

Sermon Notes January 13, 2019

“A Perfectly Good Conscience”

1. Conscience is making a comeback among Christians.

A. Over the past few years, the term conscience has been increasingly referenced in debates occurring both in our churches concerning appeals to conscience on moral issues and the public square concerning the defending of the right of your own conscience.

B. We hear a lot about conscience, but what exactly does it mean?

- 1) The general concept of conscience can be found in almost every human culture, but it has a unique and distinctive meaning for Christians.
- 2) The Greek term for conscience is “suneidesis” and occurs more than two dozen times, and serves an important concept, particularly in Paul’s epistles.

2. A few decades ago, a common theme in comedies and cartoons was the angel/devil sitting on someone’s shoulder.

A. A person's inner turmoil was personified by having an angel, representing conscience, on the right shoulder and a devil, representing temptation, on the left shoulder.

B. This type of folklore imagery gave people the false impression that the conscience was like an inner listening room in which a person could hear the voice of God (a “good conscience”) the devil (a “bad conscience).

C. A more Biblical view is to consider the shoulder angel/devil as representing witnesses to our own inner value system.

- 1) Our conscience is a part of our God-given internal faculties, a critical inner awareness that bears witness to the norms and values we recognize when determining right or wrong.
- 2) Conscience does not serve as a judge or a legislator.
- 3) That is a modern take on the concept but not a Biblical one.
- 4) Instead, in the Biblical sense, conscience serves as a witness to what we already know ([Romans 2:15, 9:1](#)).
- 5) Conscience may induce an inner dialogue to tell us what we already know, but more often it merely makes its presence known through our emotions.
- 6) When we conform to the values of our conscience we feel a sense of pleasure or relief.
- 7) But when we violate the values of our conscience, it induces anguish or guilt.
- 8) John MacArthur describes conscience as “a built-in warning system that signals us when something we have done is wrong.
- 9) The conscience is to our souls what pain sensors are to our bodies. a) It inflicts distress, in the form of guilt, whenever we violate what our hearts tell us is right.”

3. Your conscience is your consciousness or awareness of what you believe is right and wrong.

A. It’s a generally reliable instrument, so as a general rule you should follow your conscience.

B. The conscience is defined as that part of the human psyche that induces mental anguish and feelings of guilt when we violate it and feelings of pleasure and well-being when our actions, thoughts and words are in conformity to our value systems.

C. The Greek word translated as “conscience” in all New Testament references is “suneidēsis”, meaning “moral awareness” or “moral consciousness.”

D. The conscience reacts when one’s actions, thoughts, and words conform to, or are contrary to, a standard of right and wrong.

E. There is no Hebrew term in the Old Testament equivalent to *suneidēsis* in the New Testament.

- 1) The lack of a Hebrew word for “conscience” may be due to the Jewish worldview, which was communal rather than individual.
- 2) The Hebrew considered himself as a member of a covenant community that related corporately to God and His laws, rather than as an individual.
- 3) In other words, the Hebrew was confident in his own position before God if the Hebrew nation as a whole was in good fellowship with Him.

F. The New Testament concept of conscience is more individual in nature and involves three major truths.

- 1) First, conscience is a God-given capacity for human beings to exercise self-evaluation.
 - Paul refers several times to his own conscience being “good” or “clear” ([Acts 23:1; 24:16; 1 Corinthians 4:4](#)).
 - Paul examined his own words and deeds and found them to be in accordance with his morals and value system, which were, of course, based on God’s standards.
 - His conscience verified the integrity of his heart.
- 2) Second, the New Testament portrays the conscience as a witness to something.
 - a) Paul says the Gentiles have consciences that bear witness to the presence of the law of God written on their hearts, even though they did not have the Mosaic Law ([Romans 2:14-15](#)).
 - b) Paul also appeals to his own conscience as a witness that he speaks the truth ([Romans 9:1](#)) and that he has conducted himself in holiness and sincerity in his dealings with men ([2 Corinthians 1:12](#)).
 - c) He also says that his conscience tells him his actions are apparent to both God and the witness of other men’s consciences ([2 Corinthians 5:11](#)).
- 3) Third, the conscience is a servant of the individual’s value system.
 - a) An immature or weak value system produces a weak conscience, while a fully informed value system produces a strong sense of right and wrong.
 - b) In the Christian life, one’s conscience can be driven by an inadequate understanding of scriptural truths and can produce feelings of guilt and shame disproportionate to the issues at hand.
 - c) Maturing in the faith strengthens the conscience.
 - 4) This last function of the conscience is what Paul addresses in his instructions regarding eating food sacrificed to idols.
 - a) He makes the case that, since idols are not real gods, it makes no difference if food has been sacrificed to them or not.
 - b) But some in the Corinthian church were weak in their understanding and believed that such gods really existed.
 - c) These immature believers were horrified at the thought of eating food sacrificed to the gods, because their consciences were informed by erroneous prejudices and superstitious views.
 - d) Therefore, Paul encourages those more mature in their understanding not to exercise their freedom to eat if it would cause the consciences of their weaker brothers to condemn their actions.
 - e) The lesson here is that, if our consciences are clear because of mature faith and understanding, we are not to cause those with weaker consciences to stumble by exercising the freedom

that comes with a stronger conscience.

G. Another reference to conscience in the New Testament is to a conscience that is “seared” or rendered insensitive as though it had been cauterized with a hot iron (1 Timothy 4:1-2).

- 1) Such a conscience is hardened and calloused, no longer feeling anything.
- 2) A person with a seared conscience no longer listens to its promptings, and he can sin with abandon, delude himself into thinking all is well with his soul, and treat others insensitively and without compassion.
- 3) As Christians, we are to keep our consciences clear by obeying God and keeping our relationship with Him in good standing.
- 4) We do this by the application of His Word, renewing and softening our hearts continually.
- 5) We consider those whose consciences are weak, treating them with Christian love and compassion.

4. So, how can I get a Clear Conscience?

A. As we have noted in the beginning, your conscience can be defined as “an inner feeling that acts as a guide to the rightness or wrongness of one’s behavior.”

B. For those with a biblical worldview, the conscience is the part of the human soul that is most like God (Genesis 3:22).

- 1) Those who disbelieve God have a difficult time explaining the existence of the human conscience.
- 2) Evolution cannot account for this facet of the human spirit, which cannot be explained by a “survival of the fittest” mentality.

C. The conscience of man was awakened when Adam and Eve disobeyed God’s command and ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 3:6).

- 1) Before that, they had known only good.
- 2) The word “knowing” in Genesis 3:5 is the same word used elsewhere to describe sexual intimacy (Genesis 4:17; 1 Samuel 1:19).
- 3) When we choose to “know” evil by intimate experience, our consciences are violated and emotional discomfort takes over.
- 4) Whether we acknowledge God or not, we were created to have fellowship with Him.
- 5) When we do wrong, we sense that we are at odds with our created purpose, and that feeling is deeply disturbing.

D. Adam and Eve had offended God.

- 1) Yet it was God Himself who provided the solution to their violated consciences.
- 2) He slaughtered an innocent animal to cover their nakedness (Genesis 3:21).
- 3) This was a foreshadowing of God’s intended plan to cover the sin of all mankind.

E. Humans have tried a variety of things to clear their consciences, from charity work to self-mutilation.

- 1) History is full of examples of mankind’s efforts to appease his conscience, but nothing works.
- 2) So he often turns to other means of drowning out that inner voice that declares him guilty.
- 3) Addictions, immorality, violence, and greed are often deeply rooted in the fertile soil of a guilty conscience.

F. However, since all sin is ultimately a sin against God, only God can redeem a violated conscience.

- 1) Just as He did in the Garden of Eden, God provides us a covering through the sacrifice of something perfect and blameless (Exodus 12:5; Leviticus 9:3; 1 Peter 1:18-19).

- 2) God sent His own Son, Jesus, into the world for the purpose of being the final, perfect sacrifice for the sins of the whole world ([John 3:16](#); [1 John 2:2](#)).
- 3) When Jesus went to the cross, He took upon Himself every sin we would ever commit.
- 4) Every violated conscience, every sinful thought, and every evil act was placed upon Him ([1 Peter 2:24](#)).
- 5) All the righteous wrath that God has for our sin was poured out on His own Son ([Isaiah 53:6](#); [John 3:36](#)).
- 6) Just as an innocent animal was sacrificed to cover Adam's sin, so the perfect Son was sacrificed to cover ours.
- 7) God Himself chooses to make us right with Him and pronounce us forgiven.

G. We can have our consciences cleansed when we bring our sin, our failures, and our miserable attempts to appease God to the foot of the cross.

- 1) The atonement of Christ forgives our sin and cleanses our conscience ([Hebrews 10:22](#)).
- 2) We acknowledge our inability to cleanse our own hearts and ask Him to do it for us.
- 3) We trust that Jesus' death and resurrection are sufficient to pay the price we owe God.
- 4) When we accept Jesus' payment for our personal sin, God promises to cast our sins away from us "as far as the east is from the west" ([Psalm 103:12](#); [Hebrews 8:12](#)).

H. In Christ, we are freed from the stranglehold of sin.

- 1) We are set free to pursue righteousness and purity and become the men and women God created us to be ([Romans 6:18](#)).
- 2) As followers of Christ, we will still commit occasional sin.
- 3) But, even then, God provides a way for us to have our consciences cleared.
- 4) [1 John 1:9](#) says that, "If we confess our sin, he is faithful and just to forgive our sin and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."
- 5) Often, with that confession comes the knowledge that we must make things right with the ones we have offended.
- 6) We can take that step with the people we have hurt, knowing that God has already forgiven us.

I. Our consciences can remain clear as we continually confess our sin to God and trust that the blood of Jesus is sufficient to make us right with Him.

- 1) We continue to "seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness" ([Matthew 6:33](#)).
- 2) We trust that, in spite of our imperfections, God delights in us and in His transforming work in our lives ([Philippians 2:13](#); [Romans 8:29](#)).
- 3) Jesus said, "So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed" ([John 8:36](#)).
- 4) We live with a clear conscience by refusing to wallow in the failures that God has forgiven.
- 5) We stand confident in His promise that, "if God is for us, who can be against us?" ([Romans 8:31](#)).

5. Our Conscience cannot be our final ethical authority because it is, unlike God's revealed Word, changeable and fallible.

A. Too often, though, Christians reverse the order and attempt to use their conscience in order to judge God and his Word.

- 1) This is the difference between "Exogesis" and "Isogesis"
 - a) Exogesis is allowing scripture to talk to you and define the standard of life. (Objective Reality, remains the same and is constant)
 - b) Isogesis is to put into scripture your standard own standard. Subjective Reality, the standard changes over time and from one person to another

B. Many Christians claim, for example,

- 1) "I could not worship a God who would say and then they quote a clear statement from the Bible" or
- 2) "I couldn't believe in a God who would do something the Bible claims God clearly told someone to do."
- 3) In making such statements they may be appealing to their conscience.
- 4) But in such cases, their consciences are being informed by Satan, not by God.
- 5) A person's conscience may cause them to question a particular interpretations of Scripture.
- 6) But our conscience can never legitimately judge a holy God or his holy Word.
- 7) When we find ourselves thinking "Did God really say?" when Scripture clearly says he did, then we know it is the Satan not the Savior speaking as found in [Genesis 3:1](#).

6. What does it mean to have a Seared Conscience?

A. The Bible speaks of a seared conscience in [1 Timothy 4:2](#).

B. The conscience is the God-given moral consciousness within each of us ([Romans 2:15](#)).

- 1) If the conscience is "seared", literally "cauterized", then it has been rendered insensitive.
- 2) Such a conscience does not work properly.
 - a) It's as if "spiritual scar tissue" has dulled the sense of right and wrong.
 - b) Just as the hide of an animal scarred with a branding iron becomes numb to further pain, so the heart of an individual with a seared conscience is desensitized to moral pangs.

C. Paul identifies those who have a seared conscience in [1 Timothy 4:1-2](#): "The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron."

- 1) In this passage, we learn three things about false teachers who lead others into apostasy:
 - a) They are mouthpieces for evil spirits, since they promulgate "things taught by demons";

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