

# OpenTheo

## Living Peaceably With Your Conscience



### **Cultivating Christian Character** - Steve Gregg

In "Living Peaceably With Your Conscience," Steve Gregg emphasizes the importance of having a clear conscience and being accountable to God. According to Gregg, going against one's conscience is neither liberty nor safety, and a person who has lost sensitivity to their conscience could be considered a reprobate. Maintaining a good conscience should be a priority, as it can lead to joy, confidence, and a strong relationship with God. Despite the potential for a weak conscience, it is essential to exercise and develop one's sense of right and wrong, as well as seek restitution for any wrongs committed.

### **Transcript**

One of the key aspects to having godly character has got to be in living peaceably and responsibly with your conscience. There are too few men and women of conscience today, even in the church. Too many who are quick to compromise for convenience.

And character, among other things, requires that a person follows conscience and conviction rather than convenience. And that is, of course, the trade-off that we often have. If we are not to compromise our consciences, then it will be inconvenient, and sometimes there will even be consequences to suffer.

We don't see that as dramatically in our time as Christians have in other times. And as they do even now, in other places, in other parts of the world, where many people, for the sake of not compromising their conscience, will go to their death, or to prison, or will have their families torn apart, or be tortured, or go through other things like that. Because to them, the conscience simply cannot safely be violated.

Martin Luther, who is credited with being the founder of the Reformation, disagreed in his theology dramatically with the church of his time. And the leaders of that church urged him, and threatened him, that if he did not compromise his stand on his theological positions, that they would kill him. And at the Council of Worms, where he was called upon to recant the books he had written and the tracts he had written against the doctrines of the Catholic Church, and where his doctrines had been presented, he

made the statement that he cannot recant any word of it.

Because he said, among other things, he says, we are not at liberty, nor is it safe for us to go against our conscience. We are not at liberty to go against our conscience, nor is it safe. And yet, how many Christians facing much less trial, much less challenge, much less threat, than Martin Luther or Christians throughout the ages have faced for their convictions, for which many of them have died, how few today are willing, even in the face of small trials or small temptations, to keep their conscience unviolated.

Well, I want to talk to you about what the Scripture says about the conscience, because the way you manage your conscience is going to have a lot to say about whether you are a person of godly character or not. In fact, almost everything to say about it. Your conscience has to do with your convictions.

Actually, I want to talk, first of all, as the notes show, about the trouble that the conscience causes. Let's begin by defining what we mean by the conscience. We speak of the conscience as if it is a thing.

You know, we say, my conscience would not permit me, my conscience bothers me about this. As if the conscience is a thing. And it isn't really technically a thing, it's not an organ of the body.

But what it is, is simply a word that refers to our ability to know what's right and wrong. That's all that the word conscience means. It means the ability to know what is right and wrong.

Interestingly, it does not appear that man was created with a conscience. But he didn't live very long before he obtained one. But let me share with you some scriptures that show us that the scripture indicates that every person has a conscience today.

They can mismanage it. And many of them do. And if you mismanage it long enough, it can become as if you had none.

There is a word in modern psychology or psychiatry and sociology that speaks of a person who has no conscience. The word is sociopath. The biblical word would be reprobate.

A person who no longer has any sensitivity to his conscience. But that doesn't mean he has no conscience. He may have put it to sleep or numbed it or calloused it or, as Paul put it, cauterized it.

But there is a conscience in every person. In 2 Corinthians chapter 4 and verse 2, Paul said, as he was defending the authenticity of his ministry and of his gospel, he says, we have renounced the hidden things of dishonesty, not walking in craftiness, nor handling the word of God deceitfully, but by manifestation of the truth, we commend ourselves to

every man's conscience in the sight of God. Paul was accountable to every man.

Sometime maybe I'll talk to you about the whole subject of accountability. There's a lot of talk about that these days and what with the promise keepers and things like that, where men who want to avoid cheating on their wives, for example, want to avoid pornography, they team up with another man or a group of men as an accountability arrangement. Where one man keeps another man accountable.

This I do not object to. I don't think this is wrong. And I have to say that so that you'll not misunderstand what I do have to say.

I do not believe that Christians should need that kind of accountability in order to stay on the straight and narrow path. There are Christians who have been in solitary confinement and tortured, who had no support from the body of Christ, who kept their conscience pure. Joseph was removed far from his family into Egypt.

And there he was a slave in a pagan home. And he was alone in the home with a woman who tried to seduce him. And he had no Bible.

He had memorized no Bible verses because none had been written yet. He had never seen God in the sense that some of his ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, had seen God. He simply knew about God.

He knew what was right and what was wrong. He could arguably have been said to have no accountability whatsoever in that situation, except to God. See, Paul said, we shall all give account of ourselves to God.

I'm not opposed to human accountability. And I will admit that it is good for people who are weak to admit that they're weak. And we all are weak in some areas, no doubt.

And sometimes that weakness is in the area of conscience, where we violate our conscience in an area from time to time. And where we do benefit from having a brother or a sister keep us accountable. But what I'm saying is that the Bible does not present human accountability to humans as the norm for Christian conscientiousness.

But our accountability before God is what keeps us pure. When Joseph was being tempted by Potiphar's wife, he said, how can I do this thing and sin against God? He didn't say, how can I disappoint my father, who's back in Palestine? If he heard about this, he'd just go to pieces. Well, his father wasn't there to keep him accountable.

There was no God-fearing person within a thousand miles of him. He had no accountability except to God, but that was enough. Because he had a conscience before God.

Now, a person with a conscience toward God may or may not have accountability to

some structure, to some system. I remember once I was invited to participate in a sort of a cooperative ministry of Christian musicians. And as I was sort of being invited to be part of this thing, they had me answer some questions.

And they asked where I went to church or who my pastor was. At that particular time, I was preaching in a variety of churches on Sunday mornings. And I didn't have one church or one pastor that was mine.

So I gave them the name of the last pastor I'd had who had been in Santa Cruz, California, but I lived in Oregon. And they got back to me and they said, well, you gave us as your pastor a man who lives in Santa Cruz, California. You live in Oregon.

Is he your pastor? And I said, well, not exactly, but he's the last pastor I had. And I don't really have a pastor right now. As a matter of fact, I'm in the ministry myself.

And they said, well, who to whom are you accountable? And I said, well, I'm accountable to God and to everybody. And they said, well, but you need to have a local pastor in your area to keep you adequately accountable. I said, well, I'm kind of in a position.

I don't have one right now. And they said, well, we can't work with you because you don't have an adequate structure of accountability. I said, it's ironic, really, because I could go and join the largest church in town where the pastor would not even know who I was.

But because I'd be in that church, someone said I have an adequate structure of accountability. But there'd be no accountability of any kind there that I don't have already. It's interesting how people think in terms of the church or other Christians and keeping them on the straight and narrow.

It is your conscience toward God that you must live with. You know, in the church in which I am standing right now, there was once a different congregation meeting. I used to attend this church.

It was not the same church that meets here now. The group that used to be here broke off and started another church. But in that church, there was a strong emphasis on accountability to the leadership and so forth.

And that's one of the things I left the church over. Not because I'm against accountability. I'm all for it.

It was just the stress on it was unhealthy. But interestingly, one of the elders himself was in two affairs with two of the church women for eight years without the other elders knowing. He met with them on a regular basis twice a week at elders meetings, prayed with them, oversaw the church.

And for eight years was having two affairs with women in the church. He was accountable. But not to God.

He was accountable to his fellow elders. He was in the structure. He had a structure of accountability.

What we need. I'm not saying there's no place for any structures of accountability. But we need to have accountability in our conscience before God.

Joseph didn't have any structure of accountability, but he had the fear of God in him. And Paul, you know, when he traveled, he didn't actually have a structure of account. Who did he answer to the church in Antioch that sent him out? Yeah, he dropped in there about every five years, if that often gave him an update on what he'd been doing.

But who was he accountable to? Well, he says right here, who is accountable? We commend ourselves to every man's conscience. And as we present our lifestyle, we present our gospel, we present who we are and what we're saying to everyone. When we let everyone's own conscience decide what to think of us.

Why? Because Paul assumed that everyone has a conscience. Everyone has some ability to recognize good and evil, some ability to recognize truth and error. Now, obviously, that ability can be very badly marred.

And very dulled. But Paul felt there was enough conscience in everybody that he could present the gospel to people and just leave it at that. That God could work on their conscience, God could show them what was right and wrong.

And that was who he was accountable to, everybody, God and everybody. Now, in John 8, 9, we read that when the Pharisees came to trick Jesus, trap him by bringing the woman taken in adultery and tried to pit Jesus against Moses. And they said, Moses told us we should stone this woman.

What do you say? Well, we know what he said. He said, let he that is without sin among you be the first to cast a stone at her. And interestingly, it says this in verse nine.

And they which heard it, this is John 8, 9, being convicted by their own conscience, went out one by one. Here, these people were wicked people. They were against Jesus.

They were trying to find fault with Jesus. They wanted to condemn Jesus. They obviously were not sinless men or else they wouldn't have been convicted.

Jesus said, whoever is without sin among you be the first to cast a stone at her. None of them could say they were sinless. They were at least that honest.

But what's interesting is as corrupt as they were, yet they had conscience. And each of

them was convicted in their own conscience. Where did this conscience come from? How did everyone get one of these? Well, I said that God did not make every man with a conscience initially.

I am assuming this to be true. I cannot prove it beyond question. But I think it's generally understood to be true among most evangelical theologians that when man and woman were made, they were innocent.

And innocent meant, among other things, rather naive. They didn't have an innate sense of what things are right and what things are wrong. They didn't need one because they had God.

They walked with God in the cool of the day. God told them everything they needed to know. In fact, there wasn't much for them to know about good and evil because there was only one evil thing.

And God told them what it was. Don't eat that tree. Everything else was good.

Everything else was fine. God saw that all that he made was good, very good. And so Adam and Eve didn't need a highly refined or sophisticated knowledge of good and evil innately.

All they needed was to stay close to God and avoid the one thing he said not to do. And if he ever told them not to do something else, they should not do that either. They didn't need an innate sense of a whole system of morality because there was no such system to know.

It was only after sin entered the world that things became more complex. And they became more complex just in this way. More things became wrong because man became innately wrong in a rebellion against God.

And almost everything man touched turned bad. And almost everything man did was motivated by evil. And therefore, there suddenly were all kinds of things wrong that man was naturally going to do.

And interestingly enough, God, I presume, could have done this another way. But God had the original test of our first parents such that if they would fall, they would fall in this particular way that they would eat this fruit of a tree that would confer to them the knowledge of good and evil. The innate knowledge of good and evil.

Now, God didn't want them to eat of that because he didn't want them to ever need that. But he knew that if they sinned, there'd be a lot of sin. There'd be a lot of evil.

And as a concession to this, I believe, God set things up so that if sin would enter the world, along with it would come a gift to man of knowing good and evil. This gift was a

God-like gift. It wasn't only Satan who said that.

Satan told Eve, of course, God knows that when you eat of this fruit, you'll be like God, knowing good and evil. Well, actually, he told the truth in that respect. He's a liar, but he doesn't only tell lies.

And when he does tell the truth, it's usually with a slant to deceive and to lead astray. But the point is, what he said was technically true. In the end of Genesis chapter 3 and verse 22, God said, look at the man that we've made.

What has he become? He's become like one of us, to know good and evil. Prior to the fall, only God innately knew what was good and bad, cosmically and totally in the grand scheme of morality and so forth. Man and woman were naive, childlike, innocent.

They needed to know nothing of that. They only had one thing that was wrong, and God told them what that was. And as long as they walked with God, what do they need a conscience for? What do they need to know good and evil for? And so, it would appear that the origin and purpose of the conscience was that God made concession to man's fall.

That although sin would enter and man would be condemned, man would know he was condemned. Man would have a sense of conviction and condemnation, which is good to have. When you are really condemned, it's good to know that you are.

Because if you don't, you may never do anything about it. Well, ever since then, it would appear, people have this knowledge of good and evil. It's not certain that they're born with it.

Perhaps infants are born with some kind of a germinal potential conscience, but I don't think that little infants are born with any kind of sophisticated knowledge of right and wrong. Nor do I believe animals have it. Now, I've heard people try to challenge that.

I once heard a story, I think it was Paul Harvey told it on one of his broadcasts years ago, about a trained orangutan that some university students had been teaching sign language, teaching it to communicate with signing. And the orangutan escaped once and disappeared for a few days, and finally they got it back and brought it home. And the trainer was trying to communicate with it by signing in this, and the ape signed the words, I was bad.

Well, of course, that's quite a newsworthy thing for an ape to seemingly have a conscience to know right and wrong. And it does seem sometimes like animals may know they're doing wrong, like the dog that you're trying to teach not to get onto the sofa. But when you're gone, it does anyway.

When it hears you coming, it gets off and skulks out of the room with its tail between its

legs. Does it have a conscience? Does it know it did wrong? Or even little babies sometimes exhibit this kind of awareness. I've heard instances of infants under a year old, who had been, their parents had been trying to train them and discipline them to lie down at naptime and not stay up, and the baby would get up, but when he heard the mother coming down the hall, the baby would get down again and lie down like they knew what was right and what was wrong.

Does this prove that infants and even animals have a conscience? I don't think it does, necessarily. I think all of those cases can be chalked up to conditioned responsiveness. You train an animal that if it's caught on the couch, it's going to get whacked with a newspaper.

The animal doesn't know right and wrong, but it knows it doesn't want to get whacked with a newspaper. And so it does all the, you know, it responds to getting caught the way people respond to getting caught. It looks guilty, but it's more fearful of punishment in all likelihood.

And I suspect that that is true in some of these other cases I've mentioned. But at some point in the developing child's life, the child knows something of the difference between good and evil. Now, the conscience is actually something that develops over time and is conditioned by training.

It's very important for us to condition our consciences by the Scriptures, because although man universally knows intuitively that there is such a thing as right and such a thing as wrong, human beings untrained by Scripture don't necessarily know what things are right or what things are wrong. In the story Peace Child, Don Richardson, a missionary in Erien, Jaya, said he encountered a tribe of people whose morality was exactly the reverse of Christian ethics. They felt that treachery was the highest virtue.

And that being, you know, deferring to others and being kind to others was sort of being a sap, kind of is kind of the most undesirable way to be. And their whole ethical system was on its head. And when Don Richardson and his family came to preach the gospel and they heard the story of Jesus, they thought Judas was the hero and Jesus was the sap.

And it was a very difficult tribe to evangelize, as you can imagine. But it's interesting that even though this tribe had totally wrong ideas about what right and wrong were, this tribe, remote and having been out of contact with other civilizations for probably thousands of years, nonetheless, like all human beings, had a highly developed sense that some things are good and some things are bad. The sense that there is such a thing as morality, that there is a moral realm.

The sense of morality is what the conscience is. And I believe that in their most pristine condition, children probably, when they develop conscience, have a fairly accurate conscience. The Bible indicates that the conscience can be corrupted and often it is.



What happens is that the conscience, if we could speak of it as if it was an organ of perception, just like your eyes perceive and your ears perceive and your feelings and your smell and so forth, they're organs of sense. So you are given a spiritual sense, a spiritual organ, as it were, to sense right and wrong. Your natural senses don't discern those things, but there is something in you that does.

And we could speak of it for the sake of talking about it as a spiritual organ. And this organ gets violated. It gets injured at times because it knows that certain things are wrong.

And when you do wrong, it injures your conscience. Your conscience sustains an injury. Just like if your eyes look at light that's too bright or something like that, you're not treating them right.

Your eyes would ordinarily blink or something if bright light is there. But if you force them to look at the bright light, they get injured. And the conscience generally warns you off of bad behavior.

But if you ignore it and you expose it to the bad behavior and do the bad behavior anyway, it injures the conscience. And James talks about this injury. He doesn't use the word conscience, but he tells us essentially how the conscience is injured.

In James four and verse 17, he says, therefore, to him that knows to do good. That's your conscience. Your conscience knows good and evil.

To him that knows to do good and does not do it. To him, it is sin. Sin is the injury of the conscience.

That's not a biblical definition. Technically, sin is the transgression of the law. But God writes his law on our hearts.

And when we transgress that law, it injures the conscience. When we know to do good and we don't do it, we sin and we violate our conscience. And there is an injury, a spiritual injury there.

Now, that's not the only thing we need to know about sin. Probably even more important than that, we need to know that sin injures our relationship with God. Quite apart from any internal damage done to our spirit, there is that objective damage to the relationship.

There is that violation of God's law. There is that legal problem that sin causes between us and God. But that's not what I'm focusing on right now.

I want to talk about what sin does to you, to your spirit. First of all, it injures, I believe, your conscience. The story of Peter denying the Lord three times is a classic example of

a man pummelling his conscience.

As he knows he's not supposed to deny the Lord, but three times he is confronted with a situation where he knows the right thing to do, but he does the wrong thing. He denies the Lord. And afterwards he goes out and he weeps bitterly because of the injury done to his conscience.

He knows he's done wrong. His conscience is hurting. And when a conscience hurts, it does not remain silent.

When a conscience is injured, it gets irritated. And it protests. And this protestation is what we call feelings of guilt.

Your conscience is protesting against something you've done, or perhaps you're contemplating doing. And the protesting of the conscience is what the Bible calls condemnation, when it's not speaking of condemnation in the objective sense. There's two ways that we can think of condemnation.

One is simply a legal sense that exists whether or not we're aware of it. But then there's the sensation of condemnation that the Bible speaks of. We read of that in 1 John 3, verse 20, where John says, If our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart and knows all things.

If your heart condemns you, that is a protestation of your conscience. Your conscience knows that wrong has been done, and it condemns you for it. Now, everybody has had this experience, because everybody has a conscience.

Everybody has sinned and done injury to their conscience. Everybody has known what it feels like to have an irritated conscience, a protesting conscience. To know what it feels like to be condemned in the heart.

However, at the point of that sense of feeling condemnation, of course, the right thing to do is to repent, turn to God, go the right way, and so forth and so on. But when we don't do that, and probably more often than not, well, certainly taking mankind as a whole, more often than not, people do not respond rightly to a protesting conscience. Instead of turning to God, they try to silence the conscience.

And the saddest thing that can be said is that it's possible to do that. It is possible to silence the conscience. It's possible to desensitize it.

In Romans chapter 1, Paul talks about people whom God... They know right from wrong, but they don't want to retain the knowledge of God in their memory. They don't want to respond properly to the truth, and therefore God gives them over. And He gives them over, and finally He gives them over to a reprobate mind.

A reprobate mind is technically a mind that does not have the capability to sense good and evil. It's a conscience that's been deadened. And it's like any... I mean, using the analogy of an organ of the body really works here, because you can do this to skin.

You can rub sandpaper on your skin, and it'll hurt. But eventually, if you do it enough, it's not going to hurt too much anymore, because you're going to develop what? Calluses. You're going to get calluses.

The tips of my fingers have skin that I can't feel anymore. And that comes from playing the guitar. When you first start playing the guitar, it hurts.

It hurts the ends of your fingers. Why? You're violating them. You're injuring them.

But if you really want to learn to play guitar, you'll keep doing it. You'll ignore the pain, and eventually you ignore the pain until there isn't any anymore. And there isn't any more because they become hardened.

They become callous. It's possible to harden your heart. Not the physical heart, of course, but the spiritual heart.

The Bible speaks of hardening one's heart. And warns against it. How do you harden your heart? Same way you harden skin.

You injure it, and you injure it, and you injure it, and it's protesting, it's protesting. But you ignore the protest, and you just keep doing the same thing. Eventually it stops protesting.

Or if it's protesting, you can't hear it or feel it anymore. And thus the conscience becomes desensitized. In 1 Timothy, Paul refers to this as cauterizing.

You know what cauterizing is, I think. When your body has an injury, it can be cauterized by applying a red hot something. Red hot iron to it, and it causes instant scar tissue.

It kind of heals the injury, if you like that kind of healing. What you've got is scar tissue, and scar tissue is not quite as sensitive, in fact it's not sensitive at all, as the original skin was. It's a cure, but it's a terrible cure in a way because you lose sensitivity when something is cauterized, right? Well, Paul says that people can cauterize their conscience.

By inflicting the supreme injury on the conscience, and not relieving the conscience by repentance, the conscience reacts, it calluses, it cauterizes. Paul says this in the opening verses of 1 Timothy 4, he said, Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in their hypocrisy, having their conscience seared with a hot iron. This word seared means cauterized, we've used the word cauterized for that.

Having their conscience seared as with a hot iron. People can get to this state. They sin, and they feel bad, but instead of repenting they sin again, and they still feel bad.

And they sin again, and they still feel bad, but not quite as bad. And they do it again and again and again, and they find it doesn't really hurt so bad after a while. R.C. Sproul, I think I told you this story, he said the first time he lost his virginity outside of marriage, when he was 15 years old, he said he went home, he was so upset he threw up.

He was so guilty, his conscience was so bothered. He said by the time he was 19, he could do it all the time. He never felt a thing.

Now to a person who loves sin, that's a desirable state to be in, I guess. If you want to sin, you want to get rid of your conscience. But it's a terrible place to be in for anybody who hopes to ever be saved.

For anybody who hopes to be righteous. For anyone who hopes to walk with God. Because the conscience is the means, is the capacity that we have that God uses to warn us off of danger.

And to guide us in a right way. And so, the desensitization of the conscience is definitely the last thing you want. And it's the last thing that happens to most people in their spiritual journey.

Because there's not much way out of it once it's there. I guess God can miraculously change it. But I consider it to be that which Paul speaks of in Romans 1 when God gives them over to a reprobate mind.

Now there's another condition the conscience can be in that's not any better. We find Paul referring to that in Titus chapter 1 and verse 15. In Titus 1.15, Paul says, To the pure, all things are pure.

But to them that are defiled, this would be people who are morally and spiritually defiled and unbelieving. Nothing is pure, but even their mind and their conscience is defiled. The conscience can become defiled.

The mind can become defiled. Now this is what I think has happened in a case like that in Erangelia that Don Richardson tells about. These people didn't have no conscience.

They had a conscience that was telling them right was wrong and wrong was right. Isaiah says, Woe to those who say good is evil, who call evil good and good evil. Now which condition would you say our society is reaching? Well, some seem to have cauterized consciences.

Others have a very active conscience. It's just that they think it's right to kill babies and wrong to kill murderers. And they feel very strongly about this.

They have a very sensitive conscience about these things. It's just defiled. It's just twisted.

It's just perverted. So there are dangers. The conscience can cause serious problems.

It's not really the conscience that causes the problems, but conditions of the conscience can definitely become dangerous if we don't manage the conscience properly. The ultimate consequence of not maintaining a good conscience is the end of one's faith in Christ. Apparently, Paul said in 1 Timothy 1.19, Paul urged Timothy to hold the faith and a good conscience.

Now notice what he said. Which? What? The faith and a good conscience. Especially he must be referring to the good conscience because of what he says afterwards.

Which? Some having put away concerning faith have made shipwreck. That's King James language. Basically what he says is by abandoning a good conscience, by not maintaining a good conscience, many have had their faith shipwrecked.

I presume they had faith at one time. You can't wreck a ship that doesn't exist. They had faith, but their faith sunk.

Their faith was destroyed like a ship that sunk and wrecked. So let us not take lightly the conscience. Let's become aware of it and know what to do about it.

Well, let me talk to you about what to do about it. Let's talk now about the Christian's conscience. There's a passage in Romans that in my belief is widely misunderstood.

And I know this because I misunderstood it for a very long time and someone corrected me. I thought, you know, I think they're right. In Romans chapter 2, verses 14 and 15, Paul said, For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, this means they're not schooled in the Jewish law.

When the Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these having not the law, are a law unto themselves, which show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the meanwhile accusing or else excusing themselves or one another. Now, he says there are Gentiles who are not educated in the Jewish law, and yet there are, you can see in their lives, they actually follow the things the Jewish law teaches. And this indicates there's something in their heart that agrees with the law of God.

There's a law written in their hearts. And what it really amounts to is their conscience approves or disapproves of various kinds of actions, accuses them or excuses them, depending on what they're doing. Now, I was always taught, and every commentary I've ever read said that what Paul is saying here is that all people have a conscience.

Even people who've never heard the gospel, they know something about good and evil. And you'll find this even among the noble heathen who do by nature many of the things that the law requires. And this is a favorite verse for answering people who say, well, what's God going to do about those who've never heard the gospel? And we like to say, well, you know, everybody has a conscience.

God's written his law in their hearts and so forth. And that helps us to assign responsibility and accountability to them. Excuse me.

But I taught this because the commentaries did, and it made sense to me for a long time until someone, another teacher, heard me teach. He said, I'd like to know where you got this idea that that Paul is talking about the pagans here. He says, where in the Bible elsewhere does it ever say the pagans have God's law written in their hearts? And where elsewhere in the Bible does it speak of God writing his law in someone's hearts? Well, it speaks of that in Jeremiah 31, verses 31 through 33.

And it quotes that in Hebrews chapters 8 and 10. And Paul quotes it also in Second Corinthians, chapter three. But in every case, it's talking about Christians is talking about those who are in the new covenant.

God writes his law on their inward parts and his words in their in their hearts. So it's the Christian who has the law in his heart. And as a matter of fact, pagans who are not Christians don't generally do the things that are written in God's law.

Some things, yes, but most things, no. And my understanding has come to be that what Paul is doing here is addressing Jews who think that by being Jewish and by having the law, they are superior to Gentiles. But he's pointing out to them that having the law but not doing it doesn't count for anything.

And he points out that there are Gentiles, namely Christian Gentiles, who keep the law better than many Jews do. Although they don't have the law, they're not under the law. But they do it because God's written the law in their hearts.

And what Paul, I think, is saying is that a Jew who has the law and doesn't keep it has nothing to boast about over a Gentile, namely a Christian, who, though he doesn't have the law, he lives up to the standards of the law in the way the Jews don't. And I believe that he is referring to Christian Gentiles here, although I didn't used to think so. But the point here is Paul acknowledges that people can have the law written in their hearts and their conscience then becomes the thing that excuses or accuses them, which would mean approves or disapproves of different behaviors.

Now, in order for us to be guided by a conscience that has God's law written on it, we need to keep it clean and clear. We need to make sure it doesn't get cauterized. We need to make sure it doesn't get defiled.

There needs to be a maintenance of a good conscience before God. In fact, Paul said to Timothy in 1 Timothy chapter 1 and verse 5, this is translated in quite a variety of ways depending on which translation you look at. But Paul says in 1 Timothy chapter 1 and verse 5, now the end or the goal of the commandment or some translations say of our instruction, Paul is telling about what the end result of his instructions are intended to produce as he instructs Timothy and the other Christians.

Here's the goal or the end that he's hoping his commandment or his instruction will produce, is love out of a pure heart and of a good conscience and a faith unfeigned or unpretended. So he says what he hopes will come about in the life of those that he instructs will be that they will have love out of pure heart, that they'll maintain a good conscience and have an unfeigned faith, that is a genuine unpretended faith. In 2 Corinthians chapter 1 and verse 12, Paul said, For our rejoicing is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God we have had our way of life in the world and more abundantly toward you.

Now, he says this is our rejoicing. This is that in which we take hope. Our conscience is clear.

The testimony of our conscience, it does not condemn us. We are living in simplicity and purity and sincerity. And because of that our conscience is clear and that is our cause of rejoicing.

That is our source of joy and of confidence. Now, why is it important for a Christian to keep a clean conscience? I've given four reasons here that are all in the scriptures. One is to maintain confidence toward God.

In 1 John chapter 3 and verse 21, John said, Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, then we have confidence toward God. And whatsoever things we ask, we receive of Him because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight. So, if our heart is not condemning us, that is if we have a clear conscience, we have confidence toward God.

Do you know, this is probably the one thing, the very one and only thing more than anything else, that the devil hopes to destroy is your confidence toward God? What is confidence toward God? It's faith. What is it with faith? And what does the devil suffer the most damage as a result of? People who have faith. This is the victory that overcomes the world, even our faith.

The devil wants, if he can do nothing else, to damage your faith and confidence in God. Now, if you have no confidence in God, you'll be loath to approach God in prayer. And if you do pray, you'll have no confidence that your prayers will be answered.

You can't pray in faith if you're feeling guilty because you know there's something wrong

between me and God. I mean, how can I make this request and expect Him to do it? That's what John seems to say. If our heart doesn't condemn us, then we have confidence toward God.

You know, you might think the devil's whole desire is to get you to sin. I believe the devil wants you to sin, but for this reason. He wants you to sin so you can have your conscience condemned and your confidence before God destroyed.

He doesn't have to get you to sin to do that. He can just make you think you've sinned. He can just heap condemnation on you for something you didn't even do.

And it serves him just as well. Well, it doesn't matter if you sin or not, as long as you think you did, as long as you're feeling guilty, as long as you're feeling condemned, it destroys your confidence toward God. And so, we need to maintain this confidence toward God.

Remember Paul said in 1 Timothy 1.19, certain people have had their faith shipwrecked by not maintaining a good conscience. So, we've got to keep our conscience clear so that our communication lines between us and God and our sense of confidence and boldness to come before Him with our requests is not interrupted. Secondly, we need to maintain a clean conscience for the sake of our confidence before man.

You know, the fear of man, says the Scripture, bringeth a snare. It's a snare. It's a trap.

You will not be able to operate. You will not be able to walk. You will not be able to function as a Christian if you're fearful of men's opinions of you, of what they will do to you.

And it doesn't matter whether it's somebody in your family, someone next door, somebody who lives in Russia or China, or someone in the White House. It doesn't matter who it is you're thinking about. If you're afraid of what they can do to you, then you will be snared.

And confidence toward man, that is lack of fear of man, is maintained the same way as confidence toward God, by keeping your conscience clear before God and man. In 1 Peter 3, verses 15 and 16, Peter said, But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and reverence, having a good conscience that, even though they speak evil of you as of evildoers, they may be ashamed that falsely accuse your good conversation or behavior in Christ. You need to keep your conscience clear so that you don't have to worry about what people say about you or what they will do to you.

Your conscience will be clear. They may speak evil of you. They may even kill you.

But you'll go to your death with a clean conscience. And because you're right before



God, it doesn't really matter what people do to you. Remember what it says in Hebrews 13, We may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, who I shall not fear what men shall do to me.

Confidence before man comes when we have confidence before God. And that comes from keeping a clear conscience, as Peter says. In Proverbs 28, verse 1, it says, The wicked flee when no one pursues.

But the righteous are bold as a lion. Proverbs 28, verse 1. The wicked flee when no one pursues. Why? There's no one chasing them.

What are they running from? They're running from the testimony of their own conscience. The protest of their own conscience makes them paranoid. Some of you are old enough to remember the days when a lot of people smoked dope, and maybe you were one of them.

A lot of people used to have dope in their car. I never smoked it. I don't say that to boast.

I became a Christian before I was old enough to consider it. And so I never got into it. But all my friends had.

All my Christian friends did before they were Christians. And I remember hearing about the paranoia that they felt so much of the time. Driving down the street when they had some dope in the glove compartment.

Especially if there was a policeman behind them in traffic. Why? Now, the policeman wasn't after them. He didn't know they had dope.

But their conscience knew it, and they were paranoid. They were sweating bullets when there was a policeman behind them. Why? No one was pursuing them.

He wasn't pursuing them. But he might as well have been as far as they were concerned. They were being pursued by a guilty conscience.

And the wicked do that. They flee even when they're not in danger. Because their conscience will not allow them to have boldness and confidence.

But you meet someone like Peter standing before the Sanhedrin, or Stephen before the Sanhedrin. And there's confidence. Calling those men murderers of God and, you know, pointing the finger at them.

Knowing full well that they're the same people who killed Jesus about seven weeks earlier. And so, knowing what they're likely to do. But having total confidence and boldness.

Why? Because their conscience was clear before God. Interesting that Peter's could be

clear before God, because he had denied the Lord three times. Not too long earlier, but Jesus had forgiven him, and so his conscience was clear.

You can have a clear conscience even though you've done wrong, but not automatically. The point is, we need to maintain a clear conscience so that we will have confidence toward God and toward man. The Apostle Paul said in Acts 24-16, this is one of his goals in life.

In Acts 24-16, he says, And herein I do exercise myself to have always a conscience void of offense toward God and toward men. He says, I exercise myself, I discipline myself to maintain a conscience that has no offense before God or before men. And thus, Paul was able to have confidence before God and men because he kept his conscience clear.

It's also necessary to keep a clear conscience for the Christian to maintain spiritual authority. Do you know you're supposed to have a degree of spiritual authority? And the more your conscience is defiled, the less spiritual authority you have. I was reading with my children this morning, my wife, my family in devotions, some missionary stories.

True stories of missionaries who in Africa and India and other places had encountered demon-possessed people and talking about their experiences of casting demons out in the name of Jesus. And they said that they found that any Christian who had a strong faith could cast out demons unless there was compromise or sin in their life. And then the demons wouldn't listen to them.

The demons seemed to be aware when there was compromise. I've heard of other cases throughout my lifetime of people who were trying to cast a demon out. Someone in the demons says, you can't cast me out because you're living in such and such a sin.

I mean, you talk about vaporizing your faith in that moment. It's hard enough to get your faith up to cast a demon out in the first place. And then suddenly the demon, you know, reads your laundry list in front of everybody.

And it kind of vaporizes your authority in that situation. Well, elders, according to Paul, of course they were the ones who bore spiritual authority in the church. It says one of their qualifications in 1 Timothy 3, 9 is that they must hold the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience.

Why? They need to be leaders. They need to wield authority in the body of Christ. You vaporize your spiritual authority when you do not maintain a good conscience before God.

Because maintaining a good conscience before God simply means you're not living in sin. Or if you have sinned, you have received forgiveness. You've gotten it right with God.

If you leave that undone, then you lose. You lose a lot, including any spiritual authority you had. Another reason, important reason to maintain a good conscience is to maintain a soft heart and a right spirit before God.

You can have your heart hardened. In Hebrews chapter 3, we are warned to beware of having our heart hardened like the Israelites did, who wouldn't go into the Promised Land. Beware, lest ye harden your hearts.

Christians he's talking to, you can harden your heart. David knew well the danger of that. And he did sin, and his conscience afflicted him.

And when he repented, he wrote Psalm 51. And we know this verse fairly well, no doubt. We sing it in Psalm 51.

He said, create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. To have your spirit right cannot be if you do not keep your conscience right. Your spirit and your conscience be defiled.

To maintain a right spirit in you, you must not neglect the conscience. Well, there are certain disorders of the conscience that the Bible tells us about we need to be aware of, because Christians fall prey to them as well, at least are in danger of doing so. One is, as we mentioned earlier, cauterized or defiled conscience.

We don't need to look up the verses about that again. We saw them earlier in 1 Timothy 4.2. Paul talked about people who have their conscience cauterized, as with a hot iron. And in Titus 1.15, he spoke of those whose mind and conscience is defiled.

That certainly is one kind of damage that can come to a conscience. It can be cauterized, desensitized, defiled, corrupted. And this, as we saw earlier, is a result of not having done the right thing.

When our conscience began to condemn us for certain behavior, when the conscience began to protest about something we were doing or thinking about doing, and we didn't listen to it, we go on in that sin, and eventually that conscience becomes numb. We don't need to say anything more about that. There's another problem with the conscience, and it's just the opposite kind of a problem.

And that is what Paul refers to as a weak conscience. From the usage of that term in Paul in 1 Corinthians and in Romans, my impression is that Paul, when he says someone has a weak conscience, is saying the same thing we would normally say if we said someone has a tender conscience. We have, for example, in Romans 14, Paul making a distinction between those in the church who have a weak and those who have a strong conscience.

In Romans 14, he says, well, let's start with verse 1. Him that is weak in the faith receive, but not for doubtful disputes. For one believes that he may eat all things. Another who is

weak eats only vegetables.

In other words, he doesn't have the freedom of conscience to allow him to eat all things. Paul knows of such people in Corinth as well. Apparently, it was not uncommon in the early church, both in Rome and in Corinth, there were persons that Paul spoke of whose conscience was weak about certain things they could eat or couldn't eat.

And people who had a stronger conscience, not quite so tender a conscience, they could eat everything, but there were some who could not. And so Paul says in 1 Corinthians 8, 12, But when you sin against the brethren and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. Now, you wound their weak conscience because you have the liberty in your conscience to do certain things that they don't have the liberty to do.

And by seeing you do it, you injure their conscience. Why? Well, because earlier or elsewhere, he talks about how and I'm not sure exactly which verses because Paul talks about it for about three chapters. It's the verse 10 of chapter 8, 1 Corinthians 8, 10.

He says, For if any man see you who has knowledge, sit at a meal in an idol's temple, shall not the conscience of him who is weak be emboldened to eat those things which are offered to idols? What Paul is saying is this. If you eat food sacrificed to idols, that in itself is no big deal. One might well wonder what your motives are and why you're doing it.

But the fact of the matter is Paul is enlightened and some of his readers were enlightened. They knew that, you know, there was no magic about this that would somehow defile you to eat this. It's just food.

It's just going to go on right through the system, Paul said. Now, that being so, he says, Some people have a strong conscience and they can eat anything. They could even, if they wanted to, sit down in an idol's temple and eat.

And they know that if they're not worshipping the idol, it's not going to hurt them. But he said there's a lot of people who don't feel that way. A lot of people have a tender conscience about that.

And if they see you doing that, it may embolden their conscience. That means it may change the way they perceive good and evil. They may get more encouraged to do that thing which is against their conscience.

And you wound their weak conscience. And then you've got them doing something that their conscience won't let them do, although your conscience will let you do. Now, what this means is that if you do something that is against your conscience, you are sinning.

Even though sometimes your conscience may be more sensitive than it needs to be. If you think that it's wrong to wear jewelry, even though the Bible doesn't necessarily

forbid wearing jewelry, but if you think it's wrong and you go ahead and put on jewelry, you know what? You're sinning. Because you're doing what you believe to be wrong.

The state of your heart is the same as if you're doing an actual wrong thing. You're doing something deliberately that you believe is offensive to God. It may not in fact be offensive to Him at all that you wear jewelry, but it is offensive to Him that you would wear jewelry thinking that it's wrong to wear jewelry.

When you go against your conscience, when your conscience says don't and you do, that is a sin to you. Even if someone else did the same thing and their conscience didn't condemn them, and the thing is not objectively in itself a sin. Drinking alcohol is one of those things.

There are churches that believe that to touch any alcohol is a sin for a Christian. There are other churches that are more liberated than that. I think the Bible is on the side of the more liberated churches on that point.

The Bible certainly doesn't say it's wrong to drink alcohol. Jesus drank it, and the apostles drank it, and they had it at the table at communion. We know that because someone would be drunk, Paul said.

Couldn't do that if it was just grape juice. And drinking alcohol, there's no stigma to it as long as there's no drunkenness, but because there is such a thing as drunkenness, and because there are people who are weak about alcohol, and because some people, if they drink a little, go overboard and get drunk, and then they do indeed sin, there are some churches that have drawn the line much closer, and, you know, closer in from the actual sin and say, no, to touch alcohol is a sin. I was raised in a church where we read every once a month the church covenant printed in the back of the bulletin, and one of the lines in it, I covenant to abstain from the sale and use of an intoxicating beverage.

A lot of men in the church, including the deacons, didn't read that line when they came to it for some reason. But the fact is, that is a conscience issue with some Christians, which many of us may not feel is agreeable with exactly what the Bible says. But whether it's agreeable with what the Bible says or not, if someone believes it's a sin to drink alcohol and they take one drop, they're sinning, because they're violating their conscience.

That's what Paul calls a weak conscience. A conscience that is oversensitized. It's the opposite of a cauterized conscience.

A cauterized conscience is undersensitized, desensitized. But some people's conscience is more sensitive than it needs to be, and they feel badly about things that aren't really bad. But if it is so that they feel that way, they still must live according to the dictates of the conscience.

Your conscience is not always accurate, and therefore it's not always possible or right to trust your conscience. Your conscience can be desensitized so you can be doing something wrong and not feel that it's wrong. Or your conscience can be oversensitized so you're doing something that isn't wrong but you think it is.

You can't always trust your conscience. Jiminy Cricket was not right. You can't always let your conscience be your guide.

That is to say, ultimately, the Scripture has to be your guide. But he was right about one thing. Although you can't always trust your conscience, you can never safely ignore it.

Because even if your conscience is wrong in the sense of being overly sensitive, you have to obey it, or else you go against your own heart, your own conscience before God. And remember, your conscience isn't so much a thing as it is just your sense of what's right and wrong. To go against your conscience means you do what you believe is wrong, knowing that it is what you think is wrong.

That is sin. Well, there are symptoms, the Bible tells us of, of a neglected conscience, and a neglected conscience is one that is injured, that is irritated, that protests, but its protests go unheeded. The person doesn't pay attention to it, does not repent, just goes on living the same way without turning around.

The conscience is ignored. This is a conscience needing attention. And it will get attention one way or another.

There are many symptoms that the Bible, I think, gives us that go along with a conscience that needs attention. A conscience that is being violated and ignored. That is, if you are living in sin, and your conscience is protesting, but you are not repenting, these are some of the symptoms that that may be the case.

One, is that you live with a continuous low-grade condemnation. It may not always be in the forefront of your mind, but it doesn't take much to bring it back to your attention. Remember Joseph's brothers, after they had sold him into slavery, what was it, 20 years later, when they run into trouble? Remember when they didn't recognize Joseph, and he was giving them trouble there when they came to get the grain, and they were really frustrated and really seeing things were going against them, and so forth.

What did one of them say? He says, this is surely happening to us because of what we did to Joseph. 20 years earlier! First thing that goes wrong, the first thing that comes to their mind, it's because of what we did to Joseph. I knew it.

These guys were living with continual condemnation about it. For 20 years! Because they had done something wrong, they had never gotten it squared away, they had deceived their father, they had never told him the truth, they were living a lie, their conscience would not let them have peace, and of course, what's the evidence that you're living

with low-grade condemnation? Everything that happens, you say, oh, God's judging me for what I did. God's judging me for that.

Well, maybe He is. Maybe He is, maybe He isn't. But the fact is, the conscience has been left unresolved, and there is this condemnation that's always there, nagging.

Another symptom of a conscience needing attention is loss of joy. David had lost his joy because of his sin with Bathsheba, and when he repented, he actually asked God, in Psalm 51, 12, restore unto me the joy of thy salvation. Why would it need to be restored? He'd lost it.

He'd lost it through sin. You can't enjoy God, you can't have the joy of your salvation, if you're leaving your conscience neglected about things it's nagging you about. You need to do business with it.

Another thing that's caused by a neglected conscience is fearfulness and paranoia. I already mentioned earlier, Proverbs 28, 1, the wicked flee when no one pursues. But the righteous is bold as lion.

I find an interesting example of this in Herod the king. In Matthew 14, 1-4, we're told that when he had killed John the Baptist, which thing he knew was wrong, and he never really got over it. And he heard about this other guy he'd never met called Jesus, doing all these miracles.

Herod's first reaction was, it's John the Baptist who I killed. He's come back to life and he's got all these new powers now. And he was afraid.

And what an irrational thing to suspect. When you hear about somebody, the first thing you suspect is not that he's somebody who died who's come back, but Herod was nagged by this thing and he was paranoid. He was irrational.

He thought, I knew I'd never get rid of that guy. He's back to hurt me. Well, when your conscience isn't clear, there's not much to put your confidence in and to overcome fear.

And many times paranoia and irrational fear are the result. Another evidence or symptom of a conscience that is not clear is that a person withdraws from what the Bible calls the light. That would mean exposure.

That would mean transparency. When someone suddenly stops going to church, not because of anything wrong with the church, but because they don't feel comfortable around Christians anymore, because the Christians hold up a standard in some cases that they are not living by and they know it in their conscience. They don't want the exposure.

They don't want to be transparent. What happened as soon as Adam and Eve sinned?

Their conscience, what happened then? They knew good and evil. They saw they were naked.

They hid themselves. They covered themselves. They didn't want to be seen.

They didn't want to be exposed. They hid from each other. They made aprons of fig leaves to cover themselves from each other and they hid from God in the bushes when He came.

In Genesis 3, verses 7 and 8. In John 3, 19-21, Jesus said, This is the condemnation. That light has come into the world and men love darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. This is when condemnation is there.

People love the darkness. Why? Their deeds are evil and they know it. They don't want to come to the light to be exposed, said Jesus in John 3, 19-21.

So this withdrawal from light, from exposure, from the gaze of those who might make one accountable, this is evidence perhaps there is sin in the life that's not being dealt with. The conscience is not clear. Another symptom is rationalizing and blame shifting.

This also is seen in the Garden of Eden. As soon as Adam and Eve are confronted, they make excuses and they blame other people. Adam said, It's the woman that you gave me.

She gave me and I ate. And she said, Well, the devil made me do it. Finding someone else to blame.

Trying to make it sound like, What else could I do? Rationalizing. It wasn't really that bad. King Saul was supposed to annihilate the Amalekites.

He didn't. He kept one alive. Kept some of the sheep too.

He was supposed to wipe them out too, but he didn't. Samuel confronts him in 1 Samuel 15. Saul says, Oh, blessed are you of the Lord, Samuel.

I've done what the Lord said to do. Samuel said, Well, if you've done what the Lord said to do, Why do I hear the bleating of these sheep? And Saul said, Oh, well, the people kept the best of the flock that should have been killed. To offer as a sacrifice to the Lord.

Oh, that must be good. To offer a sacrifice to the Lord. Never mind it was disobedience to God.

How could God be against it? If they're going to offer a sacrifice to the Lord? Well, Samuel said, Has the Lord as much pleasure in sacrifices and burnt offerings as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice. And to heed than the fat of rams. Now, Saul did the wrong thing.



He was confronted with his sin. His conscience bugged him. And what did he do? He rationalized it.

Maybe I didn't do exactly what's right, but what I did was for a good reason. Certainly God will cut me some slack on that. That's what rationalizing is.

Saying, Okay, fair enough. I didn't do exactly what's right. But, hey, what I did was really good in its own kind of way.

Or someone else is really to blame for it. When people are not owning their guilt, nervously not owning their guilt, there's a good reason to believe they have a conscience bothering them. You know, another thing, and this might be surprising, but it's biblical, that can be an evidence of a conscience that's unsettled and neglected, is loss of appetite and loss of health.

David, after he had repented of his sin with Bathsheba, he wrote Psalm 32. Psalm 51 he wrote in the act of repenting. It was sort of a psalm of repentance.

But he wrote Psalm 32 afterward as sort of a testimony about his prior repentance. And he says this in Psalm 32, verse 1, Blessed is the man whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man unto whom the Lord does not impute iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no hypocrisy.

When I kept silence, my bones waxed old through my groaning all the day. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me. The moisture in my body was turned into drought of summer.

I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and my iniquity I have not hid. I said, I will confess my transgression to the Lord, and you forgave me the iniquity of my sin. This rejoicing that he exhibits in verses 1 and 2 came about because of what he did in verse 5, when he finally acknowledged his sin.

But before he did that, when he was hiding it, when he was keeping silent before he was repenting, he said, all the moisture in me was drying up. I just kind of dried up inside like a raisin. My bones felt old.

I was physically miserable. That can happen. Physical health can deteriorate because of a conscience that is not maintained.

Well, okay, what do we do? How do we maintain a conscience? First of all, I want to talk to you quickly about what the cure is for a conscience that's already wrecked, a conscience that's already been disordered. And then I want to talk to you about how to walk and live in a way so as to maintain a clean conscience, so as not to bring further troubles. First of all, if one's conscience is defiled or is otherwise protesting or disordered, the answer that God has provided is in, as the Bible makes very clear, the

blood of Jesus.

In Hebrews chapter 9 and verse 14, it says, How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? You need to have your conscience purged from dead works if you're going to serve the living God. If you're going to have godly character, if you're going to live a way pleasing God, you've got to get those dead works off your conscience. That condemnation, that guilt that you carry around, you've got to get rid of it.

You've got to get over it. And you've got to do that by the blood of Jesus, which can cleanse the conscience, can purge the conscience from dead works. In the very next chapter, Hebrews 10 and verse 22, the writer says, Let us draw near, meaning to God, with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water.

What is that which sprinkles the hearts from an evil conscience? Well, the sprinkling is of the blood of Jesus. It's the blood of Jesus that cleanses from an evil conscience. Therefore, there must be application of the merits of Christ, of the atoning work of Christ, each time there is sin.

We must make application to obtain clearness of conscience. We need to approach God with a pure heart and have our hearts sprinkled so that we can serve the living God. How is that maintained? How is that blood of Jesus applied to the conscience? Well, repentance for one thing.

First John 1.9 says, If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. To forgive us and to cleanse us of that unrighteousness in our conscience. In Proverbs 28.13, it says, He that conceals his sins shall not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them shall find mercy.

It's a good proverb. Proverbs 28.13 Whoever conceals his sin will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes his sin will find mercy. Repentance means you confess it and forsake it.

You turn around. There's also the need at times for restitution. Sometimes you may confess your sin to God and feel like you've repented, but you still don't feel clear.

You don't feel that God has really lifted the barrier that you felt. That condemnation is still there. Well, in many cases, you just need to overcome that feeling.

Because it's just the devil trying to make you continue to feel condemned when God no longer does. But that's not always the case. It may be that you've said the right words and had the right turning of heart, but there's still some unfinished business there that God expects you to take care of.

Remember what Jesus said in Matthew 5. In verse 23 and 24, He said, Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there you remember that your brother has something against you, that's because you've done something wrong to him, and he's holding it against you. And here you are worshipping God, trying to approach God, trying to get your relationship with God squared away, but you and your brother don't have... it's not squared away between you and him. But Jesus said, Leave there your gift before the altar and go your way.

First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. First be reconciled to your brother before you expect to be reconciled to God. Now, what this really amounts to is what the Bible calls restitution.

When certain sins are committed, it does damage to other parties. If you borrow somebody's car and get it in a wreck, and you never replace it or fix it, you've damaged them. They might say, I forgive you, and maybe they indeed do.

And maybe God forgives you. Or maybe God does and they don't. If God does and they don't, then you need to make restitution.

You owe them something. I had a friend who borrowed a book from me once. An old book, actually.

And he brought me back a new one. Because he'd taken mine and done some damage to it, spilled coffee on it or something like that. And he went out and bought a new book.

Another friend of mine borrowed one of my books and lost it in a restaurant. And he didn't get me another one for a long, long time. And I didn't bother him about it, but it bothered his conscience for a long time.

And he just wasn't free about it. And finally, he went out and bought another copy of that book, which was a hard to find book. But he got it and returned it to me.

And I don't have any books out with any of you people, so I'm not hinting here or anything like that. But there's not many things I like less than people borrowing my books and them not coming back. My books are valuable.

It's the only thing of value I own much. Well, I own a few more things than that. But the point is, you damage someone's property, you steal from someone.

You cause them injury of some sort. You repent to God, but they still might have something against you. Jesus said, you better go make it right with them.

Go do what's right by your brother first. And then we'll talk, Jesus said. Restitution.

Zacchaeus, the tax collector, had ripped people off. But when he met Jesus, he stood up and said, I'm going to give half my goods to the poor. And if I've ripped anyone off, I'm

going to restore four times as much as I stole to each one.

And Jesus said, salvation has come to this house today. Because the man was truly repentant. He wanted to make restitution.

There are times when God is quite willing to forgive and, of course, eager to forgive. But he's saying, but you still have a little dirty laundry here that you're not really attending to. You still have some unfinished business here, don't you? I lied to somebody once to protect somebody else's secret.

I'm not a very good liar. And I didn't live with it very well either for about ten years. I always justified it because I said, well, I was sworn to secrecy by this person.

And someone asked me, but I had to keep their secret. But it didn't work. My conscience didn't buy it.

And for many years, occasionally, it would come up to my mind. I lied. I lied.

I lied. I lied. Finally, I had to write a letter to the person I lied to and tell them the truth and straighten that out.

My conscience hasn't bothered me since. But there are times when making restitution for wrong done, making restitution to people, is right. Remember, Paul maintained a conscience clear of offense between God and man.

And between God, God, you clear that up by repentance. You clear it up with man by making restitution, generally speaking. And that's both necessary sometimes.

You also need, and this may surprise some of you, if you want your conscience clear of guilt, you have to forgive others. You cannot be forgiven if you don't forgive others. Now, the way I was raised, that would be heresy.

You know, I mean, someone says that. I would say, well, that means I'm saved by works. God won't forgive me if I don't forgive others.

I have to forgive people. No, I'm saved by grace. But if I have grace, I will forgive.

If I'm not minded to forgive, I don't have grace. Can't be saved by something I don't have. I'm saved by grace.

And grace is a disposition to forgive, among other things. And if you are an unforgiving person and refusing to forgive, that grace is absent. And Jesus, no authority less than Jesus said, you will not be forgiven by God if you don't forgive everyone who's wronged you.

Jesus said, pray this prayer in Matthew 6. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who

have sinned against us. Do you pray it that way? Do you ask God to forgive you in just the same way you forgive everyone else? Would you be pleased if he didn't forgive you any better than that? That's the only way you're authorized to pray. You're authorized to ask God to forgive you just the same way you forgive others.

And if that wasn't enough, just that one line, Jesus made commentary after he closed that prayer. Just so we wouldn't have missed that one point. He says in Matthew 6, verse 14, For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.

But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. That's pretty blunt, pretty straightforward. And Jesus said it again in a parable.

I won't read the whole parable. In Matthew 18, Peter said, how many times do I have to forgive my brother? Seven times? No, 70 times. Seven? Like this guy who owed millions of dollars to his king.

And the king said, pay me what you owe or you're going to be sold into slavery. The man said, have mercy on me. I'll pay you all.

And the king had compassion on him and forgave him the whole debt. And this man went out and he found a fellow servant who owed him some tawdry amount. And said, pay me what you owe.

And his fellow servant said, oh, have mercy on me and I'll pay you eventually. And the man said, no way. And he threw him into debtor's prison.

Now, that's not the end of the story. The king heard about this man's lack of generosity toward his fellow servant. Called him back on the carpet and said, you know, I forgave you that debt.

I changed my mind. I'm not going to be there until you pay me back that whole debt. You're going to jail and you're going to be there until you pay back that whole debt.

Can God change his mind when he forgave you? Now, after Jesus closes that parable, the last line of that parable, which is almost the last line of Matthew 18, is this. He took that servant and delivered him over to the tormentors until he should pay his whole debt. What greater tormentor is there than a conscience that's unrelieved? And yet, Jesus said at the very end, after he closed the parable, he said, So also shall my Heavenly Father do unto you, if you do not from your heart forgive everyone their trespasses, my Father will do the same thing to you, Jesus said, as this king did in the parable.

We better make sure we've got the same God Jesus was talking about instead of the God that modern evangelicalism talks about, because the God Jesus talked about is the one who's going to stand before someday. We're not going to be standing before Jerry

Falwell. And I'm not criticizing Jerry Falwell.

Name any other modern evangelical leader. He's not the guy who's going to decide whether we met the conditions. We're going to stand before the very God that Jesus talked about.

And Jesus said, if you don't forgive, he won't forgive you. Period. Jesus said the same thing in an entirely different setting.

In Mark chapter 11, he said, When you stand, pray and forgive, so that your Heavenly Father may also forgive you your trespasses. But if you do not forgive them in their trespasses, neither will my Father forgive you yours. You can't have a clear conscience before God if there's someone you are not forgiving for something.

Now how do you do that? Well, you do it in your heart first. When you stand, pray and forgive, you do that right from your heart. Even before they repent, or no matter what they do, you forgive them in your heart.

Reconciliation is another matter, and Jesus gives steps for that when he says, if your brother sins against you, go and rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he doesn't repent, you take two witnesses. If that doesn't work, take him before the church.

If that doesn't work, he's a heathen and a republican as far as you're concerned. Jesus gives these procedures for reconciliation, but before the reconciliation procedure is pursued, there's what's in the heart. When you stand, pray and forgive, if you have anything against anyone, Jesus said.

If you don't have enough grace to do that, then you don't have enough grace to be forgiving yourself, according to Jesus, whose gospel it is we're supposed to be preaching and hoping to be saved through. Another thing in dealing with a troubled conscience, especially in the case of either a cauterized conscience or a weak conscience, one that's too sensitive or not sensitive enough, and that is to train the conscience from Scripture. I have known people who say, I just don't feel guilty about living in adultery.

I say, well, I'm very sorry to hear that. Your conscience is out of touch with reality, but the Bible says that's wrong. And if your conscience doesn't tell you that, you better go by the Bible.

Because the Bible is the true arbiter, God's word is the true arbiter of right and wrong. And if our conscience doesn't agree with the Bible, the worse for us, because it is that that we'll be judged by. And if a person's conscience is overly sensitive, that can be corrected too by adequate biblical training.

We read this in Hebrews chapter 5. It says this in verses 13 and 14, the last two verses of Hebrews 5. For everyone that uses milk is unskillful in the word of righteousness, for

he's a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that means mature, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern good and evil. Well, what senses does one exercise to discern good and evil? Not your physical senses, they don't discern good and evil.

It's the conscience that discerns good and evil. The sense of the conscience, the senses of the conscience have to be exercised, have to be developed, have to be trained. How? By reason of use.

Of what? The word of righteousness. The one who uses milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness. The mature person is skilled in the word, is trained in the word, has their conscience, their senses, their spiritual conscience senses, their moral senses we could say, exercised to be able to know what's right and wrong, to discern good and evil.

This is what needs to be done. We need to study the word of God. We need to inform our conscience from the word of God.

Because our conscience has picked up all kinds of ideas about right and wrong from various places, from culture, from school, from television, from the church, from whatever, books we've read, friends we've talked to. We've got a whole bunch of wrong ideas about right and wrong. It's so important to retrain the conscience because it's our best ally in walking with God.

It's our best ally in living a righteous life and maintaining good character and being conscientious people. Now we do need to know the difference between conviction and condemnation. Conviction comes from the Holy Spirit according to John chapter 16.

Jesus said the Holy Spirit will come and He'll convict the world of sin and of righteousness and of judgment. So the Holy Spirit convicts of sin, but the devil wants you to feel condemnation even when you're not guilty. He wants you condemned and alienated from God.

So, what's the difference between conviction and condemnation? Well, if the Holy Spirit is convicting you, A, He'll be specific. Condemnation from the enemy is often very non-specific. You just feel kind of vaguely guilty, but you're not sure what of.

And the reason the devil keeps it vague is he doesn't want you to repent of anything. If you did, you'd get it all squared away. He just wants you to keep feeling guilty.

He just wants your heart to condemn you. Vaguely and not of anything in particular. The Holy Spirit, if He makes you feel guilty, He wants you specifically to repent of it.

And therefore, conviction for the Holy Spirit is always going to be for a specific thing. You know what you did. Condemnation may be specific, but it may also be vague.

And if it's vague, you know it's not the Holy Spirit. The second thing is, if the Holy Spirit is convicting you, that conviction will go away when you get right with God. When you repent and do what He wants you to do, then you won't feel it anymore.

But the condemnation of the devil can hang on forever, if you let it. Because you can get right with God, but the devil doesn't want you to know you're right with God. He can keep hammering you with the condemnation.

So, the difference between conviction and condemnation is, A. Conviction is definitely going to be specific enough to know what you need to repent of. Condemnation might not be. Conviction will go away when you've got things squared away with God.

Condemnation might not. Because that's just the devil's way of keeping you feeling alienated from God. Well, how do we maintain a good conscience? Like Paul said, he exercises himself to maintain a good conscience.

A conscience clear of offense between himself and God and between himself and man. In Acts 24, 16. Well, to maintain a good conscience, you have to be prepared to suffer for conscience sake.

In other words, you're going to have to compromise everything. Your comfort, your luxury, your life even, before you compromise your conscience. If you have a price at which you will compromise your conscience, the devil will probably be willing to pay it.

If you say, well, I won't compromise my conscience unless they've got a gun to my head. I won't compromise my conscience unless I'm really strongly tempted. I won't compromise my conscience unless I'll get rich by doing so.

You know, whatever it is. I will compromise my conscience for this price. The devil will probably pay the price.

He can afford it. But you can't afford to sell it. It says in Proverbs, buy the truth and do not sell it.

Don't sell your integrity for any price. Obtain your integrity and hold on to it and do not sell it. Do not have a price.

Be prepared to suffer rather than violate your conscience. Peter talks to servants who suffer because they are unwilling to violate their conscience and their masters who are evil punish them for it and beat them and in that society could even kill them if they wished. And he says this about it in 1 Peter 2 and verse 19.

He says, For this is commendable or thankworthy if a man for conscience toward God endures grief, suffering, wrongfully. In other words, if for the sake of maintaining your conscience toward God and not violating your conscience, you end up suffering for it,



that's commendable. That's thankworthy.

That's good in the sight of God. You need to be prepared to suffer and resist temptation. There's one thing you'll never surrender and that's your conscience.

Daniel had set in his heart that he would not be defiled with the king's meats. You've got to have it set in your heart. There are things I will not do because they are wrong in the sight of God.

And I don't care what it costs me. I'll die first. I don't usually listen to Dr. Laura because I can't stand her.

But I happened to be driving channel surfing today and caught a few minutes of her. And she happened to be saying in the Jewish religion, which she embraces, she says there's three things that you'd rather die than do. What were they? One was incest, one was murder, and the other was worship idols.

She says in the Jewish faith, she says those are three things you just cannot do. You die first. Well, I'd say the Christian list would have to be longer than that.

Like anything that's displeasing to God, you should be prepared to die rather than displease God. I'm not saying that you're going to go to hell if you do something displeasing to God, but your own heart has got to be committed to your conscience being clear before God to the extent that you'd rather die than sin. Why? Because the Bible does not forbid us to die, but does forbid us to sin.

And therefore, it is wrong to sin. It is not wrong to die. Faithful.

Another thing, we need to walk in the light. As we mentioned earlier, walk in the light. In 1 John 1, 7 through 10, it talks about walking in the light.