

Sin, stones, and internal bleeding

By [Martha-Lynn Corner](#)

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One of the most dangerous effects of physical trauma is internal bleeding. It is insidious because it is often invisible, at least initially; internal organs can be gravely damaged with little or no outside evidence. The victim can walk, talk, and interact often to the point of seeming fine. Meanwhile, the body suffers, and once the damage is discovered, it can be irreparable.

I've been thinking about this lately because it so clearly reflects what sin can do to the spiritual self. Typically the pattern goes something like this: we recognize our sin, agonize over it, feel sorry for what we've done, and beg forgiveness. Sometimes this feels like enough; in the Gospels, Jesus' constant love in the face of sin and the sinner is all-encompassing and freeing, washing us clean from guilt and shame.

Other times, however, the sin seems too horrific to be healed. Praying, saying the confession, and even entering into the liturgy of Reconciliation of a Penitent don't touch the hurt within. The guilt and shame take on a secret life of their own, polluting to the point that absolution seems absurd. Surely it is more right to continue suffering than somehow be released from these awful feelings. After all, we brought them upon ourselves.

It is especially difficult when our sin affects others in our community. It is one thing to be caught in a web that really only affects us—a self-contained jealousy, for example, or covetousness burning hot in the heart but inspiring no further action. But some sins come through like a wrecking ball. Relationships are destroyed—sometimes the very relationships that make up our most intimate networks of support. And we are cast adrift, unmoored, alone, and accused.

The story of the adulterous woman in chapter 8 of John's Gospel seems to me the most vivid biblical picture of such a state. A woman has been caught in the act of adultery: literally pulled from the bed of a man not her husband and thrown into the street for final judgement. Judgement came from the law, which prescribed stoning as punishment, and the Pharisees fairly writhe in glee as they present her case to

Jesus. But Jesus kneels down and idly draws in the dirt, scarcely looking up as he declares, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.”

Instantly the fury dies down. One by one the entire crowd disperses, as such a sinless wonder cannot be found in that crowd or in any of the hundreds of millions of other crowds, real or imagined, who have gathered to accuse anyone for anything in the thousands of years since. There is no sinless wonder other than Jesus.

Game, set, match, right?

The problem is that we don't need a crowd to attack us with stones. I know, because lately I've been sitting down to the mineral mother lode every single morning and shoveling those suckers down all on my own. I am swallowing the stones myself.

And for a while this seemed like the right thing to do. Guilt and shame can blind us to the point of idolatry—I'm pretty certain that Jesus himself could have knocked on the door with coffee and a bagel and I would have ignored him to keep gnawing on my massive chunk of granite.

Then I did some reading. I read up a little on the story in John chapter 8, and I discovered that during medieval times, people grew curious about just what it was Jesus was writing in the dirt. Song lyrics? A grocery list? “Haters gon' hate?”

Terra terram accusat, the legend says. Earth accuses earth.

In forgiving the adulteress, Jesus adds mercy to the justice demanded by the law. More than adding it, he prioritizes it, as only God can do for us lumps of clay. There's little point in us pointing our dirty fingers at each other. And if God's narrative lived out in Christ is bigger than the stories I tell myself, then Jesus' decision to save the woman and to save me and to save every sinner through grace negates stoning of every sort, even self-inflicted.

I have been bleeding internally for no earthly reason at all, and for every earthly reason.

Some animals should, in fact, eat stones. They're called gastroliths, and stones help them digest the other food they've eaten. Any gastroliths who are reading this—certain whales, birds, and various dinosaurs—should take that under advisement.

The rest of us should knock it off and eat our Wheaties, relieved of our burdens and newly committed to go and sin no more.

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