

The Weak Conscience

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[0:00] Well, we're studying the conscience. If you're visiting with us from one of the other classes, we're studying the conscience, that faculty that God has put within the heart of every human being.

And it's that inner courtroom where there are law books telling us what's right and wrong. There's witness that declares what we've done and what we've thought and what that law is that we're judged by.

And there's a judge in conscience, and conscience judges us and either says guilty or not guilty. Either says this thing is something good or something bad. Flashes a green light, it's okay to do this, or a red light.

No, stop. You shouldn't do that. Conscience, the gift of God. Now, two weeks ago, we scrutinized Jiminy Cricket's theology asking, should we always let our conscience be our guide?

Now, I was kind of hard on Jiminy, and we saw why. And I simply wanted to say that in his favor that Disney now is not what Disney was then.

[1:16] Just to have a movie that was addressing the issues of when you get in trouble and you don't know right from wrong.

When's the last time you've seen a Disney movie talking about right and wrong? When you meet temptation and the urge is very strong. And counseled in such times to take the straight and narrow path.

That's a quote from the Bible in a positive light, isn't it? And so, movies today even deny the categories of right and wrong. And tell our young people just to ignore conscience and just do whatever you feel like doing.

And don't even think of temptation as something to resist, but as some urges to fulfill. And so, I want to say that in favor of Jiminy.

And we'll see that there is a sense in which conscience should always be our guide. We'll see that this morning. But what did we conclude two weeks ago?

[2:24] Is it safe to always let our conscience be our guide? Yes or no? And why not? I'm sorry?

It's affected by the fall. As all the faculties of man, mind as it thinks, affections as they desire, as they love and hate, the will as it chooses.

So the conscience, part of our faculties of the heart, it's defiled. It's not what it once was. So it's imperfect. And it may, in fact, shine a green light when it should be saying red light.

Don't do it. What are some of the sins that a person might stumble into if they're just letting their conscience be their guide? What were two that we saw from Scripture?

How about the Apostle Paul? He let his conscience be his guide and he ended up doing what? Persecuting the church. Killing Christians.

[3:32] With a clear conscience. And if he just let his conscience be his guide, then he'd have blood on his hands. How about King Abimelech?

What did he almost do if he just kept following his clear conscience? Conscience. Sexual immorality. Committing adultery with Sarai.

Conscience. And what was wrong in both those cases? What was wrong with conscience? That it led Paul and Abimelech astray?

Mark? Lack of knowledge. Knowledge. In Paul's case, knowledge of who Jesus is. Who this God is that he thought he was worshiping.

And so because he thought Jesus was a false Messiah, he thought it was okay to kill his followers to the glory of God. And as for Abimelech, he didn't have full knowledge.

[4:37] He only thought Sarah was Abraham's sister. He didn't know that she was his wife. So we can't trust conscience blindly. And so that's kind of what we saw.

Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4.4, My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. You can have a clear conscience and still be as guilty as sin.

So it can't always be our guide. So we were looking then at that fact that conscience can be an error.

It sometimes does send mistaken signals. What's the cure for an erroneous conscience? There? Knowledge of God's Word. We are to educate conscience. We're to inform conscience. We're to make sure that the law books lining the walls of conscience are these 66 books.

[5 : 40] And not only getting conscience informed, but keeping it sensitive to the books, which means we don't just read it once and say, there, okay, I've got my law books filled.

No, we must continue to read so that these things are registering when we're considering doing something. Ah, the law says this. The law says that.

It's there. It speaks with us. It directs us. So we need to get and keep our conscience informed and sensitive to the Word of God.

So the adjustment to Jiminy Cricket's answer would be that conscience is to never be blindly followed, but never ignored.

And we saw last time why we're to never blindly follow it. This morning we're going to see why it should never be ignored. So an erroneous conscience was last time.

[6 : 43] This time we're looking at one form of an erroneous conscience. And it's the weak conscience. The weak conscience. The Bible deals with it specifically as a state, a condition that conscience can be in at times.

And so we're going to give it a lesson on its own. In other words, the weak conscience condemns us when it should approve. It calls that which is good evil.

It gives a red light when it should be giving a green light. It's a weak conscience. Now turn to 1 Corinthians 8.

This is the term that the Holy Spirit gives it in his own word. And we find the Bible dealing with a weak conscience when addressing matters of Christian liberties.

Do I, as a Christian, have liberty, have freedom to do this thing, to be engaged in this activity, to eat this food, whatever the issue may be?

[7 : 54] And it's in that light that we have this discussion of the weak conscience. We're in 1 Corinthians, the first letter to the church of God in Corinth.

And Paul addresses several questions that the church had asked him to make a ruling on. Tell us, in this matter, what's the right way and what's the wrong way?

Evidently, they were having issues among them. And they're saying, we need a ruling. We need somebody to step in and tell us which is right and which is wrong. So they had written to Paul or sent word to Paul, wanting him to weigh in on these issues.

The present question is whether or not it was right to eat food sacrificed to idols. So Paul deals with many of these questions in his letter. And now in chapter 8, this issue.

Is it right to eat food sacrificed to idols? No. Pagan idolatry permeated the social structure in Corinth.

[8 : 57] Many of their public social gatherings, their banquets, their meetings would be held in these temples that were dedicated to their God.

Or their gods, I should say, plural. They may be holding a birthday party for the family. And so they meet. The home's too small, so they ran out the hall.

Well, it was a temple to this God. And as they ate, their gods were pleased as the aroma of the sacrificed food rose up into the nostrils of their gods.

This food was sacrificed to their gods. And then they ate it in his presence. And he was thought to be pleased. And so this turned what was otherwise a non-religious event, even a birthday party perhaps, into a religious sacrifice to their gods.

And much of the food, primarily meat, that was sacrificed to idols, was then sold in the public marketplace. But it wasn't tagged as idol meat.

[10 : 08] And so there was virtually no way of knowing when you went to the meat counter that this food, this steak, had been sacrificed to one of the gods.

Now, it was this idolatrous city that God, in this idolatrous city, God had saved a group of people for himself and formed them into a church.

And in this church, there were two differing peoples, two differing peoples with two different opinions. There were the eaters and the non-eaters. The eaters, as we'll see, are those with a strong conscience.

Their conscience was rightly informed on this issue of eating, sacrificed food. It was informed with the truth, with right knowledge.

Their law books were properly educated on this matter. And they were giving them a right decision. Truth was on their side. And so the eaters seemed to have been the majority of the church and were probably the ones who were requesting a ruling from Paul.

[11:21] At least they're the ones that Paul addresses in this controversy. He speaks to those who have the strong conscience. They felt that their true knowledge on the issue was the only criteria on which to decide their behavior, whether or not to eat or not to eat the sacrificed food.

Well, Paul agrees with their knowledge on the issue, but he says there's another consideration by which to govern their actions. Not only their knowledge of what is right and wrong, in other words, their own conscience of what's right and wrong, but also love toward their brethren, who have a weak conscience, who don't have the right knowledge.

And so if they only let their conscience be their guide, they would sin grievously. Now look at the first six verses. 1 Corinthians 8.

Now about food sacrifice to idols, we know that we all possess knowledge. He's talking about the law books now.

Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know, but the man who loves God is known by God.

[12:44] So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols, we know that an idol is nothing, is nothing at all in the world, and that there is no God but one.

For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords, yet for us there is but one God, the Father from whom all things came, and for whom we live, and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came, and through whom we live.

What is the right knowledge that the strong conscience believers have on this issue? About eating food sacrificed to idols.

What's the knowledge that they have? Jim. Okay. By things that don't exist.

Yeah. Exactly. The knowledge these people had when they went to their law books to see is this right, is that there's just one God. So all this hogwash about being all these other gods behind these idols is nonsense.

[14:16] There aren't any such gods. They don't exist. There's just one. It's our God. And he made everything. So we're free to eat. It's not worshiping any other gods.

There aren't any other gods to worship. That's the knowledge that they had. One God, one Lord. And that's the thing they were drawing upon to determine whether or not it's right to eat.

So if these gods don't exist, then we're not participating in the worship of other gods when we eat meat that's been offered to them because they're not real.

Well, now we meet the brethren in the church who have a weak conscience. These are the non-eaters. And that's what Paul calls them. Those with a weak conscience. Notice verse 7a begins, but not everyone knows this.

Knows what? That there is only one God. And therefore, these other gods behind the idols and behind all this worship is just imaginary.

[15:28] Not everyone knows this. Not everyone in the church at Corinth knew that. He goes on.

Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat such food, they think of it as having been sacrificed to an idol.

And since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. Their minds are still harassed by those superstitious ideas that used to rule them.

for all their lives, they thought of the gods behind their idols. They've not yet shaken off all such thoughts of these gods to where they found their conscience bearing witness with the law books that says, there is but one God.

These things don't exist at all. There's nothing wrong with eating this food. They hadn't grown to that depth. They still felt that eating this food was worshipping false gods.

[16:42] Remember, they'd been born into idolatry. They'd been raised in idolatry. That was all they had known until the gospel came to Corinth. And so, for so long, they had thought of these deities behind their idols.

Now, they're converted to Jesus Christ. But they didn't have all their pagan past sorted out yet. Do you know anything about that? As new believers, not all of your pagan past was sorted out the day you came to trust and receive the Savior.

It was that way in Corinth as well. And they couldn't make, they could not make that separation of food from the idols that it had been sacrificed to.

So their weak conscience says it's wrong, it's wrong, it's wrong to eat food sacrificed to idols.

Conscience sent a red light, a blaring warning.

So that if and when they would eat this food with their weak conscience, their conscience would thereby become defiled and accuse them of having done wrong. And so their conscience would be defiled.

[17:53] Conscience is defiled when you act contrary to its dictates. When it says it's wrong to do and you do it, you defile your conscience. So they said it was wrong to eat.

So who's right? The eaters or the non-eaters? Who is right? Raj?

They're both wrong. You're a negative sort of guy. The law of love trumps everything. Okay.

So Raj says they're both wrong. The weak conscience guys are wrong because there is only one God. But the strong conscience guys are wrong because there is something more than conscience to judge our behavior.

as Roger said the law of love. Now Paul comes down with the eaters as to the truth and the knowledge on this issue.

[19:01] Paul says the eaters have the right knowledge. They're right. There's just one God. Truth is on their side. They're well informed.

Their conscience has got it right. And so he says there's nothing intrinsically wrong with eating food no matter where it's come from and what all has happened to it until it got to your table.

There's nothing wrong with it. Eat it to the glory of God. Nothing intrinsically wrong with eating that food. The conscience that thinks it is intrinsically wrong is a weak conscience.

It's lacking the strength of true knowledge on the matter. But verse 8 says Paul says to them but food does not bring us near to God and we're no worse if we do not eat and no better if we do.

Food has nothing to do with bringing us nearer or farther to God from God. So you guys with a weak conscience need to realize that.

[20:05] That's the truth of the matter. Whether you eat this or don't eat it it's not going to bring you nearer or shove you farther from God. And so just as the eaters are about to whoop it up as a victory Paul has a further word for the strong.

Verse 9 Be careful however you strong conscience men and women that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak.

So just because your conscience is rightly informed and tells you there's nothing wrong with eating this food that does not make it okay for you to eat.

Does it? That's what he's telling them. There are other matters besides your own conscience to take into consideration like causing your brother with a weak conscience to stumble.

Verse 10 For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge eating in an idol's temple won't he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols?

[21:08] And we might envision the strong guys saying what's wrong with that? Good for him the sooner he gets over his hang-ups about eating the better. That's not how Paul sees it.

No. Your conscience is strong with right knowledge on the law books that it's okay to eat this sacrificed food so when you eat it's not sin. But if your brother with his weak conscience without the knowledge that you have if he sees you eat and thereby is encouraged himself to eat even though his conscience tells him it's wrong he sins.

He sins. So when this happens two sins occur. One on the part of the strong conscience man and one on the part of the weak conscience man.

they both lose. Roger said they're both wrong. They both sin when this happens. Let's look at the sins of the two. Let's look first at the sin involved in the strong conscience man.

What was the sin of the strong conscience man? Well your example emboldened and encouraged him to do something that he otherwise never would do which is to sin or to act in violation of his own

conscience.

[22 : 32] To eat what was sacrificed to idols. Your example led him to just ignore his conscience. Even though my conscience says it's wrong. I saw so and so godly brother in Christ do it.

So I'm going to do it. And when I by my example encourage my brother to violate his conscience, I am sinning.

Nothing could be clearer. verse 11. So this weak brother for whom Christ died is destroyed by your knowledge.

When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again so that I will not cause him to fall.

To wound their weak conscience is to sin a double sin. It's to sin against them and to sin against Christ. You can't sin against Christ's people without sinning against him.

[23 : 44] Whatever you do to his people, he regards as having been done to him, whether that's good or evil. And that's what Paul's saying. So again, what we're seeing is that conscience cannot be blindly followed.

It's not a sufficient guide. Even if my conscience tells me it's okay to do this. There's nothing wrong with eating meat sacrificed. That alone is not sufficient to go ahead.

There are other considerations by which to order our conduct besides our conscience and its right knowledge. And Roger hit it on the head. One of the other things that must order our behavior is the law of love.

And that's why he began this whole discussion right there. Didn't he in verse two? Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. So you're boasting that you've got knowledge on your side, that it's okay to eat.

But you don't have love on your side if you go ahead and eat and cause your brother to sin against his conscience. love. It's a violation of the law of love.

[24 : 55] So what I do does not just depend upon the voice of my conscience, but also upon the weak conscience of my brother who's in my presence.

And someone might say, well, that's cramping. doesn't that mean that my conscience is being bound by something other than the word of God?

I thought conscience is only to be bound by God's word. And now aren't you telling me, no, I'm bound by my brother's conscience? No, your conscience is not being bound by them.

Your conscience remains free and strong. You know that it's not sinful to eat. you're going to God's word and that's all that binds your conscience.

So you know that eating is not wrong. Just because their conscience is bothered, it doesn't mean that your conscience should be bothered too.

[25 : 59] Oh, you mean there might be something wrong with there might be these gods and there might be. No, no. You know it's nothing. But if by a deliberate choice of your will you choose to limit but it's so your conscience is not bound but you limit its expression.

Your conscience is still free and strong but you limit its expression so as to not sin against your brother. Your refraining is not because your conscience condemns you and says, oh, this is wrong, this action of eating food, sacrifice, idols.

No, you refrain for love's sake. So love limits the expression of your strong and free conscience. It's God who's telling you to do so.

It's God's law that says don't cause your brother to stumble. So your conscience is still tied only to God's word and God says even though there's nothing intrinsically wrong with eating, I'm telling you there is a lot wrong with eating if it causes your brother to stumble.

So your conscience is still being led by God. So that's the sin of the strong man. Do we understand the strong conscience man's sin? If he eats to the stumbling of his brother, it's sin.

[27 : 19] Sin against him, sin against Jesus. There's a second sin involved when this happens and it's the sin of the weak conscience man. Now, from verses 9 to 13, I want you to notice the verbs, maybe participles, I'm not sure, but especially the verbs of what is it that my eating would cause my brother with a weak conscience to do?

There's about five or six different words. Let's start with verse 9. What does my eating cause him to do? Stumble.

How about verse 10? Emboldens him to eat what his conscience tells him is wrong.

Verse 11. What does my eating do? Destroys the weaker man.

Verse 12. Verse 12. You wound his weak conscience. And verse 13 has two of them.

[28:42] Well, yeah, verse 13. To fall. We cause him to fall and to fall into sin.

Stumble, embolden him, destroy him, wound him, trip him into sin. So you see what's sinful. What is the sin of the weaker conscience man in this point?

It is not simply eating the sacrificed meat. He thinks it's wrong, but it isn't. His sin is not something intrinsically wrong with eating this meat.

It's not. There's nothing intrinsically wrong with that. That's not the sin involved here. What is the sin involved? He violated his conscience.

He ate when his conscience said, don't eat. Conscience put up the red light and he drove right through the intersection. That's the sin of the weaker brother.

[29:47] You see it? It's always a sin to violate your conscience. That's where Jiminy Cricket got it right. always let your conscience be your guide if it's condemning you.

If it's saying don't, you must always heed it. True or false? And in our post-Christian world, this may sound really out there, but 1 Corinthians 8, true or false?

something might be right for one man with a strong conscience that is wrong, the very same thing is wrong for a man with a weak conscience.

True or false? True. Doesn't that sound a lot like post-modernism? This is truth for you and this is truth for me and it's right for you, but it's maybe wrong for you, but it's right for me.

that's a bunch of nonsense. There is one standard of truth and that's God's word, but God's word tells us, we're reading God's word here and God's word tells us that a strong conscience can do in certain instances what a weak conscience cannot do without sinning.

[31:13] So the weak must not follow the example of the strong unless his own conscience has been made strong. until he's convinced in his own mind that according to the law of God this is right to do then he can eat and not stumble then he can eat and not fall into sin.

True or false you may sin by doing something that is intrinsically okay to do. Why is that true?

Give me an example or why is that true? you may sin by doing something that is intrinsically okay to do. Jim? Okay so for the strong man it's okay to eat but if it causes someone to stumble it's wrong to do what is intrinsically right to do.

But how about the weak conscience man? Can he sin by doing something that is intrinsically okay to do? What is it?

Violating his conscience. So it's okay to eat food sacrificed to idols. There aren't such things as any other gods but if I think there are and I think that this is somehow involving me in other god worship and my conscience tells me so then I sin when I eat a piece of meat.

[32:47] isn't the word of god clear? Does it not sort us out and help us to think right? Martin Luther was on trial before emperors and the church at Rome for his writings and there were his books all stacked up there on the table and he was being called upon to renounce them and behind it all is the threat of his life if he doesn't.

Remember Luther's famous quote unless I am convinced by scripture and plain he didn't come to this easy he asked for a whole night to think about it and he came forth the next day unless I am convinced by scripture and plain reason reason from the scriptures I do not accept the authority of popes and councils for they have contradicted each other my conscience is captive to you know Luther's quote the word of God great quote my conscience is captive to the word of God I cannot and I will not recant anything for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe so here I stand I can do no other so help me God to go against conscience is neither right nor safe now the other major passage that affirms this same point is found in Romans 14 we don't have time this morning to turn to it but again the same point is is being made if anyone regards something as unclean then for him it is unclean if his conscience tells him yeah we might as well turn there just real quick Romans 14 if his conscience verse 14 chapter 14 as one who's in the Lord Jesus I'm fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself but if anyone regards something as unclean then for him it is unclean what makes it unclean his own conscience that would condemn him if it's wrong so if conscience is wrong says it's wrong then for you it is wrong even though there is nothing wrong with it because you don't know that you still think it is wrong verse 15 if your brother is distressed because of what you eat you are no longer acting in love do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died if Christ so loved that brother that he denied himself even unto death for him

are you so lacking in love that you will not deny yourself a beef sandwich in this situation for the sake of your brother for whom Christ died verse 20 do not destroy the work of God your brother for the sake of food all food is clean but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble it's better not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything else that will cause your brother to fall so verse 22 whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and

God but the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats because his eating is not from faith and everything that does not come from faith is sin in this passage faith is conviction what I believe is right and wrong whatever is not done by faith and belief in what's right and wrong is sin whatever does not come from a good conscience is sin so we sin when we violate conscience doing what it says we shouldn't do so should we always let our conscience be our guide no we should never blindly follow conscience for it may indeed error and there are other things to consider besides just my conscience yet it should never be ignored to ignore conscience is sinful according to Luther it's neither right nor safe now tell me what's so dangerous about violating conscience that to do so would be sin in

God's book even if the thing is okay in and of itself so there's nothing wrong with eating this food and my conscience tells me it's wrong why is it so dangerous why does Luther say it's not safe ever to violate conscience Steve each time you okay excellent we'll get into that state because that's a whole state of conscience as well insensitive conscience a dull conscience a seared conscience callous conscience what else is wrong that's excellent what else is so wrong about it Mike an informed conscience okay good in other words if you violate your conscience you are being willing to do what you think

[38:27] God says not to do that's dangerous anytime you do what you think God doesn't want you to do you're showing that I am willing to trample on God's commands even though you don't know that it's a command yet in your mind you think God says you shouldn't do this that's why conscience is telling you you think God says it's wrong and if you sin against conscience you show that you're willing to go through a red light when God says don't and that's dangerous as Mike says because there's no end to then if you'll step across what you think God says maybe the next time it will be conscience will be rightly informed and will be telling you don't do it it's wrong God says it and if you're used to just doing what you want and violating conscience!

indeed Paul talks about many who have shipwrecked the faith by losing a clear conscience it's no small thing to live in violation against conscience it shows our willingness to sin against God and whenever we John Calvin said whenever we take a step in opposition to conscience we are on the high road to ruin take that seriously brothers and sisters that's what leads to shipwrecking the faith neither safe nor right dab me the dictates of conscience must always be obeyed or sin ensues when conscience says no you must always follow it even when their dictates are wrong yes because you don't know that yet if your conscience says it's right it may be okay but don't blindly follow it there's other factors to check with but whenever it says don't whenever it says it's wrong you must always obey your conscience any questions about the weak conscience all right Lord has given us this conscience let's keep it tender let's inform it that's why one reason we're here today to let the word of God just fill our hearts and minds to let it dwell in us richly we might have an informed conscience but then that we might learn to love each other so much that we would set aside the expression of our liberties when it's in their better interest to do so let's pray thank you Lord for such clear words to the church at Corinth of old we pray you would help us to see how this applies in our day to our issues and give us then to know the truth as it is in Jesus and to know the love that dwelt so fully and dwells so fully in him bless our day together then we ask in Jesus name amen