

Teaching Series: The Glory of Righteousness

Title: Session 2 – The Purpose and the Effects of Conscience

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The Human Conscience

The Purpose and the Effects of Conscience

In Romans 1:18-20, we are shown that every person has a conscience. It's impossible for you not to have a conscience.

Romans 1:18–20 (NKJV)

¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness,

¹⁹ because what may be known of God *is manifest in them (not to them)*, for God has shown it to them.

²⁰ For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes *are clearly seen (not vague)*, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse.

Some people believe that there are human beings that don't have a conscience, don't have any conviction over sin, and that it's only religion that imposed this knowledge of right and wrong upon people. Some say that all things would be so much better if there weren't any religious people telling everybody what is right and what is wrong. However, this passage indicates that this knowledge is placed by God in everybody. It's like a homing device telling you constantly that you are failing. Even though this is painful and none of us like it, it's necessary for us. In order to receive salvation, you must first be aware of your need for salvation.

A question might arise here in some people's minds concerning Jesus and the conscience. Since Adam received the conscience after he sinned, and Jesus was born without sin, did Jesus have a conscience? Did He need one, since He never sinned? Of course, He had a conscience. First, He had a conscience because He had to retain all the attributes of humanity, except the sin nature. He had to be a man in all aspects, so that His sacrifice would be meaningful, and that humanity would be able to identify with Him in His death, as a payment for its sins. Second, having a conscience does not make one sinful. The conscience is holy, because it reflects God's nature and moral standard. Jesus had a conscience because He was human, but He never violated it.

The inquiring minds might go further with the questions and this is a very good thing. I always encourage questions from the Word of God. The next possible question is this: “Since Jesus had a conscience and He was also God, doesn’t that mean that God, the Father, or the Holy Spirit had a conscience too? After all, Genesis 3:22 shows us that the whole Trinity – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – had the knowledge of good and evil. In that passage, God said: ‘Behold, the man has become like one of Us, to know good and evil.’ If God, the Father, knew good and evil, doesn’t that mean that He had a conscience too?” Well, not really. Ask yourself this question: “Does God, the Father, really need a conscience?” I believe that God, the Father, has never had a conscience and that is why He didn’t create man with a conscience in the first place. At this point, you might really get alarmed: “What? Isn’t that heresy?” Well, I encourage you to be calm for a moment and think a little deeper about this together with me. God is righteous. He exists in righteousness and His very nature is righteousness. He does not have a moral compass that governs Him. By His very nature, God is right all the time. Everything God says and does is right and just.

The concept of good and evil is so deeply ingrained in us, as human beings, that it is difficult to understand a perspective where good and evil do not exist. It is a human perspective to see God as the ultimate symbol of moral goodness. However, God is much more than that. He is righteousness. There is a difference between the two, and I will explain why. For instance, if you see God as simply moral, then His laws are open for moral debate. Moral standards change over time. What is immoral for one culture is acceptable in another. You can debate morality forever, and never come to a point of agreement. This is particularly evident in the issue of same-sex marriage. God defined marriage only between a man and a woman. It is not open for discussion, but people have made it a moral and ethical argument. “How can two people who love each other not be allowed to marry? Who cares that they are same sex gendered?” Although I understand the logic behind this argument, it doesn’t matter, because God’s law is not ethical or moral – it is righteous. Therefore, God is right and there is no discussion. Simply the fact that Adam and Eve ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, was that an immoral thing? No, not at all according to moral standards. What is so bad in eating the fruit of a tree? However, it was a capital sin and something immoral because God said so. Was something immoral the fact that Moses hit the rock the second time instead of speaking to it? No, it wasn’t a sinful thing in itself. However, it was a serious sin for which Moses was harshly punished by God, because God had told him to speak to the rock, and not hit it. Do you see the difference between a moral compass and righteousness?

Now, let's try to define evil based on what we've said so far. Because God is righteous, there are only two possible responses from humans to what God says. Obey God and live. Rebel against God and die. Anything that leads to death, distress, or judgment is what the Bible defines as evil. Evil is not an objective entity that is opposite to God. Evil is anything that leads to death, distress, or judgment, because it is rebellion against God. For man, this is a matter of moral choice: obey God, which is good, and live; reject God, which is evil, and die. However, for God, it's a matter of truth. God said the wages of sin is death, thus when you sin you will surely die. God knows good and evil, not through a conscience, and neither because He experienced evil Himself, but because evil is anything that God isn't. ***Evil is anything contrary to God's nature, and contrary to His decrees which are truth.***

As I mentioned briefly earlier, when man ate from the forbidden tree, two things happened. First, man's spirit died and became separated from God's righteousness. Second, he received the conscience to distinguish between good and evil. Man's spirit didn't die because of the fruit in itself in the sense that the fruit imparted death to him. Man died simply because He disobeyed God's command to not eat from that tree. When man violated God's command, he became evil and knew evil, just because he came against the righteous command that God had given him. If the tree of knowledge of good and evil had imparted death and evil to man, then it should have been called the tree of death, or the tree of evil. After all, the other important tree was called the tree of life because it would have imparted eternal life to Adam's body. However, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil imparted something to man - the conscience. Think about this for a moment. This is amazing! God is so smart. When God gave man the command to not eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, God actually gave man the option to rebel against Him, and become evil, so that man would have freedom of choice. However, in the same time, God embedded the conscience in the very fruit of the forbidden tree. Conscience is the ability to distinguish between good and evil; it is a footprint of God's righteousness, which reveals a little bit of God's own nature. Man needed the conscience so that he would know immediately that he rebelled against God, and he would realize the magnitude of his sinful act. Otherwise, he would have moved on with his life and would have never realized what he did. Furthermore, the conscience was going to keep in check the dead spirit of man until the full righteousness in Christ would come. That is why man didn't become pure evil like the devil who also rebelled against God. This whole strategy in itself, reveals something extraordinary about God. It reveals that He prepared for the possibility of man disobeying Him, by placing a conscience in the fruit of that tree instead of death. God could have created the tree of life and the tree of death, and when man would have eaten from the tree of death, that would have been his end. Man would have entered death

forever and become unredeemable like the devil, while God would have let man remain in death, and create maybe another world. That would have been righteous for God, and nobody could have blamed Him for it. After all, He told man that the day he would eat from that tree, he would die. However, here we see God's extravagant love for us and His magnificent wisdom! Praise the Lord!

Now, let's come back to the purpose and the effects of the conscience. ***Your conscience is the part of you that condemns you.*** Yes, it is true that there is no condemnation for those of us who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1). But we have to believe that verse in order to get rid of the condemnation that comes from our conscience. We have to take the Word of God and purge our conscience with it, cleanse our conscience, and wash it with the water of the Word. There are two ways to cleanse our conscience. Let's read first Hebrews 9:14 and Hebrews 10:22:

Hebrews 9:14 (NKJV)

¹⁴ How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, ***cleanse your conscience*** from dead works to serve the living God?

Hebrews 10:22 (NKJV)

²² Let's draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from ***an evil conscience*** and our bodies washed with pure water.

As these passages illustrate, one way to cleanse our conscience is to apply the blood of Christ on the sinful things that our conscience condemns us of, and to declare the truth of the Word of God about us and our identity, even in the middle of condemning feelings. Another, more efficient way to cleanse our conscience, is to not violate it in the first place. 1 Timothy 1:19 says that we make our faith shipwreck if we don't keep a good conscience:

1 Timothy 1:19 (NKJV)

¹⁹ having faith ***and a good conscience***, which some having rejected, concerning the faith have suffered shipwreck.

The same thing is found in 1 Timothy 3:9:

1 Timothy 3:9 (NKJV)

⁹ holding the mystery of the faith with ***a pure conscience***.

We see in these passages the contrast between a good, pure conscience and an evil, defiled conscience. A good and pure conscience is one that hasn't been violated, while an evil and defiled conscience is one that

has been transgressed by something wrong that we did, and now that conscience is condemning us. As much as we can, we should not violate our conscience because that affects our faith in a negative way. It destroys our faith even in other things from the Word of God and in other areas of ministry and life. It will be more difficult for us to pray for a sick person to be healed when we have an evil conscience that condemns us. We can cleanse that conscience by using what the Word of God says about us, but it's even better when we keep a pure conscience on a regular basis without breaking it. 1 John 3:21 says this:

1 John 3:21 (NKJV)

²¹ Beloved, if our heart **does not condemn us**, we have **confidence** toward God.

Confidence, and keeping your confidence strong towards God, is very important in exercising faith in any area of your life. Hebrews 10:35 says:

Hebrews 10:35 (NKJV)

³⁵ Therefore don't cast away your confidence, **which has great reward**.

This is one of the reasons why many people in the body of Christ don't see greater manifestations of the power of God. It is because their own heart, and their conscience, is condemning them. It is because they are constantly violating what God told them to do or to not do. Romans 2:15 describes the function of the conscience this way:

Romans 2:15 (NKJV)

¹⁵ who show the work of the Law written in their hearts, **their conscience also bearing witness**, and between themselves their thoughts **accusing** or else **excusing** them.

The conscience is the part of you that either accuses you or excuses you, the part that either condemns you or gives you confidence. Your conscience can actually build you up or it can tear you down, depending whether it's a good conscience or an evil conscience. Many people don't understand this and don't know how to deal with their conscience in a proper way so that they will be continually built up in faith and ready for every good work.

Now, another important thing about the conscience is that ***the conscience is not a perfect guide*** and you cannot depend only on it. The conscience can be influenced; it can be seared (1 Timothy 4:2); it can be defiled; it can be skewed; it can be weak (1 Corinthians 8:7) or strong; and it can be good or evil. Let's see a few examples:

1 Corinthians 8:4–9 (NKJV)

⁴ Therefore concerning the eating of things offered to idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is no other God but One.

⁵ For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as there are many gods and many lords),

⁶ yet for us there is One God, the Father, of Whom are all things, and we for Him; and One Lord Jesus Christ, through Whom are all things, and through Whom we live.

⁷ However, **there is not in everyone that knowledge**; for some, with consciousness of the idol, until now eat it as a thing offered to an idol; **and their conscience, being weak, is defiled.**

⁸ But food does not commend us to God; for neither if we eat are we the better, nor if we don't eat are we the worse.

⁹ But beware lest somehow this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to those who are weak.

From what we see in this passage, a weak conscience seems to be one that has less knowledge and revelation of the reality of the Word of God, and as a result has more rules imposed to it than necessary. This passage also shows us again that a conscience can be defiled by infringing one of those rules it has. A conscience is not defiled only with bad, immoral things, but also with things that go beyond our self-imposed limits and rules, that are based on our level of knowledge and revelation.

The above passage described an issue existing in the first century church. Many people had been idol-worshippers before becoming Christians and had trouble with meat purchased from the markets that had been offered unto idols. Some of those idol-worshippers would feel condemned: "Well, for me to eat this meat that has been sacrificed to an idol means that I would also participate in that idol worship." However, other people understood the grace of God in a deeper way and would think differently: "That idol is nothing for me, the meat is not defiled, and nothing will happen if I go ahead and buy and eat the meat that had been sacrificed and offered to idols." It was probably cheaper as well, so it was more convenient. Romans 14:20-23 describes a similar instance:

Romans 14:20–23 (NKJV)

²⁰ Don't destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are pure, **but it's evil** for the man who eats with offense.

²¹ It's good neither to eat meat nor drink wine nor do anything by which your brother **stumbles** or **is offended** or **is made weak**.

²² Do you have faith? Have it to yourself before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves.

²³ But he who doubts **is condemned if he eats**, because he does not eat from faith; for whatever is not from faith is sin.

What we learn from this illustration is that human conscience can make one feel guilty about things that there is nothing wrong with. I was once in a vacation with my family to the beach and while we were there, we went to a local church on a Sunday morning. The pastor there started preaching that Christians should not drink coffee or go to the beach. Here we were - all tanned from the sun and enjoying our lives.

Of course, everyone's eyes were on us, while this was going on. Not to mention that they were all living near the beach! Imagine that: to live near the beach and never use it! What I am trying to say is that your conscience can change depending on your background, your upbringing, and on different other things. Of course, every person is born with a basic conscience and a core intuitive knowledge of good and evil. However, that basic conscience can be either expanded to become super sensitive by adding more rules to it, or it can also be shrunk to a dull and insensitive conscience, that no longer works properly.

To understand better how the conscience works we can compare it to a monitoring application. In my line of work, we have monitoring applications that monitor databases and the resources from the company's computers. For instance, they monitor the space usage on storage, processor usage, the occurrence of different errors or corruptions, etc. Whenever such an event occurs or a predefined threshold is crossed, an email alert notification is sent to my phone and then I can intervene and check what the problem is. These monitoring systems come with a predefined set of alerts that are most important and basic. From there you can delete some of those predefined basic alerts, modify their thresholds, or you can add more alerts and thresholds. Any monitoring system needs to have its alerts tuned so that the system it's not overly sensitive, but neither too loose. On one hand, if the monitoring system is overly sensitive, you will receive email alerts all the time, your inbox will be flooded, and you might miss critical alerts. On the other hand, if the monitoring system is too loose, then you will receive less alerts, or not at all. In this case, you have a higher chance of not being alerted when a real critical issue occurs. The human conscience functions in the exact same way. It comes with a predefined set of basic moral guidelines. On one hand, we can make that conscience more sensitive by imposing new rules to our minds consciously or unconsciously. Depending on the culture or type of church in which we grew up, some new human-made rules might have been passed down to us without us even being aware of them. Those rules might not be necessarily bad, but the downside of a hyper-sensitive conscience is more condemnation and guilt. On the other hand, we can make that conscience dull by constantly violating it. The downside of this state is that we slowly lose the ability of seeing as evil some things, deeds, or behaviors that are actually evil or immoral.

Let's move a step further and see another important fact about conscience. We can also skew our conscience by comparing ourselves with others. 2 Corinthians 10:12 tells us about this:

2 Corinthians 10:12 (NKJV)

¹² For we dare not class ourselves or compare ourselves with those who commend themselves. But they, **measuring themselves** by themselves, and **comparing themselves** among themselves, are not wise.

What this is talking about is that you can skew the judgment of your conscience by just comparing yourself with other people. This is how many people arrive at their standard of right or wrong. We have an intuitive knowledge of right and wrong, but the Scripture did say that we can defile it, we can make it dull, which makes it an unreliable guide. Many people establish their standard of morality by just looking around and taking the average of morality of those around them in such a way that they are not the worst nor the best. As long as they come close to the average, most people consider that to be sufficient. Watching movies or shows that contain immorality and adultery in them affects our standard of right and wrong in a negative way. This is exactly what Hollywood is trying to accomplish lately in a more intensive way by squeezing in every new movie a scene involving homosexuality – which, most of the times, has nothing to do with the plot of the movie. It's there with only one purpose: to skew and accustom people's standard of morality in that area, to make their conscience dull to it, and to bring those behaviors to a level of normality and of average morality.

The conscience cannot be our absolute guide. We cannot ignore it either because we all have it. If you ignore it just because it's not a reliable guide, that is to your detriment too, because then it becomes dull and hardened. However, we cannot let it reign in our lives and let it have the final word either. So how do we deal with it? We have to deal with it in a proper way as believers in Christ, so that we don't ignore it, neither let it dominate us, but use it to our advantage. The apostle Paul says the following about his conscience in Acts 23:1 and Acts 24:16:

Acts 23:1 (NKJV)

¹ Then Paul, looking earnestly at the council, said, "Men and brethren, I have lived **in all good conscience** before God until this day."

Acts 24:16 (NKJV)

¹⁶ This being so I myself always strive to have **a conscience without offense** toward God and men.

God gave us a conscience so that there would be an awareness on the inside of us of right and wrong, and that it would show us our need for Him. It would bring us to our knees and make us call out to God for help. However, as we have seen, our conscience can be corrupted and defiled when we compare ourselves with each other. So how do we deal with this?