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The Conscience - Part 1

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The Bible for Today with John Stott - Premier

John Stott shows us that our conscience is what makes us different from the animal kingdom. He explains the place of our conscience in Christian conversion, Christian relationships and Christian maturity.

Transcript

[Music] By creating us in his own image and likeness, God made us not any rational beings, were able to think. Not only emotional beings were able to feel, but moral beings were able to make ethical choices and decisions. Welcome to the Bible for today with John Stott.

The 20th century gave us a number of great evangelical Bible teachers and for many, John Stott stood above them all. Perhaps no one raised the standard of Biblical teaching as did Stott. It was Jesus Christ that he made preeminent in all his teaching.

Whenever he preached his home church of all souls, Langham Place, it was packed. During John Stott's centenary, we are bringing you some of his finest Bible teaching from almost 60 years of ministry. What we believe and how we behave is what John Stott sees as the integrated Christian.

This involves our mind, our will and our conscience, which is our subject for today. John Stott begins by explaining why we as humans have a conscience. Our theme is very simple to understand.

It is the result of the fall, the disobedience of our first parents. All of us have become more or less disintegrated personalities. But through the redeeming and transforming work of Jesus Christ, we are becoming reintegrated until that great day when our personalities are perfected at the second coming of Christ in the New Heaven and the New Earth.

We are talking about what it means to be an integrated Christian. For the last two Sunday mornings, we thought about the place of the mind and the place of the emotions

in the life of an integrated Christian. Today, we come to the place of the conscience.

Here is absolutely plain that the conscience is one of God's good creation gifts to human beings which distinguish us from the animal creation. By creating us in his own image and likeness, God made us not any rational beings were able to think, not only emotional beings were able to feel, but moral beings were able to make ethical choices and decisions. For example, way back in Genesis chapter 2, you may remember that God gave Adam and Eve a commission, a fruitful multiply, sell the earth, subdue it, a permission you may eat of every tree in the garden, a prohibition of one tree in the middle of the garden you shall not eat, and a warning in the day on which you eat it, you will die.

That is to say, God took it for granted that Adam and Eve could discern the difference between these things, between a permission and a prohibition, between a commission and a promise and a warning, between right and wrong, and he treated them as rational and moral beings which he had created them to be. That is assumed right from the very beginning of the Bible. Again, I said, distinguishes us from the animals.

Many of you, I think, will know the name of a great Swiss theologian before the Second World War called Emil Brunner. Let me quote from one of his books on this very subject. In the animal, we do not see even the smallest beginning of a tendency to seek truth for truth's sake, to shape beauty for the sake of beauty, to promote righteousness for the sake of righteousness, or to reverence the holy for the sake of holiness.

The animal knows nothing above its immediate sphere of existence, nothing by which it measures or tests its existence. And the difference between man and beast amounts to a whole dimension of existence. Or here in a way is a more interesting quotation.

Some of you will know the name, I think, of Jane Goodall, who for more than 25 years has been investigating the social behavior of chimpanzees in the wild in Tanzania. She's written a couple of books about it. When she began in the 1960s her research, she was very impressed by the similarities between human beings and chimpanzees.

She found the chimps like humans can use tools, their hold hands, their embrace, their kiss, their suckle, their young, they maintain family ties throughout their life, and even if a mother dies, they adopt the orphaned baby. So to begin with, she was very impressed with the similarities, but in the 70s she changed her mind. She was shocked, in fact, to discover that they make a prolonged planned war with one group of another until the other group is totally obliterated.

She says it is a case of senseless violence, often accompanied by tremendous pleasure and excitement. Chimps, this is all Jane Goodall. Chimps show us how unique we are, and the more I find close similarity with us, the more I realize also how great the gulf is between us.

Now listen carefully. Chimpanzees have no moral sense. In chimps society only might is right.

So I want to pray this morning that we will all of us thank God for our conscience. The moral, the faculty of moral discernment that can distinguish between right and wrong, justice and injustice and so on is what Scripture calls conscience. It distinguishes us from the animal creation, and we should thank God for it.

Now it is perfectly true. I think I need to add this parenthesis because some of you know Dr. B thinking it. It is perfectly true as a result of the fall or disobedience of our first parents.

Our conscience has been twisted out of shape and has become a rather blunt instrument. It is perfectly true that in different cultures, different practices are permitted and different practices are regarded as taboo. It is perfectly true therefore that the conscience is not infallible and it badly needs to be educated according to the Word of God.

Nevertheless, even fallen human beings know that there is a difference between right and wrong. There is such a thing as a moral order and they have an inward imperative that urges them to do what they know to be right and avoid what they know to be wrong. And it seems that certain things in every tribe and culture are universally condemned, things like cowardice, adultery, theft and murder.

Now the apostle Paul himself writes about the universal conscience of humankind in Romans chapter 2, and he says that even pagans who know nothing of the moral law of God externally, they have never heard of Moses or the Ten Commandments or the Old Testament or the Sermon on the Mount, even pagans who have no objective knowledge of the law of God have the same law Paul says written on their hearts. So that their conscience he goes on either excuses or excuses them according to whether they do or don't do what they know to be right. Now wonder friends if you've ever thought of this, it's a very important thing to understand.

God has written his moral law twice in two different places. First or once he wrote his law on stone tablets when he gave the Ten Commandments to Moses. But once he wrote the moral, the same moral law on what Paul calls the fleshy tablets of human hearts when he created us in his own image and gave us a conscience.

So God's moral law is both inside us and outside us. And what God has written on our hearts on our very human nature needs to be checked and educated and endorsed by the moral law that is revealed outside us in Scripture. Well what God has revealed in Scripture needs to be made personal and urgent by the voice of our conscience within.

So Scripture and conscience belong together and each needs the other. That's why

Martin Luther in that great and well-known statement once said, "My conscience is bound to the Word of God. And I cannot and will not recount anything since it is dangerous to act against conscience, especially one might add a conscience that is bound to the Word of God." So Luther went on, "Here I stand.

I cannot do otherwise. God help me, amen." There is conscience in the Word of God, the external and internal writing of the law of God agreeing with one another and belonging to one another. Thank God for our conscience.

Now then we come to the question, "What is the place of the conscience in the Christian life?" Now I want to give you a number of answers to that question that will help us to see the indispensable role that conscience plays if we are to be and to live as Christians. One, the place of conscience in Christian conversion. It is no exaggeration to say that not one of us in church this morning who has come to Jesus Christ in penitence and faith and become a new creature in Christ, not one of us, whatever have come to Christ if it hadn't been for the functioning of our conscience.

Because the very beginning of the process that leads us to Jesus Christ is when the Holy Spirit convinces us of our unholiness. When He convicts us of sin, He uses the moral law to do it, the moral law exemplified in the life of Christ. And through that law, the standards, the moral standards of God, the Holy Spirit brings us to an awareness of our rebellion and our conscience condemns us.

The Holy Spirit goes on pricking and prodding our conscience until we humble ourselves to acknowledge that we could never save ourselves and that Jesus Christ is the only Savior. 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 seize 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 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 slanderr 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 has 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 echo Paul's 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? "So 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 received 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. Other surround themselves with noise because they're 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 punctilious 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've 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, "cortorized." That's a word that is still used in medical practice today, isn't it? You cauterize tissue or skin or nerve by burning it. And by burning you render it insensitive or dead.

And it is possible to deaden or cauterize 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 cauterized, 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 the first century Corinth in the church, there was a clash of consciences. There is the conscientious convictions of some Christians, where in conflict with the conscientious convictions of other Christians. Some of them believed that there 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 ate 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 is created is to be rejected if it may be received with thanksgiving." So Paul said he had a strong conscience with liberty to eat what he wanted to eat.

He had been listening to the first part of a message by John Stort on the conscience, which will be concluded at the same time next week. 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 Stort 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 Stort and videos of him preaching around the world. All this and more can be found at premierchristianradio.com/JohnStort. The legacy of John Stort 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 Stort, who donated all his book royalties to support this ministry through Langham Partnership. To find out about this and other ministries, John Stort founded, go to premier.org.uk/JohnStort. Join us at the same time next week for more from The Bible for Today with John Stort.

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