albums did the same thing but the world couldn't sit on your

lounge and look at them. Looking at old photos, no one is ever smiling – but for as long as I can remember 'cheese' or 'spagetthi' or 'happy' is the word before every photo we take because we want to tell the world everything is awesome and that we are so connected and happy. We post these messages and longingly wait for the thumbs up, love heart or maybe a comment to reinforce our projected self. I know, I'm being a little cynical here, and some of you, like me, are social media recluses... but culturally, this is the world we live in.

The most popular genre of photography today is the selfie. Millennials (people born after 1996) are estimated to take 450 per year or 25,000 selfies in their lifetime. A MIT study found it takes just 11 seconds to decide if we are satisfied with the specific selfie, but another 26 minutes considering if it should be shared on social media and editing the image.

And image editing is a booming industry. There are thousands of face editing and augmentation apps for users to craft their looks and digital identities like Facetune, and even Zoom has a “touch up my appearance” mode – I call it the Days Of Our Lives, or the Bold And The Beautiful filter because, like those soap operas, it just makes you look sort of fuzzy. Snapchat boasts 200 million daily active users who use Lenses every day to transform the way they look – flawless skin, correct eyes and noses, and Barbie doll symmetry.

Australian research commissioned by Dove found that of all 10–17 year olds, three-quarters of them have applied a filter to change the way they look in photos by the time they are 13, and more than three-quarters of Australian teen and pre-teen girls will delete a selfie if they felt they didn't look perfect in it.

Filters can sometimes be hilarious; but, in all seriousness, 50% of young girls don't think they look good enough without photo editing. Even a term called Snapchat-dysmorphia is rapidly on the rise, where people seek cosmetic surgery to achieve their filtered face in real life because they cannot stand to look in the mirror and not see what they project in their social feeds.

As one researcher for the University of Wales said, “I don't think it's just filtering your actual image. It's filtering your whole life.” Of course, this tech is just optimising what we have always done with clothes or cars or cosmetics – we present a version of ourselves that we think is more impressive or acceptable. Even in a pre-digital world, we kept up appearances covering our blemishes and masking our fears and insecurities, and being someone else in order to be liked, included, to feel like we are worthy...

But there are some moments in life when all those filters and best projections begin to glitch and unravel, where you are exposed, seen without all the shine – when Dorothy looks behind the curtain to find the Wizard is just a plain old man. These are often some of the most defining moments of life – perhaps our past catches up with us, we are exposed, found out,

caught in the act... and we are forever changed. No matter whatever good it was that we were known for, no matter how well curated our projected self – suddenly all that seems to vanish and we gain a new reputation that seems to delete the old. There are many public examples of this:

- Lori Loughlin – bribing college admissions boards
- Prince Andrew – linked to Jeffrey Epstein
- Harvey Weinstein
- Michael Jackson
- Lance Armstrong – doping
- the Bombers and Sharks had a similar liking to peptides
- Dave Warner and Steve Smith had a fondness for sandpaper
- Ravi Zacharias
- Brian Houston
- Carl Lentz
- Mark Driscoll
- George Pell...

These are extreme and very public examples of losing your filters and being seen at your worst. Mercifully our own lives don't make the media too often. But spectacular mess is not the exclusive domain of the famous, is it? Regular people, sometimes those you least expect, lose their license for driving over the limit; drain the family bank account on a gambling addiction; get caught in an illegal money-making scheme; lose their job over some negligence, or poor performance or gross misconduct; get a knock at the door from FACS; act inappropriately, do time, have affairs, face divorces, get embroiled in scandals... Now maybe you have dodged all those, but I'm sure there are other actions or even just thoughts that you'd 'die' if people discovered. Being exposed, discovered beyond our respectable selves, is terrifying because with all that comes much pain and embarrassment and shame. And news travels fast – there is always someone with an opinion on why you messed up, or will cancel you for your failure to measure up, and you just might believe it and start joining in with self-condemnation. These condemning voices can be overwhelming and terrifying, and sometimes fatal.

Such was the woman in our story today. We don't know the back story, but either way, her world unravelled the moment those temple guards stormed the house where she was caught in the act of adultery. Whatever filters, or standing she had in her community are now stripped away, like her clothing.

*"At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. 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." (John 8:2-4)*

Isn't this a distressing scene? She is callously dragged to Jesus while He is preaching in the temple courts in Jerusalem. Imagine the humiliation and shame and fear. Now I know it's Mother's Day and this could be distressing to bring this passage today, but it's also real - terribly real for some - and I hope it's also healing by the time we get to the end. I know in a room like this, it's more than a distressing thought. It's all too real. You've experienced or maybe still experience callous, violent, controlling, dehumanising behaviour of men - and that is never ok, nor something to accept and live with, and as we will see in this passage, it is never how Jesus, another man, will ever treat you.

This whole scene was a set-up: the woman was sprung sleeping with a man she was not married to (although I'm pretty sure that adultery takes two, so there was a bloke involved somewhere, but he seems to have vanished). Jesus is preaching in the morning, so this probably happened the night before and she was possibly held till the next day. She is made to stand before the assembled crowd as 'exhibit A' of a sinner. According to the law, the penalty is execution by stoning. In reality, this law was tightly regulated; there was supposed to be a proper investigation, the accused had a right to defend the charges, and there is actually almost no record of it being applied in practice.

They say, *"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. (John 8:5-6)

"Such women" is such a demeaning phrase, isn't it? This is a trap because they are trying to get Jesus either to provide a contradictory interpretation of the Levitical law and prove He is a false teacher of the law, or pressure Him to uphold the conviction and thus anger the Romans who were the only authority allowed to execute anyone. Either way, the woman is just a pawn in a bigger game - they don't really care about what this costs her. The religious people were using the scriptures to achieve their own agenda - and how that problem persists even today...

A common and sometimes fair perception in culture is that Christian people are judgemental and condemning of the lifestyles of people who aren't. And by extension, many people who live knowing their own messy lives feel like a holy God should condemn them too. "If I came into church, the roof would fall in", or "there would be a bolt of lightning". The reason for this, at its core, is not knowing the heart of the Father. Jesus, in this chapter, will clarify that if you hold to His teaching, and take your lead from Jesus about what the Father is like, you will know the truth, and that truth will set you free. But sadly, like the Jews, they didn't even think they needed to be set free.

*"But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger."* (John 8:6)

What do you reckon Jesus was writing in the dust? Some commentators reference Jeremiah 17:13, *"Lord, you are the hope of Israel; 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, the spring of living water."*

Perhaps Jesus was symbolically writing the names of the woman's accusers, as those who are the real forsakers of the Lord, who refuse to come to the Living Water (as we've heard Jesus refer to Himself this way).

*"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."* (John 8:7-8)

I love this image. Jesus pauses His writing, straightens up, looks them all in the eye, man to man, and gives the most brilliantly disarming response before getting back down low and resuming His writing... "Ok fellas, let's go in order... Get all the sinless blokes to go first. Because it's you sinless ones that are qualified to pass judgement... If you are without sin, you get to stand-in for God."

*"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."* (John 8:9)

People can be all tough in a mob, be that in real life or digitally, but no one wants to take responsibility for casting the first stone ("You go first..." "No, you...") and, Jesus reminds them to look in the mirror, past their own filters of spirituality and respectability to see their own sinfulness. From the older to the younger, the mob withdraws - perhaps because the culture was to defer to the oldest first, or perhaps because the older you get the more you see your litany of failures and imperfections that no amount of photoshopping can change.

*"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 8:10-11)

In the end, the only One without sin who could actually cast the first stone was still standing there, empty-handed, looking deep into her eyes - and He explicitly says, "Neither do I condemn you." (see also John 3:17)

Friends, we live under the weight of pressure to be all together, to filter our lives for fear of so many condemning voices, both others and the ones in our own head... So you need to hear this from the Word of God Himself - the One who is the radiance of the Father, from the One Who perfectly reveals the heart of God, from the only One in the end Who really matters: "I don't condemn you." I wonder if, at that moment, like Eve in the garden before

sin, she forgot her own nakedness and tasted the freedom of the life she was made for, for the life we were all made for.

But, that freedom is truly accessed in Jesus' final words to this woman, "Go and leave your life of sin." Truth and grace go together. Think about those words. Jesus is saying, "I know who you are. I know why they brought you here. You aren't innocent." Jesus doesn't ignore her sin and certainly is not affirming it or letting her get away with it. Because that would be another form of condemnation - to leave her in the destructiveness of her sin. "Go and sin no more," is Jesus saying, "I won't be satisfied saving you from condemnation yet leaving you in a version of yourself that is highly likely to bring you right back to the same broken place - the version that will just reconstitute the life of condemnation you already know." Jesus comes not only to rescue us from shame and condemnation but to renew us into a new freedom in life. Freedom is not to do whatever you desire according to your broken self, but freedom from true condemnation, freedom to grow beyond your broken self into Christ-formed authenticity and the power to live out from under the weight of sin, shame, expectation and image management. Jesus displays the heart of God and, through His death and resurrection, invites you into this kind of life today.