

The Erroneous Conscience

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[0:00] Last week we began a new series of lessons on the conscience.! Rather than giving a difficult definition of conscience,! I tried to give you more a picture.

What is the picture that we saw that helps us to understand what the conscience is? It's what on the inside? A court. And there's at least three things in the courtroom that we need to see if we would understand the function of conscience in every man.

What's the first one? The law books. Those are the dictates of conscience. Conscience only acts upon the light and knowledge it has.

And so it's those law books that direct conscience. And we found that there is something of the requirements of God's holy law written on every heart. What else is in the courtroom of conscience? The witness. And it bears testimony along with the law books concerning our behavior, whether it's right or wrong. Is it in line with what is good and proper?

[1:13] And so conscience bears witness. And there's one other in the courthouse. And who is it? The judge. Because the judge determines.

He makes moral decisions as to whether our behavior is in line with what's right or whether it's not in line.

And so it either accuses as guilty or else it excuses and appeals for innocence on our behalf. And conscience is able to do this about things done in the past, the distant past even, or about things that we are considering doing in the future.

I'm thinking about doing this. And conscience says, that's wrong, John. Or conscience says, yes, green light. So conscience is given us as a gift of God, a faculty that's put in the heart of all men. I trust we've seen enough to thank God for giving us this faculty of the heart, conscience. That was just the introduction. Now, many of you will remember Jiminy Cricket's advice to Pinocchio.

[2:24] When you get in trouble and you don't know right from wrong, when you meet temptation and the urge is very strong, give a little whistle. Take the straight and narrow path.

And if you start to slide, give a little whistle. Give a little whistle. And always... Let your conscience be there. Okay. There's some.

Fans of Jiminy Cricket. Now put your thinking cap on. What do you think of Jiminy Cricket's theology?

Always let your conscience be your guide. What do you think about that? I see a thumbs down.

Lou. It should be our God.

It should be our God. Be our guide if it conforms to the word of God. That's good, isn't it? That's a thumbs up up here.

[3:28] Is it a faithful saying? Is it right and good and safe to always let your conscience be your guide? Well, are we then to ignore conscience?

Since it's not a sure guide all the time? No. I think there's two extremes to avoid in answering the question.

Thinking too highly of conscience and thinking too lowly of conscience. Now, those who think too highly of conscience would answer our question with an unqualified yes.

Yes. Yes. Always. By all means, let your conscience be your guide. These are the ones who coined the phrase and are its greatest supporters. You can't go wrong if you follow your conscience.

Let your own conscience dictate to you right and wrong. Never mind what anyone else says. Your own conscience is your standard for you of what's right and wrong and what you should do and shouldn't do.

[4:34] It's only wrong if your conscience tells you it's wrong. I just heard a preacher last week imbibing this very thing.

He'd written a book and he was saying, you can always follow your conscience. Always listen to that voice of conscience within and you'll make the right decision. Now, what's wrong with this view?

Lou has given us some direction to answering the question. But what's wrong with the view that we can always let our conscience be our guide? Ed?

Who writes the law books? What are you insinuating by that? Well, if you begin in your illustration with the law books, you have somewhat of the moral law of God knowledgeable to all people.

But we can also twist that to our own culture, our own upbringing. And that's what I mean by the law books.

[5:37] Who is telling us right and wrong? Well, once we buy into that philosophy, belief system, whatever, then that will determine our law books and that will determine our course of action.

Follow that? Okay. Anyone else? What's wrong, Dare? Hmm. So it's not always easy, is it, to tell the difference between even conscience's voice and the voice of emotion, the voice of infatuation, the voice of lust.

There might be other voices that we mistake as conscience or that influence conscience to make a wrong choice. Dan? To take Dare's example one step further, I remember a phrase in a song, when you and I were growing up, I can't remember who's saying it, but it's a phrase, how can it be wrong when it feels so right, referring to it in a premarital sense.

Hmm. We weren't supposed to listen to those songs. All right.

There is some truth in Scripture that this view of conscience is not dealing sufficiently with. It's the T in tulip.

[7:05] Total depravity. What does total depravity need to inform us on this issue? Mark?

Excellent. Remember, total depravity doesn't mean that a man or a woman, a boy or a girl, is bad as she may be.

We're not saying that that's true of all people. They are all as bad as they could be. Total means that the entirety of the person, their total personality, has been affected by sin, away from God, towards sin.

Now, that's true of all the faculties of the heart. What did we see are the faculties of the heart? The mind as it thinks. Are we to trust in our mind? Don't lean on your own understanding, the Bible says. He who trusts in himself is a fool. Are you to trust your affections, your emotions? No. No. They're often set on things that are godless.

What about your will? Is your will untainted by the fall, as some would teach, that it's still neutral and is not? No. It's total depravity. The will is bent on choosing myself and my sin away from choosing God in his way.

[8:14] And so with the conscience, the fourth faculty of the heart, the conscience itself is fallen. It's not neutral. It's depraved.

It has been infected, contaminated by sin. And so it doesn't work perfectly either, any more than the mind works correctly. Look at Titus chapter 1 and verse 15.

Titus 1 and verse 15. Someone read that out loudly for us, please.

To the pure, all things are pure. But to those who are corrupted and do not believe, nothing is pure. In fact, both their minds and consciences are corrupted.

Both their minds and consciences are corrupted, defiled. Whose? Whose minds? Those who do not believe, right?

[9:13] Unbelief. All of us were in unbelief and all of our minds and consciences were defiled, polluted, corrupted by sin. And so the Bible talks about conscience needing to be cleansed, doesn't it?

In Hebrews. What's the one thing that can cleanse conscience? The blood of Jesus, as we'll see in the future. Conscience is filthy and polluted and needs to be clean.

So it didn't somehow avoid the fall. It's not just that the other faculties got infected, but not conscience. No, it too is not now what it once was, as man came from the hand of our Creator.

Now, it still functions just like the mind. The mind still functions, doesn't it? But it's no longer perfectly functioning as it once did in Adam before the fall.

It's now corrupted with every other faculty. Therefore, it's no longer a safe and an infallible guide. It may lead you astray. So R.C. Sproul commenting on Jiminy says, this is good advice.

[10:17] If our conscience is informed and ruled by the word of God. Lou reads R.C. Sproul, doesn't he? However, if our conscience is ignorant of Scripture or has been seared or hardened by repeated sin, then Jiminy Cricket's theology is disastrous.

Those who blindly follow conscience will be sadly misguided. This is too high of a view of conscience. Over reliance on conscience is a guide for what's right and wrong.

But there's another extreme on the other end of things. And they see this and they say, well, see, conscience is fallen. It's depraved. So just ignore it. Now, that may sound more biblical, but it is as erroneous and an extreme to be avoided even as the other.

It undervalues the gift and role of conscience and its benefits even in fallen men. And it perhaps discounts the power of grace in the believer to renew our conscience.

To say to believer and unbeliever alike, never pay attention to your conscience. Now, their major error seems to be in their all-or-nothing approach to the matter.

[11:34] Since conscience is not infallible, therefore, ignore it. Since it's not a perfectly safe guide, therefore, don't have anything to do with it.

Now, what kind of all-or-nothing principle is that to live with? We don't scrap everything, do we, that's not perfect? But, husbands, think if your wives use that principle and there's a scratch on the car.

Ah, we need a new car then. And there's a chip on the china. Oh, it's no good. Get rid of it. We've got to get a new set. There's a water spot on the living room table. We need new furniture.

There's a stain in the carpet. Haul it out. Get new. There's only a few husbands here could afford. A wife who operated on a principle like that. But then we wouldn't be around long either because we're not perfect, would we?

She'd get rid of us. We don't do that with things. That just because they're not perfect, we say there's no good use for them. Now, granted, conscience is more than scratched and stained a little bit.

[12:41] It has some major defects. But so do the other faculties of the heart. So does the mind. And we don't say, therefore, there's no place for the mind in the Christian life.

And even to the unbeliever, we don't say, therefore, forget about using your mind. Does not God himself say, come on, let's reason together. Let's use our minds for a moment.

Let's think some right thoughts instead of your lies. No, we realize the faculties are not what they once were, that they're fallen, and yet we make use of them.

The Bible doesn't say, ignore and don't use your mind. It says, don't lean on your own understanding. But we still are to use our understanding.

So what's the answer? Should we always let our conscience be our guide? Well, the truth lies between these two extremes. Each have something to contribute.

[13:44] And I believe a biblical answer would be this. While conscience cannot always be trusted, it should never be ignored. It cannot always be trusted, but it should never be ignored.

Never blindly followed because it's fallen infallible, yet never ignored because it nevertheless is a guide given still to be considered.

So I would amend Jiminy's jingle in this way. Never blindly followed and never ignored. And we're going to focus more on the never ignored in the future.

But today we'll see more this idea that we're never to blindly follow conscience. So we turn to the scriptures. And as we come to the Bible, we find that the Bible speaks of several different conditions of conscience.

Conscience is not the same in every person. And it's not always the same even in us, the same person. It's not static and unchanging.

[14:52] It's subject to change and development. Just like the human body may be in different conditions. One time sick. Another time healthy. So the conscience may be at one time very sensitive.

And at another time very dull. Or maybe at the same time it's very sensitive to certain issues. But very dull to others. So if we're trying to discern how to treat conscience and what our attitude toward it should be, we'll need first of all to identify what condition our conscience is in.

Not all patients get the same treatment. And each condition of conscience has its own particular needs. We're going to look at five conditions of conscience in this series. This morning, the erroneous conscience.

The erroneous conscience. The erroneous conscience. By which we simply mean that conscience is not always right. It's subject to error. It's sometimes mistaken.

And as Ed pointed out, one of the chief causes of an erring conscience is found in the law books of conscience. The judge of conscience considers the law books to measure our behavior.

[16:08] Now, we saw that in Romans 2. That something of the requirements of the law are written upon the heart.

I believe in Adam and Eve the whole moral law of God was stamped upon their heart. Some of that's been lost. But do you realize that in the new covenant, what is promised is that the law will be written on the heart.

That there's a taking of the sinner in his depraved state and his fallen conscience and redeeming him back to that condition before the fall.

Even better than that, as we'll see. And so there's the writing again in the new covenant of God's law upon the heart. But what we're saying is that in man as fallen, the whole law is not on the heart. They've lost much of that. And so now in fallen conscience, there are some of the pages and volumes and even whole books in the library that are missing.

[17:21] Some shelves have very little on them. And pagan cultures without the written law of God of Scripture have a conscience that may only check the grosser violations of the law.

The more outward sins, stealing and murder, and they know that's wrong, while their conscience leaves untouched. The inward cesspool of sin, of lust and hatred and pride and greed and envy. So fallen conscience suffers from missing information about right and wrong. There's also the problem of wrong information that's been put into the law books.

Bad laws that have been inserted into the books. Contaminated with error. Things taught by parents, by society, by false religions. And conscience is in such a sad state that it may call evil good.

And call good evil. And may put darkness for light and light for darkness. And bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter. It's fallen. And it may make false judgments.

[18:32] It may approve what it should condemn. It may condemn what it should approve. It may fail to warn us when it should. Like a smoke detector that the battery has gone dead.

And so it doesn't warn us when there's fire in the house. It's fitful and inconsistent. Sometimes punishing us for not following some little superstition.

While at the same time permitting the greatest breaches of God's law. John Brown, the Scottish commentator says, When the mind and conscience are defiled, nothing can be pure.

When the light which is in man is darkness, how great is that darkness. Quoting the Savior's words. Now when studying computers in college, I remember we had the cards.

Computers were a different animal in those days. And yet we learned the principle, garbage in, garbage out. And it simply means that whatever you put into the computer is what you're going to get out when you read the results.

[19:36] And if you mess up on the information as you put it in, you're not going to get a true reading coming out. And so it is with conscience. Feed it with erroneous law books.

And its judgment will be erroneous. Because it looks to the law books to make its decisions. Faulty knowledge leads to faulty decisions of conscience. So it may send us the wrong signal.

That's what we're saying this morning. An erroneous conscience. Can you think of examples in scripture when a man was sent a wrong message by conscience?

When he thought he was doing right, when really he was doing wrong. Can you think of anybody that was in that boat? Ed? Jonah, when he was given a direct command from God to go to this place.

He gets there and here's a ship going the opposite direction. And God's good providence, that must be right. All right. He might have had Jiminy Cricket whispering to him, looky there.

[20:38] Yeah. This is the good way. This is the way. Take it. Can you think of anybody else in scripture who thought they were doing right and conscience gave the green light when in reality?

It was sin and wickedness. Paul, the way you say it. In what way? To persevere the church.

Isn't that right? And he did so with a good conscience. He tells us so. What was the erroneous knowledge on the law books of Paul's conscience?

That enabled him to persecute Christians with a good conscience? You have no other God besides me. These people are worshiping a false God.

Okay. What else? What did they have? What did Paul have on the law books of conscience about Jesus of Nazareth? He wasn't the Messiah.

[21 : 45] Therefore, he was a. Impostor. A liar. A blasphemer. Claiming to be God. A man claiming to be God. That's what he had on the law books of conscience.

And so he acted upon conscience. Christianity is a godless cult. And for the glory of God, I will stamp it out.

And conscience said, go get him, Paul. Go get him. Now. Turn to Philippians three. This isn't just. Some of us making this up.

This is what Paul himself testifies in his various letters. And I want to show you that. Philippians three. Verse four. He says that we who belong to Christ have no have have no confidence in the flesh, though.

I myself. Verse four. Have reason for such confidence. And if anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more.

[22 : 54] Now, listen to what he puts on the positive of of conscience. What conscience approved of in the apostle Paul. Here's his good deeds that what he considered as what was right and proper to be done by God.

Verse five. Circumcised on the eighth day of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews in regard to the law of Pharisee. As for zeal, persecuting the church.

As for legalistic righteousness. I was faultless. So persecuting the church was done out of zeal for God.

Do you see that? It was one of his good deeds, something he considered to commend him to God. This is what will give me right standing with God. I persecuted the church.

I was zealous for God. It's not something that he put in the bad column as he was unconverted.

Thought, oh, no. If I get to the judgment, I sure hope that's not seen. No, he hopes that's brought up to God's attention because he thinks that's going to win him points with God.

[24 : 03] First Timothy chapter one and verse 13. Verse 12 says, I thank Christ Jesus, our Lord, who's given me strength that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service.

And then first Timothy one 13. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief.

Paul is telling us when I carried out my acts of violence and persecution against the church, I acted in ignorance. Conscience went to the law books and instead of being rightly informed, I was misinformed.

I was ignorant of the truth and conscience only acts according to the light that it has in its law books. And yet sins of ignorance are still sins.

Sins of ignorance are still sins and contract true guilt before God, even though he was unaware of it.

[25 : 15] Acts 26. He's given his testimony before the. The courts of the land and acts 26.

This is a key passage in verses nine through 11. Before Agrippa.

And Festus and Bernice, Agrippa's wife, he's giving testimony. And he says in verse nine, I, too, was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth.

And that is just what I did in Jerusalem on the authority of the chief priest. I put many of the saints in prison and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them.

Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished. And I tried to force them to blaspheme in my obsession against them. I even went to foreign cities to persecute them.

[26 : 15] Notice he says I, too, was convinced. Literally, he says, I thought with myself. That's a function of conscience.

We are able to think about ourself and our own actions, whether they're right and wrong. I was convinced. My conscience told me that I ought to do that.

You see the word ought that I ought to do. That's a word of duty. That's a word of obligation. The Apostle Paul standing before God with his conscience said, I felt obligated to persecute the church. And that's what I did. My conscience told me. It was my duty. And I acted according to it with religious fervor.

And zeal. All the while thinking he was serving God. You can just jot down if you need to want to. Acts 23, 1. When he's testifying before the Sanhedrin, he says, I've lived in all good conscience before God until this day.

[27:25] I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day. And I believe that goes back to his unconverted days. And he's claiming that he did what he did out of his conscience, a good conscience.

It got him a knuckle sandwich, as you can read in that passage, for claiming such. But even in persecuting the church, he had acted according to conscience, albeit an erroneous conscience. Now over to John chapter 16. Because all of this is just in line with what Jesus said would happen in John chapter 16. And I'm going to jump in at verse 2.

John 16, 2. He's talked about the way the world will persecute Christians because they persecuted him. And he says in verse 2, they will put you out of the synagogue. They'll excommunicate you out of the synagogue.

In fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God. They will do such things because they've not known the Father or me.

[28:29] They're ignorant. And yet they'll think. And their consciences will give approval to what they're saying. They'll think that they are serving God as they kill Christians.

Now that shows us just how faulty conscience may be. That shows us the far end of it, doesn't it? Because it's misinformed, it may call the very worst evil the highest good.

Even the murdering of Jesus. The worst evil. And yet conscience say, go for it. Green light. He's an imposter. And it shows us just how far into sin a man's conscience may lead him.

There may be inadequate knowledge of conscience. Not only faulty knowledge, but inadequate knowledge. Conscience is not omniscient. It doesn't know everything. It only knows what's on the law books.

It only knows what it sees and hears and so on. And so as conscience takes the witness stand and bears witness to the judge, its knowledge of the situation is limited.

[29:37] Though it tells what it knows, it may be lacking some real important facts and so come to a faulty conclusion. In this way, it may give the green light and lead us right into sin. Turn to Genesis 20.

We see a man following his conscience. And he's headed right into sin. In Genesis 20, remember Abraham is down in the region of the Negev.

And he stays in Gerar. And there Abraham says of his sister, or said of his wife, verse 2, Sarah, she is my sister. And then Abimelech, king of Gerar, sent for Sarah and took her.

But God came to Abimelech in a dream one night and said to him, you're as good as dead because of the woman you have taken. She's a married woman. Now Abimelech had not gone near her.

So he said, Lord, will you destroy an innocent nation? Did he not say to me, she's my sister? And didn't she also say, he is my brother? Father, I have done this with a clear conscience and clean hands.

[30:52] Then God said to him in the dream, yes, I know you did this with a clear conscience. And so I have kept you from sinning against me. That's why I did not let you touch her.

Now return the man's wife, for he's a prophet, and he will pray for you and you will live. But if you do not return her, you may be sure that you and all yours will die. So had God not intervened, this man would have committed adultery with Sarah.

That's where he was headed. How is this? And done it all with a clear conscience. How is this possible? Because the testimony of conscience was missing the important fact that though Sarah was indeed the sister of Abraham.

Abraham, the daughter of his father, but not of his mother, she also happened to be his wife. And therefore to have intimate relationships with her would violate the moral law of God that says you shall not commit adultery.

Now did Abimelech's clear conscience clear him of any wrongdoing in this case? Because he had a clear conscience, does that mean he was not guilty? Yes or no?

[32:01] No. How do you know that? And why? Pardon?

His law would have been violated. You see that in verse 6? I have kept you from what? From sinning against me. If you would have done what your conscience told you was okay to do, you would have been sinning against me.

You see how conscience may lead us into sin? Because it's not omniscient and it doesn't have all the facts. It has inadequate knowledge many times. It's not necessarily right to do something just because conscience approved.

And it was such a sin that would have destroyed him. And the context almost makes it sound like it was the whole nation that was going to be judged because of their king's sin.

Are you ready to trust your moral decisions into the hands of your conscience knowing that? No, it's a most dangerous thing to buy into Jiminy theology that says without any qualification, always let your conscience be your guide.

[33 : 10] Saul, the persecutor. Abimelech, the almost adulterer, shows that a clear conscience is no proof or guarantee that the action done is morally right and acceptable to God.

Now, I want you to see in 1 Corinthians 4 one other example. And this time in the life of Paul as a believer, as a believer, conscience is not omniscient.

It's not always a safe guide. It doesn't have the last word. Therefore, to act like it does is to set ourselves up for disaster.

Let me read 1 Corinthians 4. This Paul who persecuted Christians with a clear conscience is now a believer.

And he says in verse 4, so then or chapter 4, verse 1. So then men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. Now, it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.

[34 : 12] I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court. Indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent.

See that again? My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore, judge nothing before the appointed time.

Wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what's hidden in darkness. He'll expose the motives of men's heart. And at that time, each will receive his praise from God. I may examine myself and say, my conscience is clear.

I just did. I just taught that class in a way that ought to be rewarded in the day of judgment. My conscience is clear. There was no sin in it.

And Paul says, oh, no. Any service that we do, your conscience may be clear, but that doesn't make you innocent. Because in the day of judgment, God may find something that your conscience didn't.

[35 : 25] Behind that good deed that you did, he may find down some dark alley of your heart some proud motive. Some self-seeking of praise. Some wickedness.

So, a clear conscience doesn't prove your innocence. Therefore, don't give yourselves over to it as if it's this sure and safe guide.

It may err. And if that's the... And if the fault then is that the law books are inadequate, they're sometimes giving misinformation, what's the cure?

What's the cure then for an erroneous conscience? Pardon? Pardon? The Word. Pack your law books full.

Study this book forwards and backwards, inward and out, so that your law books are lined with the whole counsel of God. That's what Paul says, I proclaim to you the whole counsel of God.

[36 : 32] It's not enough to read the Psalms and selected portions of the Gospels. The whole Word of God must line our law books if we want to be safely led and have our conscience informed.

So make a lifetime study of this book. Memorize it. Meditate upon it. Pour over it so that it's sensitive to the knowledge of what God says is right and wrong.

So that we might amend Jiminy's statement, always let your Bible be your guide. There's safety, isn't there?

Will your Bible ever direct you in a way that you end up sinning? Will it ever misinform you? Will it ever give you the green light when it ought to be a red light? Or a red light when it ought to be a green light?

Never. The right understanding of this book will be a sure and safe guide. And just a word to us about our children. Do you see the precious privilege and opportunity given to us parents?

[37 : 36] That we have our children given to us when there's relatively little in the way of law books on the shelves of their heart and conscience. I didn't say they're a blank slate.

Not in the slightest. God has put something of the requirements of his law. Their conscience is defiled. But we have the privilege of packing those empty shelves full of God's truth.

We have them for that very formative time. And it's so important because a day is coming when they will leave us and they will go out in the world. And the world will tell them good is evil and evil is

good.

And they better have something on the law books of conscience to scream at them. That's not what God says. God says premarital sex is wrong.

God says lying violates his truthfulness. God says stealing is wickedness. God says, you see, what a privilege to have packed those law books.

[38 : 35] And at any moment in their life, God may be pleased to awaken conscience to do its work. And the spirit of God bring conviction where there has been none.

So let's let's lay hold of the word of God for ourselves. This book of the law is to be on your hearts. And then you are to teach it to your children when you're walking by the way, when you're sitting down, when you're rising up, when you're lying down.

Fill their hearts with the truth of God's word. Well, we're we're run over here. Lord, help us as we prepare our hearts to worship him.

We're dismissed.