

# OpenTheo

## The Conscience - Part 2

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### The Bible for Today with John Stott - Premier

John Stott shows how as Christians we can put the cross of Christ between the devil and our conscience. But he also shows how it is possible to deaden our conscience to what God says which is what is meant by blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

### Transcript

[Music] If a strong conscience is an educated conscience, a weak conscience is an uneducated conscience. Oversensitive, overscrupulous, squeamish about doing things that it could have liberty to do that doesn't feel it should.

[Music] Welcome to The Bible for Today with John Stott.

There's perhaps been no one who has raised the standard of biblical teaching in the 20th century as John Stott. He was a pastor to pastors and a servant of the Global Church. From his home church of all souls Langen Place in Central London he preached over 600 sermons and during this his centenary we're bringing you some of his very best teaching from nearly 60 years of ministry.

[Music] Last week John Stott brought us the first part of a message on our conscience which is what makes us different from the animal kingdom. Today John Stott explains how our conscience brings us to have faith in Jesus Christ. Faith is born out of despair.

It is out of the despair of ourselves that faith in Jesus Christ is born. Now this conviction of sin is essential. There are some people who don't like it.

I have to say that we reject the accusation that is sometimes leveled against Christians that we create in men and women artificial guilt feelings. Well some may do that but we should not do that and I have most of us can say we do not do that. All we do is to allow conscience to do its God ordained work.

And we also reject the superficial view that human beings should never despise themselves and never hate themselves but that if they're ever in that condition they

have to be brought immediately to accept and to forgive and to love themselves. I say no, no, no. That is the voice of the false prophet who says peace, peace when there is no peace and who either denies our need for forgiveness or cheapens the forgiveness that is on offer.

The fact is whether we like it or not we are all of us despicable creatures on account of our rebellion against the authority and the love and the law of God. And all of us need to take upon our lips the words of Job when he was brought to repentance. He said, "I've heard of you with the hearing of the ear but now my eyes sees you and therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes." Because you see it's only when we come to an understanding of the sinfulness of sin as a rebellion against God it then and then only that the gospel makes sense.

It's then and then only that the good news of Jesus Christ brings music to our ears and healing to our wounds. It tells us that Jesus Christ to never send any sins of his own bore our sin and guilt in his innocent person on the cross and the through Christ and Christ crucified there is a full and a free forgiveness to all who repent and believe in Jesus. And then in the scripture read at the beginning of the service, "Our hearts are sprinkled from an evil conscience." Oh, I hope that everybody has experienced that.

It's the beginning of the Christian life. Now, don't misunderstand me. I'm not claiming that after your heart has been sprinkled from an evil conscience when you've received forgiveness at the foot of the cross your conscience never troubles you again.

Now, it will do partly because the devil is a slanderer and an accuser and that is in fact what the Greek word for the devil means. But as the devil reactivates our conscience or tries to, in order to condemn us, I hope you know what to do. You put the cross of Christ between the devil and your conscience.

You say to the devil, "I know I'm a sinner, but Christ died for me and I have received forgiveness through Christ and Him crucified." Well, you know, that's why we need to come regularly to the Lord's Supper. I wonder if there's somebody here who's become very neglectful of attendance at the Supper of the Lord. But we need to come regularly because it is the Lord's Supper that reminds us that Jesus died for us.

And it is there at the table of the Lord that we may receive through bread and wine emblems of His body and blood, a fresh assurance of His forgiveness and acceptance. And then we shall be able to work our pulls defiant questions, who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is He who can condemn us? Christ Jesus has died for us and been raised from the dead and is seated at the right hand of God and is making intercession for us.

So who can separate us from the love of Christ? On say nothing, I am persuaded that nothing is able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Now

there is the assurance of everybody who's been to the foot of the cross and receive forgiveness from the hand of a crucified Savior who died in His or her place. It is wonderful to have a clear conscience, a conscience that has been sprinkled with the blood of Christ, a conscience that is free as a bird because of the knowledge of forgiveness.

But alas, there is a dreadful alternative to the conscience that is sprinkled clean. It is possible for the voice of conscience not to lead us to Jesus Christ. Some people who hear the voice of conscience instead turn to alcohol in the hope of drowning its voice.

Others surround themselves with noise because they are terrified that in silence they might hear the accusing voice of conscience. Other people plunge into a flurry of business and pleasure in order that they will have no time in which to think or listen to their conscience. And other people with a bad conscience become religious.

Did you know that? Because they imagine that a punctillious observance of external religious rituals will somehow compensate for their refusal to come to Christ. I tell you neither alcohol, nor noise, no business, no pleasure, no religion can be any substitute for coming to Jesus Christ in order to find freedom of conscience. Now in such people that I have been talking about who refuse to listen to their conscience, their conscience becomes deadened.

And even to you as a word Paul uses in his first letter to Timothy, "quarterized." That's a word that is still used in medical practice today, isn't it? You're "quarterized tissue or skin or nerve" by burning it. And by burning you'll render it insensitive or dead. And it is possible to deaden or "quarterize your conscience." Though I think it is the most perilous condition into which men and women can ever bring themselves.

In fact, to turn a deaf ear to conscience and to defy it until it is "quarterized" or to harden our hearts against the word of God as Pharaoh did against Moses is exactly what Jesus meant by the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. It is a state of rebellion against God, deliberate and defiant that in the nature of the case is unforgivable. Well, I deliberately spent a long time on this first point because I thought it was the most important.

The place of conscience in Christian conversion, we only come to Christ when the Holy Spirit through the law and our conscience drives us to Christ as the remedy for our sin and guilt. But now much, much more briefly, secondly, the place of conscience in Christian relationships. You will remember, because it was read to us in the second lesson just now, that in first century Corinth in the church there was a clash of consciences.

It is the conscientious convictions of some Christians who were in conflict with the conscientious convictions of other Christians. Some of them believed that they were quite free and consciences to eat meat, which before it was sold by the butcher had

been involved in a pagan idolatrous ritual. Other Christians felt very squeamish in their conscience about that.

They felt that if they had food that had previously been offered in idolatrous sacrifice, they would surely themselves lapse into idolatry. So there were consciences in conflict with one another. How does Paul handle it? Well, he makes a very important distinction that we need to understand.

Between what he calls the strong conscience on the one hand and a weak conscience on the other. The strong conscience is an educated conscience and it is based on biblical knowledge. We know Paul says, Paul is one of those who had a strong conscience because he said, "We know that idols are nothing.

We know that there is only one God the Father and we know that there is only one Lord Jesus Christ and we know that an idol has no real or existential existence." And therefore our conscience, Paul says, "Is free? Why shouldn't we eat food that has previously been offered to an idol? Idols are nothing. To offer food to an idol doesn't contaminate the meat. God is created the meat.

God is the creator. Nothing that God has created is to be rejected if it may be received with thanksgiving." Sir Paul said he had a strong conscience with liberty to eat what he wanted to eat. But there were others in the Church of Corinth who didn't have that knowledge and on account of that their conscience was weak.

If a strong conscience is an educated conscience, a weak conscience is an uneducated conscience. Over sensitive, over scrupulous, squeamish about doing things that it could have liberty to do but doesn't feel it should. Their conscience rebelled against the idea of eating idol meat.

So what did Paul tell him to do? He began by saying that the conscience is sacred. Everyone should never be trampled on even when it is mistaken. Conscience needs to be educated but it must never be violated.

The weak, even though they're over scrupulous and ever sensitive, the weak should never go against their conscience and the strong should never encourage them to do it. Instead, those with a strong conscience should even refrain from doing what their conscience gives them liberty to do in order not to lead others to disregard their conscience. Now if we had time to stay, we could apply that to many, many situations today.

It's a very important principle to get hold of. I can sum it up in this little epigram. Knowledge gives us liberty of conscience but loves limits the liberty that knowledge gives.

We must not trample on other people's consciences. So the place of conscience in

Christian conversion, the place of conscience in Christian relationships and thirdly, the place of conscience in Christian maturity. At last, I bring you to my text.

It's often good to have it at the end of a sermon rather than the beginning because I think it will be left more readily in your mind. To have your Bible then you may like to turn to it in the Acts of the Apostles. Acts 24 and verse 16.

"So or therefore I always take pains to have a clear conscience towards God and towards human beings." May I remind you of the context, Paul was standing on trial in a Roman court before the Procurator Felix. The Jewish leaders had charged with him, accused him of being a political agitator and profaning the temple. Paul denied and repudiated the charges.

Instead, he said he was a follower of the way, the way of Jesus. And he believed that at the end of history there was going to be a resurrection and a judgment of both the living and the dead or the just and the unjust. And therefore, because of that coming judgment when he would give an account of himself at the bar of God, therefore I take pains to keep a clear conscience before God and human beings.

I think it must be one of the boldest claims that has ever been made in a court of law. There was a transparent integrity about that Christian prisoner. He seems to have had a passionate desire to have a clear conscience, both vertically towards God and horizontally towards his fellow human beings.

It reminds me of a little phrase they have often used in the East African revival that has been going on since the 1920s when they often talk about walking in the light with nothing between them and God or them and their fellow human beings. And they sometimes say I want to live in a house that has neither ceiling nor walls. Well, it's an amusing idea because if there is neither ceiling nor walls, there's no house.

You can't have a house without ceiling or walls, but you know what they meant. They wanted to live in a house with no ceiling, nothing between them and God and without walls, nothing between them and their fellow human beings. And Paul said he took pains to secure that because in anticipation of the final tribunal, he wanted to live under the tribunal of his own conscience.

Our own conscience anticipates the final judgment of God. And this, you know, taking pains to have a clear conscience involves discipline. Discipline in Bible studies says that our conscience may be educated.

Discipline in prayer says that the Holy Spirit may sensitize our conscience. Discipline in the Christian fellowship said that within the community, our interpretations of Scripture may be checked and even challenged by other believers through the Word of God, the Spirit of God, and the Church of God together that our conscience becomes refined and

educated and adjusted and corrected. So let me conclude.

The conscience has an indispensable place in the Christian life, in Christian conversion, in Christian relationships, and in Christian maturity, as we take pains to keep our conscience clear. And there is no possibility of becoming an integrated follower of Jesus, or even beginning to discover what Christian integration means if we neglect or disregard our conscience. I wonder if there is somebody here who is doing precisely that.

That is to say you are turning a deaf ear to the inner voice that condemns you. You know you are condemned by your own conscience. You're trying to live with it, but you can't.

And your conscience is saying to you, because you are condemned, go to Jesus Christ, that you may receive forgiveness, humble yourself, acknowledge your sinfulness, and your inability to serve yourself, and run as fast as you can to Jesus Christ, and take refuge in Him as the Savior who died for you. And then you will be given not only freedom from guilt, but also freedom from a guilty conscience. Or I wonder if there is a Christian here whose heart was once sprinkled from an evil conscience through Jesus Christ, but now you're back in the old disobedience and your conscience nags you again.

I tell you, friend, I know from Scripture and from experience that there is no pain so bitter as that of a bad conscience. It has many psychosomatic symptoms of which the Psalmist wrote in Psalm 32 that was read for our first lesson when the Psalmist said, "When I kept silence, and when I refused to confess my sin and guilt, my bones wasted away through my groaning day and night, God's hand was heavy upon me, and my strength was dried up as in the heat of summer." But then he confessed his sin, and the burden was lifted and his heart was free as a bird. Professor Harlessby of Norway, who wrote a book about the conscience about 50 years ago, says, "No torture is more grievous than a bad conscience." And if there is no more painful than a bad conscience, I tell you, there is no peace like that of a good conscience, a conscience that is educated by the word of God, sensitized by the Spirit of God, constantly cleansed by the forgiveness of God, so that there is nothing between us and him and nothing between us and others.

There is no peace like the peace of a good conscience. So, friend, will you take my text to yourself today? May be learned by heart as I did many years ago. Say it to yourself from time to time, therefore, because of the final tribunal of God, therefore, I take tains.

I do my utmost to keep my conscience clear, both towards God and towards my fellow human beings. We will spend a moment in silence, the silence some of us dread, because it's in silence that the voice of conscience speaks, and in the silence we will allow it to speak, either accusing or maybe excusing us. But if it accuses us, then we know what to do, run to the cross, and seek forgiveness at the hands of a Savior who died for you.

Our Heavenly Father, we thank and praise you that you created humankind in the beginning, a moral being with a conscience, and that even after the fall, in our fallenness, our conscience remains a moral voice within us. Forgive us for times we have turned a deaf ear to that voice, and grant that we may listen to it in future more attentively, and when we have found forgiveness through Jesus Christ and Him crucified, grant us that ambition as we take pains to fulfill it, to keep our conscience clear towards you and one another. We ask it for the glory of your great and worthy name.

Amen. You've been listening to The Conclusion of a Message by John Stott on the Conscience. This is part of a series that shows us what it means to be an integrated Christian based on the letter to the Romans.

Each week we highlight a book by John Stott that relates to what we've just heard, and the title of today's recommendation is The Message of Romans. It's part of the very popular The Bible Speaks Today commentary series. The details are on our Centenary website, where you'll also find biographies of John Stott and videos of him preaching around the world.

All this and more can be found at [premierChristianradio.com/JohnStott](http://premierChristianradio.com/JohnStott). The legacy of John Stott lives on and is growing, touching every level of society across the world. Today, Christian leaders throughout the majority world are being equipped to provide pastor training and resources in their own countries thanks to the vision of John Stott, who donated all his bookworlds to support this ministry through Langham Partnership. To find out about this at other ministries, John Stott founded, go to [premier.org.uk/JohnStott](http://premier.org.uk/JohnStott). Join us at the same time next week for more from The Bible for Today with John Stott.

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