

What is the Conscience?

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Preacher: Jon Hueni

[0:00] See if you can solve this riddle. Who am I? Everybody has one. Though I cannot be seen, I
By ignoring me. Who am I? Conscience. Conscience. Today we're beginning a new series on the
study of the conscience.

The Bible has much to say about conscience. It's a very part of who we are as man. And so we just
want to begin with what is the conscience?

What does conscience do? What is this faculty within man? Tell me something that conscience
does. Convicts.

Of what? Of doing wrong. What else does conscience do? Directs.

[1:22] This is right. This is wrong. It points the path. The apostle says the getting and maintaining
of a good conscience is of the utmost of what it means to be a Christian.

In fact, some places, as we'll see later in our study, he would summarize the Christian life as
holding on to faith and a good conscience. That's the summary of the Christian life.

And if you're living the Christian life, then conscience and maintaining it in a good state is no small
part of what Christian life is about.

Well, its word is a compound word. It's made up of two words. To know and with. And so it's this
knowledge that's with us.

That we are this consciousness that we're able to evaluate ourselves. We're able to know about
ourselves. And then. It also.

[2:23] Is a knowledge whereby we distinguish between good and evil. And it prompts us to do the
good and to shun the evil. It commends us when we do well and condemns us when we do bad.

But someone's defined conscience. This way. A court within the heart that passes moral judgments
upon our thoughts and actions.

A court within the heart that passes moral judgments upon our thoughts and actions. It commends
us. For what it commends what it views as good and it condemns what it views as bad.

And it approves what's right and disapproves what's wrong. It defends, accuses, bears witness.

These are courtroom words, aren't they? And so we see that we're talking then about a court within
the heart.

And to begin with, I want us to see that it is something that is within our hearts as man. This moral
consciousness is a function and a faculty of the heart.

[3:38] Turn to 1 Samuel chapter 24. Now the Old Testament did not have one word whereby a
specific word for the word conscience.

When we come to the New Testament we find that word. Now the NIV does use the word
conscience to translate certain passages.

But 1 Samuel 24 and verses 1 to 7. We see David's conscience in action.

Who would read that for us? The first seven verses of 1 Samuel 24. After Saul returned from
pursuing the Philistines, he was told, David is in the desert of En-Gedai.

So Saul took 3,000 chosen men from all Israel and set out to look for David and his men near the
cracks of the wild ghost. He came to the sheep pens along the way.

[4:45] The cave was there and Saul went in to relieve himself. David and his men were far back
in the cave. The men said, This is the very day the Lord spoke of when he said to you, I will give
your enemy into your hands for you to deal with as you wish.

Then David crept up unnoticed and cut off a corner of Saul's robe. Afterward, David was
conscience-stricken for having cut off a corner of his robe.

He said to his men, The Lord forbid that I should do such a thing to my master, the Lord's anointed,
or lift my hand against him, for he is the anointed of the Lord.

With these words, David rebuked his men and did not allow them to attack Saul. And Saul left the cave and went his way. So David no sooner cuts a little piece of Saul's robe than something happened inside of him.

The NIV translates it, David was conscience-stricken. Does anyone have a different translation? And could you just tell us what does verse 5 say? Afterwards, David what?

[6:06] Was troubled? Conscience-stricken? His heart struck him. Any others? Okay, that's more literal of what the Hebrew says.

His heart smote him. His heart struck him. And all I'm doing is wanting you to see that this is his heart. It's said that it's something that happened within his heart. And with all the knowledge that we have of man's heart from the rest of Scripture, our translators realize, well, that's the faculty of function.

That's what strikes us when we think we've done something wrong. And so the NIV translates it, He was conscience-stricken. The heart of David struck him. And we have the same phrase used in 2 Samuel 24.10 when David numbered the fighting men in Israel and knew he wasn't supposed to. And after he had, his heart smote him. He was conscience-stricken. You remember in Acts 2, after Peter on the day of Pentecost preached to those Jerusalem sinners who still had the blood of Jesus on their hands, and he said, you killed the Lord's anointed and he raised him from the dead and exalted him.

And remember, the Bible says something happened in their hearts. What happened to their hearts? They were pricked in their hearts.

[7:35] They were cut in their hearts. That's again an expression of conscience. It was the faculty of conscience that was condemning them. You killed God's anointed, God's Messiah.

So conscience is a faculty and a function of the heart. The heart in the Bible is more often than not, I would say there's very few times when the heart refers to the pumping organ in our bodies. More often it's speaking about the center of behavior, that control panel of our very personality. And so it includes the faculty of the mind as it thinks, the affections as they desire, and the will as it chooses, and the conscience as it approves or disapproves.

All of these functions and faculties are found within the heart. So conscience is within the heart, a court in the heart.

Now, think of it in that terms. I think it will be a helpful memory device as you think about conscience and what it does. Now, we want to see in this courtroom of the heart, there are three things.

[8:52] There are law books lining the walls of this courtroom. And there is a witness up in the witness stand. And thirdly, there's a judge on the bench with his gavel passing judgments.

And all three of these are functions of conscience. So let's consider them one by one. First of all, there's law books in this courtroom of the heart. These are the dictates of conscience.

Now, what role do the books of the law play in a court, in a courtroom, in a physical courtroom in St. Joe County? What role do the law books play in court?

They rule? The standard by which decisions are made? So, yeah, the laws set forth what is expected, what is right, what is wrong.

And in coming to any judgment, a person's behavior has to be seen in light of the law books. Did it measure up? Or didn't it? So, courtrooms are very concerned with the question, what does the law say?

[10:08] And so is conscience. Conscience is very concerned with what does the law say? Now, conscience only works according to the light it has.

And the laws written upon conscience come to us in two ways. Number one, some of them are born, inborn. Some of the laws in conscience were put there when we were born.

Secondly, others are acquired. Other laws are on our conscience because we were taught and instructed. Let's think first of the inborn law.

Turn to Romans chapter 2. Romans 2. And if you notice in verse 11, Paul's speaking about God's judgment.

And verse 16, this will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ as my gospel declares.

[11:23] So he's in a context here about God's righteous judgment. He's not biased. He doesn't take bribes. He can't be bought off. He shows no favoritism.

It's impartial. It's not based on the color of your skin, the amount of money, your education. It's based on truth. And so both Jew and Gentile stand condemned.

The Jews don't get special treatment because, oh, we're Jews. And so the law treats them with some favor. No, the law judges blindly according to right and wrong.

So that's the point. And from chapter 1, 18, all the way to chapter 3, in verse 20, Paul is rounding up like a cowboy all the human race.

And he's bringing them as guilty before God. Jew and Gentile, all of them guilty before God. Now, verse 12 shows us the standard that God is using for judgment.

[12 : 26] What is it from verse 12? What is the standard? The law. The law. The law of God.

The moral law of God. And he speaks of two different categories of people being judged in this verse. Who are they? How does he describe the two groups of people?

Jim? Well, once before the law is that the word and the one after. Okay. He doesn't exactly use before and after. What are the words he uses?

Apart. Apart from and? Under. Under. So, some people are under the law.

Others are apart from the law. There are those who sin apart from law. There are those who sin under the law. Now, who are these?

[13 : 24] And what is this difference about them? Well, the law that some are others, the law that some are under and others are a part of speaks of the outward special revelation of God.

The Jews were under that law. They had received that law. They had the knowledge of the law. And he says that very clearly in this passage. You brag about being a Jew and because you have the law.

So, those are the ones who are under the law. But then he speaks of those who sin apart from the law. Those are the Gentiles. They didn't have the law of God sent to them.

They didn't have prophets sent to them. And so, they're referred to here as those apart from the law. Without law. So, Jews and Gentiles.

Jews were given the law. Gentiles didn't have it. And even today, there are still people who live the whole of their lives apart from the law in that sense. They've never read a Bible.

[14 : 24] They've never had it preached to them. They're apart from law. There's other people, your children, you, who have received the law. And so, we sin under the law.

But, the point is, is that Paul says, we're all condemned. Jew and Gentile. Those who sin apart from the law and those who sin under the law.

They're all condemned and will be punished as transgressors. And the question that rises in our minds, how can that be? How can God condemn people who don't even have His law?

How can God damn heathen who have never heard His law or read the law? And what Paul does is he shows that no one is entirely without the law.

No one is entirely without the law of God. Even these Gentiles who are apart from the written law show that they're not entirely without God's law.

[15 : 25] And they show that when they do some of the things that God's law requires. Notice verse 14. Indeed, when Gentiles who do not have the law do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves even though they do not have the law, the outward law.

So, a totally pagan culture may have a sense of justice within their system. They may be tribal people, they may be uncivilized people, and yet they have a sense of justice.

There are certain things that are right and wrong. They've never seen or heard of the Ten Commandments from God, and yet they have a sense that it's right to honor parents.

And there's an honor system for the aged in their tribe. They have a sense that it's wrong for people to kill my children, to take my wife, to steal my property.

And all of this without ever having heard of the Ten Commandments, where did they get this sense of God's law? What does verse 13 tell us?

[16 : 51] Or verse 14 tell us? By nature. By nature. By what they are, by nature, in the same way that birds fly south for the winter, by nature, so, all men have this inner sense of some of the things that are right and wrong according to God's law, and they show that they have that sense of God's law because they just, by nature, do certain things and don't do certain things that the law of God condemns or requires.

So it's the same moral law as you and I have. Exodus 20, that summary of the moral law, it's the same law. we have it inscribed in scripture, they have it, not in scripture, but stamped on their very

constitution as man.

An inner sense of it. Same law, but in a different form. And we could say as well, a different level of clarity.

We see more clearly what the law of God requires. they have this vague sense that it's wrong to steal, to lie, and so on. So we have it more clearly, we have it in a different form, a written form, they just have this sense stamped upon their heart.

And because they have that upon their very constitution, they have this law, Paul says they are a law for themselves. They are not without the law entirely.

[18:27] They themselves are a law that they are under. Their very being makes them accountable to God's laws and their conscience brings the law to bear upon them even though they have no written law of God.

Now notice verse 15 says, it's a word of cause, the reason, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts.

It doesn't exactly say that the law is written on their hearts, but some of the requirements, of the law are written on their hearts. And it's when they do those things required by God's law, even though they've never read it, that they show that this law is somehow registered and written on their hearts. I was reading last week in Acts, we're right there, you can just turn back the page, Acts 28, Paul is shipwrecked onto the island of Malta.

And you remember, they all arrived safely on shore. Verse 2, the islanders showed us unusual kindness. They built a fire and welcomed us all because it was raining and cold.

[19:43] Verse 3, Paul gathered a pile of brushwood, and as he put it on the fire, a vapor driven out of the heat fastened itself on his hand. When the islanders saw the snake hanging from his hand, they said to each other, this man must be a murderer, for although he escaped from the sea, justice has not allowed him to live.

But Paul shook the snake off into the fire and suffered no ill effects. The people expected him to swell up or suddenly fall dead, but after waiting a long time and seeing nothing unusual happen to him, they changed their minds.

Now they said he's a god. So he went from being a murderer to being a god in just a few moments in their eyes. But the thing that strikes me about this is here are these Maltese pagans without the outward law of God.

They're ignorant, and yet they have a sense that murder is wrong. They have a sense that there is justice operating in God's moral universe.

That even though this guy might have chance to survive the storm and shipwreck, justice prevails. Aha, look, the snake got him.

[20:56] There's justice in the world. These heathen have a sense of justice. They have a sense that it's wrong to murder. And that's why they think he's going to die.

He must be a murderer. Well, let's stand and watch. He's going to swell up and fall over dead any moment now. We've seen these vipers and what they do. And so they have a sense that murder is wrong and it's so wrong that you deserve to die for taking the life of another.

folks, they never once read Genesis 9:6 that he who takes the life of another must have his own life taken. They never read that.

But they had a sense of it. It's wrong to murder. You don't deserve to live is what justice will bring about. It's just a part of their nature as man made in the image of God.

And Paul bumped into some of them there on the island. of Malta. So they too sin against God's laws even though they never heard them from the Bible.

[22:00] And that's why they too will be condemned. That's why all men are herded up and found guilty before God. None are able to give excuse. All are silent.

They recognize their guilt. So these are the law books that line the wall of conscience by which men discern right and wrong.

Now in addition to the inborn law that God stamps on man's moral constitution some people have been instructed further in greater detail upon the laws of God from the Bible and that would be you and your children and many in our country.

You've read it. You've heard it preached. You've had it taught in Sunday school. Parents have taught their children. So their shelves on the walls of conscience are much fuller than the people in Malta and the people in some tribe that have never heard.

Their shelves are full of volumes and pages that others don't have. And so they have a more complete knowledge of what is right and what is wrong.

[23:11] they do not have as many gaps as the pagan does without his Bible. There's greater detail, greater clarity of what God expects and what is the standard.

And the effect of having more light leaves them what? More responsible, more accountable. To him that has much, much will be required.

But they're all condemned. It's just that those that have the law written will have an even greater condemnation. So all have sufficient knowledge of God's law to be condemned for not obeying it. So there's the first thing in this courtroom of the heart, the law books. And then secondly, we noted that in a courtroom there are witnesses in the witness stand.

We notice in verse 15 of Romans 2, their conscience also bearing witness. Their conscience also bearing witness. That's the language of the courtroom of the witness giving his testimony.

[24:20] And Paul often calls upon his own conscience to bear witness. I'm not lying to you, he says. My conscience bears witness that what I'm saying is the truth. What do witnesses do in the courtroom?

What's the role of the witness in the courtroom? You've seen the role of the law books. What does a witness do? Testifies. Testifies? What does he say? Maybe.

What is he supposed to say? Yeah. So what is he supposed to say? He's supposed to say the truth. The truth about what? What he saw. What he heard. What he's experienced of the matter being tried.

He's to give testimony of the relevant facts of the case that he's aware of. So the conscience also bears witness. And it testifies for or against you or even for or against others if your conscience is judging others.

It bears witness. I think the context here is speaking about your own behavior. Now notice the also in verse 15.

[25:28] Their conscience also bearing witness. Now also means along with. So what was the other witness in the courtroom?

All the way around. The laws, right? He's just said that the laws are there. They're informing the court of what is right and wrong.

But that's not the only voice in conscience. There's also this there's this testifying of whether my behavior is in line with those law books. The conscience also bears witness along with this law written in the heart.

The law that the conscience has. So conscience has an eye to the laws of God, what they say, whatever the law of God is that the conscience knows, it has an eye to that law and then bears witness along with it.

It says to us what is right and wrong, and then it testifies as well what we actually did, if it's testifying after the fact, as often in a case of law. But it also weighs in on behavior even before you do it, doesn't it?

[26:43] That's a little different from our courtroom scene, but it's bearing witness to you even before you do something. So you're about to keep that extra change that the mistaken cashier put in your hand, and you realize she gave me a five dollar bill and it should have been a one, and you're thinking of keeping it.

And conscience draws upon the law books that you know about, about what's right and wrong, and it tells you, well, that would be stealing what's not really yours.

Conscience is bearing witness with the law, the law within, that it's wrong. You know it, John, you shouldn't take it, you should return it. Or somebody lays into you with a sharp tongue and cuts you down.

And you're about to give them a piece of your mind and just even the score. And conscience bears witness with what it knows. Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.

You must overcome evil with good. Don't get revenge, my friend. Now, if you have a well informed conscience, you have things like that being said to you. But it may just be a sense that, you know, what I'm about to say would be wrong to say.

[27:57] It's not kind, I just shouldn't say it. Maybe it's just a feeling, a gut feeling in your heart. But conscience is telling you, even before the fact, about right and wrong, isn't it? It's bearing witness.

Depending on many factors, it may be clear and detailed, but in one way or another, it will be saying to us whether that behavior is deemed right or wrong.

wrong. Now, so before we do something, it bears witness. What you're thinking about is wrong, or it can say what you're thinking about is right.

And it bears both witness. It's a bearing witness with the law and how our proposed behavior measures up with the law. Now, this ability to distinguish between right and wrong is not equally clear and detailed in all men, but it's there to some extent in all and can't be denied.

No one is without the law of God in their heart and the light of conscience that joins in to, and all without exception, sin against the law of God.

[29:09] No one lives up to the light that they have. The tribal man in Africa, who only has moral consciousness within of God's law, he breaks the very laws that he knows.

And those who are most taught in the word of God, all come short of the glory of God and so are justly under condemnation. That's his point, Paul's point here in this passage.

Recently, I was listening to a message by a minister who years ago had seen a TV interview with Charles Manson. And of course, the shocking thing about Manson was that he showed no remorse for the murders that he committed that were so gruesome.

And because of this, it was being said of him that he had no conscience. He was a man without conscience. And this pastor was watching the interview, and as the interview went on, Manson was complaining about all the injustices he was receiving in prison.

They're not fair. They're not giving me my rights. They're unjust. against the His rights were being violated.

[30:22] And in accusing the prison warden, he proved he did indeed have a conscience, and it was working just fine. It was able to distinguish this is right, this is wrong, and I'm being treated wrong.

And he screamed about it. He let the cat out of the bag. He did have a sense of right and wrong, and in condemning others for their injustices to him, his own conscience condemned him for his injustices done to others.

If it's not right for him to have his rights violated, he knows it's wrong to have others violated by my treatment of them. Look at Romans 2 and verses 1 to 3.

You, therefore, have no excuse. Romans 2, 1. You who pass judgment on someone else. For at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself because you who pass judgment do the same things.

Now, we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. So when you, a mere man, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment?

[31:37] You see, you, by your critical faculty of judgment are showing to one and to all, I'm able to distinguish right from wrong.

I'm able to see when somebody's rights are being violated. And by condemning others, he condemned himself. You remember the headlines and the signs of people in the streets when they got bin laden and they said, bin laden, go to hell.

And I heard another minister commenting on such signs. Oh, so America does believe in hell after all. That when such wickedness shows itself, we have a sense that there is a hell for such people as that.

There's justice. People get justice. There's a moral government in the world, a moral governor. And interesting that in the heat of the moment, the truth pops out.

We have a sense of right and wrong and of it deserving punishment, yea, even hell. So there's enough of the law of God stamped on all men to condemn us all.

[32:55] This is the law that conscience has on its shelf and draws upon in discerning and testifying to what's right or wrong. So conscience bears witness sometimes beforehand is what we're thinking about doing, but it often bears witness after we do something.

It says what you did was wrong or it assures us that what we did was right. You know, it has a power to draw upon memory of things done long ago.

Have you ever felt your conscience making you guilty about things that you did 40, 50 years ago?

It's amazing the power of conscience.

It's ability to grab hold of a memory and bring back the past and to condemn you over something done in the past. That's part of what it does. It brings it all back with vivid clarity and biting guilt, the testimony of conscience.

So that's the second thing. We have one bearing witness in this courtroom. Law books, a witness, and the third thing is the judge himself. Now, there's some overlap here, but conscience performs all these functions.

[34 : 05] What's the role of the judge in court then? In a court of law, what is the role of the judge? To make a decision. So he's looking at the law books, he's examining all the testimony of the witnesses brought, and then he's crunching it all and deciding guilty or not guilty.

he brings a verdict and renders a judgment. In the same way, conscience in that inner court acts as a judge and pronounces its verdict on what we think and say and want and do.

And it judges our behavior in light of the law that it has, in light of the light of testimony of what has actually happened. And it assigns guilt or innocence.

It condemns or it justifies. Notice the two-fold verdict of conscience in verse 15. We're still in Romans 2 and verse 15. Since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their conscience is also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.

So there's the double judgment. It could be one or the other. The verdict of the judge conscience.

[35 : 32] Accusing, defending. And it's able to do all this just in a fraction of a second. Faster than any computer.

You're just considering doing something and things pop into your head and immediately conscience sorts through all the relevant passages of the law that it knows. And it says, that would be wrong. Or you've already done it and it just, on the spur of the moment, you feel your guilt. It's so quick in its rendering of judgments.

Someone said conscience warns us as a friend before punishing us as a judge. But it does carry that work of a judge. And so it's a tremendous blessing, this faculty of conscience, that we have this inner courtroom within us, a God-implanted voice, if you will.

We ought to thank God then for this built-in warning system. It indeed is a real aid to us in living.

And we'll need to caution and we'll need to give all sorts of further information about conscience.

[36 : 46] But this is where we begin with the blessedness of it. This is the way God created man. It didn't evolve into this. Man came forth from his hand with a conscience.

Now until Genesis 3, conscience only approved. He said everything that Adam did was right. Yeah, you're doing right. You're doing right. But then when he sinned, it also for the first time began to condemn and say, you're guilty.

Now of the two voices of conscience, we're probably more aware of its voice when it says guilty. But it does have the other voice defending us.

And if you're ever been accused by others wrongly, you'll appreciate this voice of conscience. The whole world can be condemning you. But if your conscience within is bearing witness for you, it gives you boldness to stand.

It gives you courage. It keeps you going. But it doesn't matter if the whole world is singing your praises and saying what a wonderful guy you are. If that voice within is saying, John, you are guilty and you know it.

[37 : 50] So conscience has both verdicts and it renders both to us based upon what we've done.

What does a guilty conscience feel like? Anybody want to put that into words? Not good. The flu? Someone said it's better felt than telt. David said it affected his physical health. Bones wasting away.

I feel like your heavy hand is on me. I feel like in the drought of summer, just withered. I've been out in that heat all day. I'm just drained. That's the power of this judge within.

It's enough to rob us of sleep, of joy, of peace, of concentration. It can make us physically sick. It caused Judas to commit suicide.

[38 : 54] It made Felix tremble in fear. As Paul discoursed on righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come, Proverbs 28 says, the wicked man flees though no one pursues.

He's guilty. And so he's paranoid. Paranoia is a result of a guilty conscience. I'm not saying all paranoia, but no doubt much of paranoia in our psychiatric hospitals goes back to this fact that man is guilty and he knows it.

The wicked man flees when no one's pursuing. There's the fear of being found out. Do others know? The work of conscience, tormenting, so much so that criminals who have escaped the long hand of the law have nevertheless turned themselves in, haven't they?

Because they couldn't escape the voice of conscience. And they deemed that a guilty conscience is so tormenting that it's better to live in jail with a good conscience than to be a free man without it.

The power of conscience. Seneca said, he's a pagan, if there were no God to punish me, no devil to torment me, no hell to burn me with, no man to see me, yet I would not sin for the ugliness and filthiness of sin and the grief of my own conscience.

[40 : 20] Just bearing witness to the power of conscience. It's been a great means of grace to make this world a better place to live in, keeping men from acting as wickedly as they otherwise would.

Well, our time's gone. Let me just encourage you as a memory device to think of conscience as the inner courtroom of the heart with the law books, bearing witness, the testament of conscience.

Also, there's witnesses in this courtroom, and there's the judge accusing or condemning. We'll continue our study next week, Lord willing.

We're dismissed.