

The Oversensitive Conscience

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[0:00] Studying the conscience, and last week it was the weak conscience, from 1 Corinthians chapter 8. What was the issue in the church? To what or not to what? To eat or not to eat? The food sacrificed to idols.

That was the question. Some said yes, some said no. Those that said no were not to eat. Paul said they had what kind of a conscience? Pardon? A weak conscience. Weak in what sense? Well, weak in that it's not properly informed. Weak in that it doesn't have the knowledge of the truth. What was the knowledge of the truth that the weak conscience doesn't have on his law books? There is no other God. Our God is the only God. And therefore, all these other gods that are sacrificed to, they're nothings.

So, eating meat does not involve you in worshipping other gods. You're free to eat because of the right knowledge of reality. One God, these things are nothings. So, they had the knowledge, the right knowledge on their law books.

[1:20] But why is it not enough for those with a properly informed conscience to always let their conscience be their guide in this instance? Why is that not enough? Somebody remember?

Conscience can't always be trusted. And in this case, what would have conscience led them to do that was so bad?

If that's all they checked. Is it okay to eat meat offered to idols? Conscience says, yep, go for it. Because there is no such thing as another God. What would have it led them into? What kind of sin?

Okay. Sin. Not in eating the food that had been sacrificed to idols. That's not a sin.

But the sin would be to cause my brother to stumble. Not a small thing. He could be destroyed because of that. He could... What is so serious about going against conscience?

[2:23] Well, it shows you're willing to sin against God. Even when conscience is wrong. Yet, you don't know it's wrong. And conscience says, that is wrong, John. You can't do that without sinning against God.

And if I violate conscience, I say, I don't care what God says. I'm going to do it anyway. That's a very dangerous thing to do. So, if you, by your eating, encourage your brother who says in his own conscience, I think that's sin.

But, oh, Pastor John, look at him. I guess I can do this. And he does it because I'm doing it rather than listening to his own conscience in the matter.

He has sinned. And I have sinned if I have in some way encouraged him to violate his conscience. True or false?

If my conscience tells me doing something is wrong, then for me it would be sinful to do it. Whether the thing in and of itself was wrong.

[3:32] True. It would be sinful. What would my sin be? Eating meat? No, that's not sin. I think it is. But in eating the meat, I would not be sinning because I'm eating meat that had been offered to idols.

I'm sinning because why? Good. I'm doing something that I think God doesn't want me to do.

So, I'm violating my conscience. And that in itself is sinful. The man who doubts, has doubts of conscience, is condemned if he eats, Romans 14, 23, because his eating is not from faith.

And everything that does not come from faith is sin. There the idea of faith is the idea of conviction.

The one who eats, even though he has doubts of conscience that say it's wrong to eat, is condemned if he eats because his eating is not from conviction.

It's not from faith that looks to God and says, God's got the smile on. This means I can do this and please God. And anything that I do that's not of faith in God's approval is sinful.

[4:49] Even though the thing that I'm doing may not be sinful in and of itself. So, that's where Jiminy Cricket is right. If conscience is saying it's wrong, you are to always let your conscience be your guide.

You're to never violate it. But when conscience says there's nothing wrong with eating, that's not the only green light we require for our guidance in life.

There are other matters that we must consult. One of them, will it cause my brother to stumble? And there's a whole group of other questions.

If we've got time afterwards, we'll look at some of those questions that we need to ask to make sure before we go ahead and do it. Even if conscience is saying green light, green light, we can't just go yet.

There are other green lights. We've got to have them all green before we proceed in our behavior. So, what's the cure for a weak conscience? So, I've got a weak conscience.

[5:57] And it tells me eating this meat offered to sacrifice idols is wrong. What's the cure for me? God's Word.

I need to re-educate conscience so that it's not responding wrongly to life. But in the meantime, while I'm re-educating conscience, what am I to be doing with regard to the issue?

Following my conscience. So, there may be a period of time where I will not be eating meat because I can't do it with a clean conscience. I can't do it with a clear conscience.

I still have too much baggage from the past that thinks that if I eat that, I am in some way doing honor to those gods. And I haven't got enough knowledge on my law books to be set free from that scruple of conscience.

So, while I'm studying Scripture and while I'm seeking to fill my mind with God's truth, I will not eat. I will never eat until I can do it with a clear conscience and say, I now know that's not wrong.

[7:13] And I can enjoy that unto the glory of God. So, even while you wait, don't go against your conscience. Don't do it because somebody else is doing it.

That's not enough. That's still sin. And follow the warnings of conscience now even as you seek to rightly inform your conscience. You know, your conscience wasn't educated overnight.

You may have grown up where that thing was said to be wrong for years and years and years.

Don't expect that just with one Bible verse, your conscience will be re-educated.

It may take not only one Bible verse, but it may take that soaking down in to your conscience to where you can finally do it with a clear conscience.

And that may take you some time. Be patient. Wait. But slowly, but surely, the truth will unravel the bands that held your conscience captive to some human authority or tradition.

[8:18] It's the truth that sets you free. Sets you free from a weak conscience. Well, we come this morning to the next condition of conscience, what I'm calling the oversensitive conscience.

The old writers called it an over-scrupulous conscience. We don't talk too much about scruples anymore. We talk more about sensitivity, don't we? We like that word.

So I'm calling it an oversensitive conscience. In one sense, a weak conscience is a subset of the oversensitive conscience. It cries foul when there's really no foul.

And that's what an oversensitive conscience is. It's not a healthy conscience. Now, a healthy condition of conscience is to get and keep my conscience very sensitive to sin.

Can't get too sensitive there. But an oversensitive conscience not only condemns sin, but it also condemns things that are not sinful.

[9:33] It's always crying foul. It's accusing when it should excuse. And an oversensitive conscience can be a real nuisance. It's like that Sprinkler system at the office.

It's there for good reason. It's sensitive to heat and smoke and it may save a lot of files, important information, and even the building in case of a fire.

But if the controls are set too sensitively, what may be an office birthday party with a few candles is going to turn into a group shower. Right? It's oversensitive.

And the very slightest smoke even, it's set off. And much trouble. Maybe it's a watchdog and you've got burglars seem to be hitting your neighbor.

So you buy a watchdog and you want him to come and bark at night when the burglars are sneaking in your windows. But you find that your mutt not only barks at burglars, but at the moon and the stars and spiders and shadows.

[10:50] He's oversensitive. And he turns out to be a noisome nuisance to you. That's the way an oversensitive conscience is. It's barking about things that it should not bark about.

And that's the condition of conscience we're studying today. An oversensitive, over-scrupulous conscience. Now, what's the cause of such a conscience?

I think we need to start with the enemy of our souls, Satan. If he cannot damn us, he would at least steal our joy along the way to heaven.

Joyless Christians, at least Christians with long faces, are bad advertisements for the gospel. He loves that. So, the evil one is out to steal our joy.

And he can do that by stirring up all kinds of scruples of conscience, troubling our conscience about all sorts of innocent actions to make religion a tedious and troublesome bore, a burden, a heavy yoke.

[12:04] And so he disturbs our mind when it shouldn't be disturbed. He would disable us from other duties and doing them with joy. And so we travel to heaven with a doubting conscience rather than with joy and confidence along the way.

He loves to stir up scruples about many things indifferent that would torment our conscience and steal from us the rightful use of many of God's good gifts that he's given to us to richly enjoy.

It's interesting that when Paul warns Timothy about men who teach that it's wrong to get married forbidding marriage 1 Timothy 4 and forbidding certain foods from being eaten.

He calls them doctrines of demons doesn't he? These things come from the evil one who's out to rob us of the good gifts that God has given us. Marriage and all foods that God has given to be richly enjoyed.

and it would make the Christian go heavily to heaven. Our Lord's yoke is easy. He said so. His burden is light.

[13:18] His law is liberty. His service is absolute freedom. His ways are ways of pleasantness and all his paths are peace. That's the truth. But Satan chafes under Christ's yoke and he wants people to do the same.

So I do believe that very often the devil has a huge part in an oversensitive conscience. But there are other secondary causes. And for the Corinthians why didn't they eat of that meat?

It would have been enjoyable to. Well it was their long standing habits and beliefs from their past life. And so long eating meat sacrificed to idols was a part of their actual worship of idols that now it's hard to separate the two.

Eating this meat seems to always be attached to worshiping these other gods and so they can't enjoy the meat. They think it would defile them spiritually.

So there may be things that are in and of themselves okay but because of their close association with past habits of sin during our unconverted days our conscience is crying it's wrong John it's wrong.

[14:28] So that may be one cause for an oversensitive conscience but perhaps a more common cause for a weak conscience or for an oversensitive conscience is letting your conscience be bound by the traditions and commandments of men.

The traditions and commandments of men where human traditions and human regulations are given divine authority and bind your conscience maybe you grew up in a home where your parents and or your church told you for as long as you can remember that to drink any alcoholic beverage is a violation of God's will it is sinful and that became ingrained upon your law books of conscience so whenever that issue came up you went to the law books and it said it's sinful it's sinful it's sinful recently I was talking to an unchurched and untaught man about sin and he had no qualms about confessing I'm a sinner I know I'm a sinner I have a few beers every now and then that was it he had upon his conscience he hadn't been to church for years and decades and yet he had upon his law books that drinking a beer is sin now what do the scriptures say

I can't find any place in the bible that says drinking alcohol in and of itself is something evil in fact Jesus did it that should settle the matter it does say clearly that getting drunk is sinful yet this is registered in many consciences as a sin conscience is condemning when it ought to be approving many other such man-made regulations have been ingrained in conscience forbidding much that is okay now a prime example of an over scrupulous conscience was the Jews of the first century I'm talking about the Jews of Jesus days on the earth you take an average Jew and you walk into his conscience and you examine the law books and you will find tons of things on his law books that

say this is a law that says it is wrong to do this and that and you'll find far more things on his law books that are the commandments of men than that are the commandments of God that was the way it is the way it was

Matthew 15 is Jesus verses 8 and 9 is Jesus commentary on the religion of his day and he quotes from Isaiah 29 and he says their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men that was the summary of the religion of the day the good guys of the day the spiritual leaders of Israel that their whole religious system was made up only of rules taught by men the Pharisees had added so many man-made rules that the real laws of God were buried and obscured turn to Matthew 23 and verse 23 we're looking at an over scrupulous conscience an over sensitive conscience that barks when it shouldn't that accuses and condemns when it shouldn't and the

Pharisees were such who had such consciences and taught other men's consciences as well and Jesus meets them head on in verse 23 of Matthew 23 woe to you teachers of the law and Pharisees you hypocrites you give a tenth of your spices mint dill and cumin but you have neglected the more important matters of the law like justice mercy and faithfulness you should have practiced the latter without neglecting the former you blind guides nothing worse than a blind guide you strain out a gnat but swallow a camel isn't that a beautiful picture you've got a drink and you're concerned about the little gnats around the edge while you chug down a camel with all of his hump no problem wow [19:11] Jesus has the word pictures and we need these you're very careful and fastidious and over scrupulous about many little things so that they wouldn't even go out and take a few mint leaves for some tea without putting one over into the Lord's pile now I do believe a tithe is biblical but I don't believe that the Lord was wanting us to be so bound up that we can't do anything without being that fastidious about it are you kidding me!

leaves well yes we are to tithe and I believe Jesus says we are to do not only the latter but without neglecting the former but it's this preoccupation with minutia that characterized the Pharisees even some things that God had not commanded and yet at the same time they ignored more important things that he had commanded and it teaches us that conscience at the very same time can be very sensitive to little things and very insensitive to the big things do you remember the Jewish leaders and how scrupulous they were about not defiling themselves by going into a Gentile's house they didn't even go into Pilate's palace but made him come out to them well what was the reason they even wanted to talk with

Pilate that day do you remember what were they wanting to get done murder Jesus an innocent man a man they knew was innocent that they had to hire false testimonies to condemn him no scruples about murder but scruples about if I go into this Gentile's house somehow I'll get his defilement upon me what a what a straining of gnats while swallowing camels like murder you set aside the commandments of God by your own traditions he says in Mark chapter 7 remember the Pharisees they come and they see that Jesus disciples are eating food without washing their hands first and they weren't just dirty hands that needed to be washed for hygiene it was it was a religious ritual that they had come up with that before eating you might have bumped into a Gentile with that finger and therefore you've got defilement on your fingers and if you touch that apple and eat the apple well defilement will come into your body and will make you unclean and unfit for God so they're all bent out of shape why don't your disciples wash they say the Pharisees and Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing holding to the tradition of the elders and they observe many other such traditions and they show that those traditions were binding in their view your disciples are sinning by not washing why is that so they took what was a tradition and they made it to bind upon the conscience of men a right and wrong thing and Jesus says you have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your tradition remember the command is honor your father and your mother and you've got this silly tradition that if your parents are needy and need some money that you don't have to give it if you call that gift Corbin a gift to God then that money doesn't have to be spent for your mom and dad who are in dire need and so by your silly tradition you undo you nullify the command of God you swallow a camel like the fifth command think nothing of it and you're playing around with your little tradition Corbin and it's in that passage that Jesus says don't you know it's nothing outside a man that enters in that makes a man unclean you got the arrow going backwards man it's what's inside a man that comes out and makes him clean because inside he's got murder and adultery and envy and bitterness and pride and every wickedness inside you don't get spiritually defiled by bumping into a gentile you get spiritually defiled from that heart of yours as it wells up into your life so consciences were finely

tuned to the law books of tradition such that they barely heard the commands of God even the ten commandments that were so clearly laid down in the scriptures it seems like for every command of God they had absolutized their own applications and made a binding list of things that they could that could not be done in order that they be sure not to break the command of God and their own devisings actually diminished and nullified

[24:51] God's commands now that's not something only found in Pharisees of Judaism of Jesus day we find it in Colossae perhaps from the ascetics handle not taste not touch not the source of such rules was human human commands and teachings we see it in our own day Roman Catholics say that eating meat on Fridays is wrong can you show me chapter and verse where that's the case no they say it's wrong for a priest to marry can you show me a place in scripture where God says that his ministers are not to marry no it's not just Roman Catholic thing there are several groups that impose the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament the dietary laws even after

Jesus made clear that all foods are clean the Amish say one horsepower is okay but 350 under the hood is sinful and many other such traditions sinful where do we find such things in scriptures many Protestant churches teach that certain things are sinful alcohol and movies and cards and they absolutize their own applications of true biblical principles making it binding law for others so for instance I come to a text like Ephesians 5:3 but among you we know how the Gentiles are but among you you Christians there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality or of any kind of impurity or greed because these things are improper for

God's people that's a command of God that's not tradition and in working out that principle I may conclude that for me that forbids internet use but if I absolutize that application that personal application from a biblical principle and biblical command and start preaching from the pulpit that therefore it is wrong for you to use the internet well I have just made my own personal thoughts binding upon you I've played lord of your conscience and there is one law giver who is able to save and to destroy and his name is not John Heaney now I may say to you whatever tempts you to sin and causes you to fall must be mercilessly eradicated from your life and

I am on preaching ground when I say that because Jesus said if anything causes you to stumble cut it out gouge out your right eye if that causes you to stumble it would be better to go into heaven with one eye than to go into hell with two that is teaching radical surgery of anything that causes us to stumble Hebrews 12:1 let us therefore throw off every sin or let us throw off every hindrance anything that hinders us and the sin that so easily entangles folks there's more than just things that are out and out sinful that entangle us in the Christian race there's a host of other things and we're to get rid of both and the race get rid of those as well as sin and so I say make no provision for the flesh Romans 13:14 don't buy groceries for the flesh as

J. Adams says if you have repeatedly fallen to internet porn and things you shouldn't be looking at or reading these are powerful words of God that you must deal with and you must come to some conclusion about your own life and your responsibility to God to keep your eyes pure and your mind pure but it would be wrong for you to absolutize your your specific application of those principles and to make it a one size fits all therefore nobody at Grace Fellowship should be using the internet now an oversensitive conscience then sometimes it's due to our past life and sin and we attach certain things to other things and we have scruples about it other times it's because of the traditions and commandments of men what hides often what often hides behind an oversensitive conscience this is an interesting study to me you've got this person with an oversensitive conscience there are often big bugbears hiding behind an oversensitive conscience

[30:12] I'm going to mention three guilt hypocrisy and self righteousness guilt an oversensitive conscience is often a guilty conscience and so a guilty conscience will strain at gnats in order to hide the camel that's gnawing at him to deflect the interest away from the sin that's causing the real guilt and he deflects to the little gnats around him so Jesus and his disciples are eating Mary comes in takes an alabaster jar of perfume pours it on the Lord a year's wages Judas says that's wrong Mary you're wasting that could have been sold and given to the poor Judas has got a very sensitive conscience about wasting money so it seems but what's behind that scrupulous conscience that overly scrupulous conscience what does the Bible tell us he said that not because he had any concern for the poor but because he was what keeper of the bag and was helping himself to it so he's got a guilty conscience gnawing at him he's stealing from the

Lord's treasury and so he deflects it's one of the strategies of a guilty conscience to deflect the interest away from the real problem and to deal with these minutiae and things around us and

pointing out other people's errors it could even be a way of making amends for their sin and their guilt a form of penance a payback a punishing of self so so I'm very careful about I go way overboard in carefulness and not doing not allowing myself to do all these things that are okay because I'm punishing myself because I have sinned against God I've broken one of his commandments something else often that hides behind an oversensitive conscience in Matthew 23 if you're still there what's the repeated charge that Jesus has for the scribes and Pharisees in chapter 23 he calls them what hypocrites six if not seven times you hypocrites also in Matthew 15 you hypocrites you worship me in vain your teachings are but rules taught by men so an over scrupulous concern about little matters may very well be a sign of hypocrisy a cover up making me look better than what I really am when we see preoccupation on little man made rules picky moral policemen look for swallowed camels in the stomach I was speaking of this with a pastor recently who told me of a lady in his congregation didn't tell me her name thousands miles away or hundreds of miles away but she was ever so concerned about a host of little tangential issues and that was controlling her and it was causing trouble in the church and she had strong convictions on these very lesser matters and over scrupulous conscience and she could be very judgmental of others if they did not keep her shibboleths so it caused problems obviously in the relationships and she ended up going for biblical counseling a tremendous boon and blessing and she came to see her huge camel behind all these little gnats she was a very controlling person to her husband to her children to her pastor to church people even such that her older children wanted to put distance between them and her and she came to see it and there was redemption and there was there there's there's there's much hope but you see behind this this facade of fastidiousness out here was a camel and a control freak and it was ruining her relationships well the bible shows us such things it could be guilt it could be hypocrisy

I'm not saying it always is but very often behind this over scrupulous conscience you have that or it may be self righteousness you see because the law of God condemns us and leaves us all coming short therefore we either own what we are and come and receive free forgiveness from God the righteousness of Jesus or we try to establish our own righteousness isn't that what Romans 10 condemns the Jews of doing so we can't high jump eight feet we can't we can't love our enemies we can't turn the other cheek we can't go the second mile we can't get rid of this bitterness in our hearts we can't get rid of this revengeful hateful spirit and so what do we do well we just put the bar down here we can't step right over them we just we talk about minutia little commandments picky little things about external behavior while the camel of heart sins goes untouched but we can feel good about ourselves before God so the sixth commandment just means

I haven't stabbed my neighbor in the back with a real knife Jesus says no no you just brought the bar down you know what that sixth commandment means it means when you hate your brother you've committed murder in your heart that's the very thing that leads to murder you've broken the sixth commandment and you just put the bar down on the seventh commandment I've not been to bed with my neighbor's wife and so I'm clean on the seventh commandment I've got some righteousness to show to God Jesus says no when you looked at your neighbor's wife with lust you broke the commandment because it's that lust that leads to the outward breaking of the command and you you find letting your yes be yes and your no no that's too hard I mean that would bind me to my word after all I'd have to live up to what I said and so you come up with all these excuses that bring the bar down well I had my fingers crossed when I promised or I swore by the how's it go [37:17] I swore by the gold in the temple but I didn't swear by the gold in the temple I only swore by the temple not by the gold so my my oath is not binding and in so many ways you see that the Pharisees were putting the bar down to a doable deal and thereby establishing righteousness before God God well what's the cure for an oversensitive conscience again it's get your conscience informed by the word of God but it's also refuse to let your conscience be bound by the traditions and commandments of men you can receive suggestions helpful hints advice but conscience is to be bound to God's word alone no preacher no human authority has the right to bind your conscience with man's ideas when the highest authority in the Roman church commanded Martin Luther to recant he stubbornly refused and said my conscience is captive to the word of

God he was following Galatians 5:1 that says it is for freedom that Christ has set us free stand firm then and do not let yourselves be burdened again by the yoke of slavery do you know that one of the reasons Jesus died on the cross is to set you free from bondage to men bondage to men's rules this is so important that our confession of faith has a whole chapter on it chapter 21 Christian liberty

and liberty of conscience and it tells how Christ has purchased for all believers a liberty in the gospel and all the things that we're free from and one of them is the!

God alone is Lord of the conscience he has set it free from all obligation to receive or obey any such doctrines or demands of men as are in any respect in opposition to his word or not contained in it indeed to believe and obey such doctrines and demands is tantamount to a betrayal of true liberty of conscience it is against all reason and nothing less than the destruction of liberty of conscience when men demand of their fellows an implicit faith in other words an absolute and blind obedience that's to be given to God alone and so there are people and there are men who seek to lord it over you and seek to control you and seek to bind your conscience with their own standards and lay guilt trips on any who do not conform that is an assault on your precious liberty

Jesus died to set you free from that don't you dare let somebody take that freedom away from you that's the word of Christ I died to give you that freedom now don't give it up remember during the cold war the bumper sticker better dead than red that's somebody that appreciated the freedom that our country has we're not just going to sell out what costs so much I like that and we ought to have such bumper stickers in our hearts did Jesus die to set me free from the bondage of men and better dead than to be bound again by the commands and traditions of men don't sell that freedom don't give it up don't let it be taken that would place yourself back under the bondage that Jesus set you free from well our time is gone let's enjoy the freedom of Christ and worship him in spirit and in truth today as we have his word we're dismissed