

Conscience (Part 2)

Knowing and Using Your Conscience

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We are going to continue in this sermon on the subject of conscience I spoke on about a month ago. A little bit of review is in order at the beginning of this sermon because I want to go over the main points I covered during that message.

The first one was that conscience does not appear to be a faculty that God instills in a person at birth. I want to modify what I said in that sermon so that it is a bit more accurate. By virtue of the fact that man has a spirit, he does have what I would call a natural awareness of a God. He may call that God the Creator. He may call it a higher power. He may call it a first-cause. But conscience is a great deal more complex than merely being aware of a God.

God has created us with the ability to have a conscience. A conscience functions according to the standards or ideals that are a part of a person's education, and each person's experiences in life are somewhat different. The only conclusion that can be determined is that those standards by which a conscience operates are not installed at birth. Rather they are a part of our education and our experiences of life. In this light one can see that conscience is a vital part of the function of free moral agency—an aspect of our mind that either gives approval or disapproval to an attitude, an activity, or even one's judgment of himself in an overall sense.

The second thing we covered in that sermon was quite a number of definitions of conscience. The one I liked best, because I felt it described conscience best was: "Man's moral intuition which passes judgment on his own state." When applied to the Bible, that definition becomes the response of man's moral awareness to the divine revelation concerning himself, his attitudes, and his activities.

The key here is man's awareness to the divine revelation concerning himself. Think of this in terms of yourself and your brethren within the church. I think you will agree with me that there is in this a wide degree of intensity of conscience among brethren. Each person's awareness of God and His way is going to be different because each one's experience with God, and his knowledge of God, is at somewhat different levels. Is that not true? Yes it is.

Some of us have been in the church twenty years, thirty years, and some ten years or five years. Our experiences are different because we have come into our conversion from different angles and different backgrounds. Some of us may be sharper than others intellectually. God may have given us differing gifts. All of these things working together allow for different intensities of conscience and different levels of understanding. We are going to find within the church different approaches to things and different feelings of intensity about right and wrong. This point leads directly to the third point.

The third point is that a conscience can function only according to what it knows, and in relation to God, only according to what it knows about God and about His way. If a person is ignorant of

the moral standards of God, the conscience cannot function at that level. It is simply beyond that person's grasp. This allows a person to do evil things—evil in relationship to how God defines it—and to do it in a perfectly clear conscience. Proof of this is John 16: 2, which says, "They shall put you out of the synagogues [out of the church, out of the fellowship within a church]; yes the time comes that whosoever kills you will think that he does God service."

According to the last phrase of that verse, a person can kill somebody and think that he is doing an act of worship. It is interesting that a conscience can be so educated as to allow a person to do something that is terribly evil and think that he is actually worshipping God in doing it.

Are there not religions, are there not lands, are there not people in the world who feel that they are able to, let us say, earn themselves points, or to feel good about putting others to death? I am thinking of those who are part of the Islamic faith. In putting down the infidel (as they look at it), they think they do God service, and believe this act earns them a higher place in paradise.

What is really perverse is that Jesus uttered this in the light of people who were well aware of Christianity, that they put them out of the synagogue. Synagogue is associated with Judaism, and He is speaking to Christian people, and so here He is talking about people who have knowledge of the way, who think they are doing God service.

Did this happen in the Inquisition? Did not people who claimed to be Christian put to death other people who were claiming to be Christian, and think they did God service? The conscience had been twisted to such a position, to such a level that allowed them to do that. We need to think about this because we are moving toward a time in which this is going to be repeated once again, and in far greater intensity.

The fourth point, counter-poised against that thought, is something that is found in Titus 1: 15. This one is particularly chilling in its ramifications.

Titus 1:15 To the pure all things are pure: but to those who are defiled and unbelieving nothing is pure; but even their mind and conscience is defiled.

The inference here is that a true Christian's conscience can become defiled as well. We are dealing with something that is strictly from the world having a defiled conscience, but the Christian's conscience can become contaminated, or defiled. The conscience will adjust in the direction that it is exercised. That is a truism. I think you understand this is true. A person can begin a pattern of sin with a feeling of horror, with a sharp feeling of remorse and shame about what he has done, or maybe what he is contemplating doing. If the sin is entered into, and if the sin is continued, the conscience begins to adjust its feelings. Its intensity becomes less and less until finally the person is the slave of what he formerly felt great remorse about doing, and he is helpless before its onslaught. So you see, even the conscience of a Christian can adjust. Paul gives us this warning in Hebrews 3.

Hebrews 3:12-15 Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called "Today," lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence

steadfast to the end, while it is said: "Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion."

This is especially interesting because the people to whom this was originally written were not violently rebelling against God. That is very clear from the context of the whole book. Rather they were drifting away through neglect. Hebrews 2 tells us what will happen to us if we neglect so great salvation. They did not hate God. They were drifting away.

These people were neglecting their salvation. If they were material in the sense of something that was sitting out in a field, we would say they were oxidizing away. They were rusting away, as far as their Christianity was concerned, because they were not maintaining it, let alone growing within it. Their lives, their conscience, their heart was gradually becoming hardened.

Slowly but surely the feeling of intensity they had about right and wrong was slipping away from them and was becoming hardened against the deceitfulness of sin. The heart, and therefore the conscience, will adjust to the place where it becomes so hardened that repentance is impossible. We might say today that a person in this state is becoming "inured" to sin, and no longer cares. The word "inured" means "to accustom, to accept something undesirable." Its root is the French word for work. Are you beginning to get the drift? What was undesirable was work.

A lot of people do not like to work. They look upon it in their attitude as a necessary evil that must be done, and so they harden themselves to the fact it must be done, and they go do it. That is one attitude a person can have towards work, but it is an attitude one should not have. In our case it is sin, and its affect is undesirable. But human nature, which is still in us with its enmity towards God, looks upon sin as desirable. We have a choice here. If we give in to human nature, it will gradually accustom the heart and conscience to sin through character until we no longer care. We will be inured.

You will recall God's frequent references in the Old Testament to Israel being stiffnecked, or having hardness of heart. Having one's conscience hardened is another way of speaking the same thing. However, to those under the New Covenant, it is far more dangerous. Indeed, it is the ultimate in departing from God.

We are going to string several scriptures together to get a better picture of what can happen to one's conscience, and why it is so important.

Hebrews 8:7-13 For if that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second. Because finding fault with them, he says: Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they did not continue in my covenant, and I disregarded them, says the LORD. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. None of them shall teach his neighbor and none his brother, saying, know the LORD,

for all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them. For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more. In that He says, A new covenant, He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.

I read all of those verses because that was lifted right out of Jeremiah 31 in the Old Testament. It was a promise at that time—a prophecy of something God was going to do for the people of Israel eventually.

In verse 7 we find that there was a fault—a flaw as it were—in the Old Covenant. In reality I think we can understand that nothing God does ever has a flaw in it. There was nothing wrong with the Old Covenant. Every good and perfect gift comes from the Father of light above.

The Old Covenant was a good deal. No nation ever had such a good deal handed to them. The God of heaven made an agreement with Israel to prosper them, to protect them, to provide for them in every way, and to fight for them. All they had to do was to submit to His law. But there was something wrong in the relationship, something wrong in that the Old Covenant could not cover where the problem was.

Romans 8:3 For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh.

The problem in the relationship was not in reality in the Old Covenant. The problem was in the people. The Old Covenant simply could not cover the weakness that was within the people. God never intended it. It was an exercise that proves to be an instruction for you and me. The peoples' experience under the Old Covenant did not produce a good relationship with God. God tells us where the problem was.

In Deuteronomy 29:4 God says that He had not given them a spirit that gave them the ability to understand. The relationship could not then be what God was going to have with His people under the New Covenant. It was a pattern of what was to come. We just read in Hebrews 8 what was to come. What was to come was a better covenant with better promises. We are going to go to Hebrews 8:5 because I want to prove to you that the Old Covenant was just a pattern.

Hebrews 8:5-6 Who serve the copy and shadow of the heavenly things, as Moses was divinely instructed when he was about to make the tabernacle. For He said, See that you make all things according to the pattern shown you on the mountain. But now He [Christ] has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as He is also Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises.

Remember, this is connected to conscience. This is connected to the defiling of a conscience, or the state of a person's conscience. In Ezekiel 36 God is talking through Ezekiel about what is yet to come. Jeremiah 31 speaks of a covenant that He is going to make with Israel. We have already been drawn into that covenant. The time is coming when He is going to make that New Covenant with a political entity.

Ezekiel 36:24-27 For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. [Think about a defiled, contaminated mind; a conscience.] I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them.

We have already been drawn into a part of the New Covenant, in God's preparations for the fulfillment of this very prophecy. This is so that we can be prepared to work with Christ when this time He is speaking of in Ezekiel 36 begins to occur.

I want you to notice that the primary feature of this New Covenant is the change in the people's heart. It is a change in their mind, in their conscience, from one that is hard, from one that is defiled, from one that is contaminated, from one that is resistant to truth, from one that is stone-like, to one that is soft, to one that is sensitive, to one that is pliable, to one that is merciful, to one that is kind, to one that is generous, to one that is concerned, to one that is humble, to one that is God-centered rather than self-centered.

What is He talking about here? He is talking about conversion. What is conversion? Conversion includes the change from a stony heart to a soft heart, to a heart that is tender. He is speaking of the softening of a heart, the removal of the obduracy of God, and the way of God, by making it possible for a person to be sensitive and concerned about submitting to God. Is this world concerned and sensitive about submitting to God? You know from your own experience that it is not, except in a very general way.

With this thought in mind we are going to go back to the New Testament to Ephesians 4:17. In my Bible this paragraph is titled "The New Man." Think of this in terms of this change of heart. Think of this subject of conversion—this subject that governs a person's feelings about morality, a person's feelings about ethics, a person's feelings about what is right and what is wrong, what is righteousness and what is evil. Paul wrote this to a mixed congregation of Gentiles and Israelites.

We are not in quite the same type of situation today. In its spiritual sense, a Gentile is the opposite of a Jew. Who is a Jew? Romans 2 and 3 says Jew is a person who is converted. A Gentile is simply the unconverted. So what is the new man? The new man is a spiritual Jew. He is in the process of conversion. His heart, his mind, is being changed.

Ephesians 4:17-18 This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk [conduct your life] as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God.

Is a person who is alienated from God sensitive to God? Is his life centered on God? Is his life, is his heart, is his conscience hardened toward God? Does he care about God's law? Only marginally, at best. It is not really a part of his life. That person's mind is hardened. What do you expect that person's conscience is going to be like? Is it going to be the same as the

converted person's conscience? Impossible! It cannot be, because by the miracle of conversion the converted person's mind, his heart, his sensitivity toward God, has been softened.

Remember this true principle, that a conscience, converted or unconverted, will progress in the direction that it is exercised. It will intensify toward evil, or it will intensify toward good, depending on the way it is exercised. Can you understand why there is so much in the Bible about being righteous?

If we are growing in conversion, our conscience is going to become ever more sensitive about right and wrong. It is going to become ever more tender. That conscience is never condemned by an action which we do, because the converted person will understand that the conscience is going to adjust in the direction it is exercised. If it is exercised in the wrong direction, what is going to happen? Your conscience is going to condemn you for what you allowed yourself to do. We are going to see how important this is in a little bit.

Ephesians 4:18 Having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardening of their heart.

What did we say at the beginning that conscience is dependent upon? It is dependent upon education and experience, and how it is exercised. Their minds are alienated and darkened because of the ignorance that is in them because of the hardening of their heart. Verse 19 gives a warning from the apostle about why we had better exercise our conscience in the right direction.

Ephesians 4:19 Who, being past feeling....

Look how far this has gone. That is how far conscience will adjust. This is a warning to Christians that this can occur. When a person has committed the unpardonable sin, he is past feeling. He cannot repent. If a person feels he has committed the unpardonable sin, it is very likely that he has not because his conscience would not give him that feeling if he were past feeling. He would not care.

Ephesians 4:19-20 Who, being past feeling have given themselves over to licentiousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness. But you have not so learned Christ.

Here again is education. Conversion is an educational process, but it is an educational process in the right things. If we are not being educated in the right things the conscience will adjust to the wrong things. Conscience is not something God can put into a person by fiat.

Ephesians 4:21-22 If indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus: that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts.

We have to make choices. We are going to grow one way or the other. Our liberty in Christ is that we have been put in a position where we can make the choice. That is our liberty. Those in the world are not free to make that choice.

Ephesians 4:22-24 That you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in righteousness and true holiness.

Through this process of conversion it is our responsibility to make effort to put off the old man by changing conduct, because the conscience will follow. It will go in the direction of the conduct. If we make the effort to do those things, then we will be renewed in our mind, and the conscience will follow right along. Here are some of the specific things we have to do:

Ephesians 4:25-27 Therefore, putting away lying, each one speak truth with his neighbor, for we are members of one another. Be angry, and do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on your wrath, nor give place to the devil.

Ephesians 4:29 Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth.

Ephesians 4:30-32 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, just as God in Christ also forgave you.

Do you know what that actually says in the Greek? It says "Be sweet." Be *sweet* to one another and tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ also forgave you.

Ephesians 5:1-2 Therefore be followers of God as dear children. And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet smelling aroma.

This little summary is telling us that none of these changes will take place unless we battle against the conscience we brought with us from the world. That is going to take sacrifice. Just like Christ sacrificed His life, we are going to have to sacrifice our life as well.

So here is where we stand. We were born into this world with no knowledge. What we are and what we feel was formed by association with family, school, church, friends, employers, college, books, and fashions. All of these largely came out of this world, but all of these things have to be brought under review, and there has to be change.

God calls this world "confusion the great." It is a system He describes in simple terms as being "drunk with the wine of the wrath of the great whore's fornication." I challenge you to look anywhere you want in the world at the result of this world's moral judgments. They are failing. Can you understand that a drunk's judgment cannot be trusted? That is such a simple picture. You cannot trust a drunk's judgment.

I remember an astounding statistic I heard over WIS in Columbia when we were there in the early 1980s. They said, according to police records of motor vehicle arrests made in the state of South Carolina, that after six o'clock in the evening one out of every three people was under the influence of either heroin, cocaine, marijuana, alcohol, or medication, so that their judgment was impaired.

That was just one state. Thirty-three percent of the drivers were impaired in some way. Could their judgment be trusted? It is very likely the reason why they were arrested is that they did something to attract the patrolman's attention. It was probably something weird, something strange, or something which gave evidence of very poor judgment.

We are going to look at this from God's perspective. He sees the whole world under the influence. Can their judgments be trusted? Can their feelings about what is right and wrong be trusted? Absolutely not! Any of you who have had too much alcohol, you know how your feelings change under the influence. The conscience is usually released of its inhibitions and the real personality comes out, and it is usually not very pretty.

Imagine what it looks like to God. He weeps over it. You can see there has to be massive changes in our thinking. This issue of conscience is no little thing. It is very important as to whether or not we are ever going to be in the image of God. We are to be made new. We are to be renewed in our minds. It is a process, and as we progress, the conscience will undergo a multitude of changes because the values are changing. There must be a radical re-orientation of our minds if we are ever going to be in the image of God.

Job 27:5-6 Far be it from me that I should say you are right; till I die I will not put away my integrity from me. My righteousness I hold fast, and will not let it go; my heart shall not reproach me as long as I live.

What a boastful statement that was! Now much of what Job said was pretty much true. God admitted that Job was a righteous man. For God to admit that Job was an upright person, that is pretty high praise. Job was a pretty good fellow. He was a wonderful citizen—the kind of next-door neighbor anybody would like. By Job's own estimation, he felt that he was really a balanced personality, but to God, Job was staggering all over the place in a drunkenness that he was not even aware of.

We have to be aware we were born into a culture, and that this culture pretty much determined what we are. Maybe by that culture's standards we might be a very good citizen, a good person. I am sure that is the way Job was looking at it. By comparison to those around him, Job was a very good man, but at the end of the story, what did he say? He said, "I hate myself. I abhor myself. I repent in dust and ashes." He said he spoke about things he did not understand. He began to see things from God's perspective, and his heart, his conscience, was smitten because he recognized, that compared to God, he was absolutely, in everything, filthy.

So what are we going to compare ourselves against? It is a choice with which we are confronted. We have to recognize that we have been developed and educated in a culture that is obsessed with self-satisfaction, and this cannot help but bring people into conflict. It creates offense and division because each one's sense of right and wrong is telling him that he has every right to exercise himself in order to satisfy his desire. The Bible says this is not so, this is not right.

In the Bible the community is generally seen as more important than the individual. In other words, the family is more important than the individual member. Whether it is the church, the state, or all the way up to the nation, the body of people is more important than the individual

member or citizen. That is the way the Bible looks at it. There is a very clear reason behind all of this instruction, because the Bible assumes that God is the unseen hand that is actually ruling over all. Whether it is the family, the church, or the nation, the Bible presents God as ruler. Therefore everything is in good hands, is it not?

If a person sees God actively ruling, then he knows by faith that all things work together for good, and that the momentary satisfaction one might get from the fulfilling of his desire is not what life is all about. In the United States we have been taught otherwise. The government and the social system in the United States are structured so that it—society and even the government—have to conform to the satisfaction of individuals and minorities.

The priority that we see in the United States today is not what it used to be. Back in colonial times the priority was actually weighted in the other direction, more to a biblical fashion where the community was more important than the individual. However, as time has progressed more toward the end, the individual becomes increasingly more important and is able to exercise his prerogative in spite of what society might want.

It has gotten so bad in the United States that now juries are finding it difficult to condemn murderers because individual rights have become so important. The individual is able to exercise his conscience—his values about right and wrong. The jury finds them essentially innocent. Can you see what this is going to do? We are going to have absolute chaos before this is all over because individuals do not feel it is necessary to conform to the demands of the whole. They want to exercise their own prerogative. Their conscience is telling them that it is okay.

The Civil War—a major war in the United States—was fought over this very issue. It was the most devastating war we had ever been in. The real issue there was money. The real issue was "Tara." On the political scene, the real issue was whether individual or state's rights were going to be supreme over federal right. In this case the federal right came out supreme. Today I do not think it would go that way.

Here in the church we are becoming distorted about right and wrong. I have heard of people in the church claiming that a lie is not a lie if the person who is telling it does not know it is a lie. Now that is not so. It is like saying that if one does not know that two plus two equals five, then it is not wrong.

Why would a person say that if a person does not know that it is a lie? Well, because his conscience is telling him that he did no wrong because it was not his intention to deceive. The conscience of the person telling the lie may not be damaged because of his sincerity and ignorance, but the one hearing the lie is still misled. The conscience of the person telling the lie may not be damaged, but the act still is not righteous. It is no more righteous than two plus two equals five, if it is going to lead someone to the wrong conclusion. You might think Ritenbaugh has gone out on a limb here." No I have not.

I John 5:17 All unrighteousness is sin.

All unrighteousness is sin. Modern translations usually translate it "All wrongdoing is sin." In other words, sin there is the Greek *harmartia*. What does that word literally mean? It means to

miss the mark. Let us feed that back into the definition. "All unrighteousness is missing the mark." Two plus two equals five does not quite make it. It missed the mark.

We need to broaden our understanding of sin from its basic definition of being the transgression of God's law. It is very interesting that in the New Testament where maybe we are especially concerned about the peculiarities or the complexities or the specifics of sin, God uses words that are extremely broad in their application. The two most frequently used ones are *harmartia* and *paratoma*. *Harmartia* means "to miss the mark." *Paratoma* means simply "to turn aside." The mark that is missed is the way God would do it. In other words, righteousness is the way that God would do it. When we begin to understand this, it ought to be humbling to us, and therefore beneficial to us to have the right concept of perfection.

Sin is not limited to things done deliberately, or to things that we can specifically say is lawbreaking. Sin is "missing the mark." The Bible approaches moral issues as being black or white. There is almost no middle ground. This is the reason why the Bible says that love covers a multitude of sin.

The Bible also says that not all sin brings death. That ought to be comforting, because we have the tendency to make the definition of sin so na