

**My Conscience Bears Me Witness:
The Clashing of Consciences (1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1)**

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on June 30, 2019

Introduction

- ❖ As many of you know, we're in a sermon series that's focused on the conscience. We're trying to develop a biblical theology of the conscience – of that voice in your head that tells you right from wrong. Since we've started this series, my wife and I have been noticing talk of the conscience in all kinds of places. We saw Toy Story 4 last weekend, and there Woody was teaching Buzz about following your inner voice – about listening to your conscience.
 - Now in humorous fashion, Buzz confused his inner voice with the prerecorded messages inside him, triggered by the buttons on his suit. **It's silly, but it reflects the reality that we're all generally confused when it comes to the conscience.** And it helps to shed as much light and clarity on the issue. Based on good conversations I've had with some of you, it's clear to me that further clarification is needed.

- ❖ **For example, one important clarification is to say that the inner voice is *not* the Holy Spirit's voice.** Your conscience is part of you. It's *your* inner voice, and it testifies (bears witness) to the truthfulness of God and the rightness of his law. That's why we've been calling it God's witness in your soul.
 - **It's important to distinguish the conscience from the Holy Spirit because this topic is not just relevant for Christians.** Everyone has a conscience. So you can appeal to their inner voice when talking to those who aren't Christians – who don't have the Spirit in them. Unless they're a true sociopath, everyone has a conscience that will prick and prod, that will accuse or excuse, that will comfort or convict. **The conscience is part of the image of God in all of us.** Now if you *are* a Christian and you have the Spirit, then be grateful that he's there to help calibrate your conscience and to use it to accuse or excuse you of wrongdoing.

- ❖ And that leads to another clarification – **the conscience really only deals with the category of right and wrong.** Its job is *not* to help you make decisions about what school to apply for; who you should marry; whether you should take that position; or which investment to choose. That's the job of Spirit-led, biblical wisdom. **The conscience has only two speeds – right or wrong, guilty or not guilty, black or white.** It doesn't handle shades of grey very well. It'll either accuse you or excuse you. So if you're consulting your conscience to make a decision, make sure it's one that deals with right or wrong. If you're looking for advice on how to choose between good, better, and best – don't look to your conscience.
 - The conscience deals with good or bad, right or wrong. It sounds straightforward and simple enough. But of course, we know it's far from that. **Issues of conscience are complicated because – even though we each have only two speeds – we have different interpretations of the speed limit.** Meaning that we all have different interpretations of what's right and wrong.

- ❖ So that leads to this morning's topic. We want to talk about what happens when our consciences clash. **What do we do when we don't agree on issues of right and wrong – especially within a Christian community?** There are a number of issues that well-meaning Christians disagree on – even within our church!

- ❖ Consider some examples. Recently we studied the Ten Commandments and considered the question of whether Christians are still obligated to observe the Sabbath. Our consciences could also clash about whether a Christian can vote for this candidate or support that political party. Or whether it's right or wrong to attend that same-sex wedding or to call that person by their preferred name or pronoun. Or maybe it's a question if Christians should play poker or vacation in Vegas or drink alcohol or smoke or get a tattoo. Or maybe our consciences clash on whether we should vaccinate our children or celebrate Halloween or homeschool our kids.
- ❖ Now if any of those issues caught your attention and you're thinking, "How is that controversial? It's obvious what's right. Of course, a Christian should..." – well that just shows how much we need to talk about this. **The fact is your conscience of what's right and wrong won't necessarily match with other Christians, even with those in this room.**
 - So if we want to maintain the unity of the Spirit in our church, then we need a robust theology of the conscience that allows for us to respectfully disagree when our consciences don't match up. So what I'd like to do this morning is to walk through a passage in 1 Corinthians 10 that deals with clashing consciences, and I'll draw out four considerations regarding the conscience.

Consider what kind of conscience you have

- ❖ The first point is this: We need to consider what kind of conscience we have. According to the Apostle Paul, it could be either a weak or strong conscience. This is the kind of language he used in 1 Corinthians. **In this morning's passage, Paul is addressing the issue of eating food that has been sacrificed to idols.**
 - Now this might sound irrelevant to us, but it was a very pressing issue for the Corinthian church because. In fact, they were the ones raising this issue in a previous letter they wrote to Paul. Starting in chapter 7, he begins to address some of their issues. When you see the phrase "*now concerning*" (like in chapter 7:1 or 8:1), that signals that Paul is responding to a matter they brought up in their letter.
- ❖ Now our passage, chapter 10:23-11:1, is actually part of a larger unit starting in chapter 8. If you look at 8:1, it says, "*Now concerning food offered to idols.*" That's the main issue here, but from the text, we can identify two sub-issues that are related but distinct. **Both had to do with eating food (meat, in particular) that had previously been offered up in a sacrifice to a pagan idol (to some Greek god or goddess).** Only a portion of the animal was used in the sacrifice. The rest of it was still fit for consumption. So most temples had a side business where they functioned like a butcher shop.
 - Now remember, the Corinthian church was comprised mostly of Gentiles, so the majority of them were converted out of these pagan religions, and they likely grew up buying their meat from these temple markets. **So one controversial issue had to do with whether it was right or wrong for Christians to still shop at these temple markets** – since the meat was associated with idol worship. Apparently there were some who thought it was totally fine, while others considered it idolatrous and wrong.

- ❖ Now there's a second sub-issue here. **Back then, it was also common for trade guilds to conduct feasts at these temples.** A dining hall was typically attached to the temple, where people would eat together after sacrifices were made and the extra meat was prepared for a feast. And likewise, a number of these Corinthians, before conversion, would've attended these temple feasts as part of their work. If you're a mason, it's normal to attend the feast put on by the masonry guild. To avoid it could cost you future business and business connections.
 - **So there was another controversy regarding whether it was right or wrong to attend these temple feasts and eat food offered to idols** – specifically in the context of a temple where idol worship was taking place.

- ❖ **Now if you look at chapter 8:1-3, apparently there were those in the church still going to these temple feasts, and they were justifying their behavior based on their Christian knowledge.** Now that they're Christians, they know better. They know these idols aren't real. They know there's no such thing as Apollo or Athena. There's only one true God and his name is Jesus. So while their pagan friends consider the feast a form of worship – to them, it's just a good meal and perhaps a witnessing opportunity.
 - How does Paul respond? Well initially, he acknowledges that they're right. That idols are nothing. Look at v4, *“Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “an idol has no real existence,” and that “there is no God but one.”*

- ❖ **So Paul agrees that idols are non-entities. So eating food sacrificed to idols should be a non-issue.** He even goes on in v7 to describe those who don't hold this position as having weak consciences. *“However, not all possess this knowledge. But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. ⁸Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do.”*

- ❖ **So Paul has a category for Christians with weak consciences, and by inference there are those with strong consciences.** Now at first glance, it seems like Paul is using these labels of weak and strong to make value judgments – declaring some Christians to be better or more spiritual than others.
 - But that doesn't fit with the context of the letter. **The problem in 1 Corinthians is that – those who wrote the previous letter to Paul – they saw themselves as more spiritual than others, and Paul was confronting their arrogance (4:6; 5:2).** He's clearly not siding with the stronger. If anything, he's trying to rebuke them.

- ❖ So when Paul speaks of those with a weak conscience, he's not insulting them. By weak, he just means the individual's conscience is easily wounded (cf. 8:12). It's hypersensitive to right and wrong, particularly when it comes to eating food previously offered to idols.
 - To have a **weak conscience**, according to Paul, means your position is theologically uninformed. You don't possess knowledge on this point (8:7). **And that's why your conscience is restricting you.** It's telling you it would be wrong or sinful to partake.

- ❖ So let me choose an example where I think we'd probably all be on the same page. **Let's imagine a Christian whose conscience tells him it's wrong to drink coffee.** Why? Because coffee is a stimulant with addictive qualities. And Paul says in chapter 6:12 that all things are lawful for me but I will not be dominated or mastered by anything. So this hypothetical brother concludes that it would be disobedient to partake of anything that's addictive – that could have mastery over you.
 - That would be an example, in our opinion, of a weak conscience. We would say he's interpreting the text out of context and misapplying it to coffee drinking. And that a more theologically informed position would permit you. **It doesn't mean Christians who drink coffee are better or smarter or more spiritual.** It just means your conscience is stronger on this issue and wouldn't be wounded if you saw someone drink coffee or if you did it.

- ❖ So to have a **strong conscience** on a particular issue simply means that your position is theologically informed. Like those Corinthians writing Paul, you possess some knowledge that frees you to partake in this or that activity. Because you see it as either morally good or neutral. That's what makes it a strong conscience.

- ❖ So let's summarize the difference: **Those with weaker consciences tend to have very sensitive consciences** – that some would argue are too strict and too easily wounded or offended. **While those with stronger consciences tend to have less sensitive consciences** – that some would argue are too loose and too callous or lenient.

- ❖ **The point is that if you find yourself in a situation where your conscience is clashing with someone else's, you've got to consider what kind of conscience you have.** Of course, we all naturally assume we have the strong conscience. But that's because we're still treating these terms as a value judgment – as if one is better than the other. **But Paul just means that one conscience tends to feel more restricted from doing things (the weak), while the other conscience feels more free (the strong).** It's not about one being spiritually better than the other. Either kind of conscience has room to grow and has need for correction.

Consider how your conscience may need calibration

- ❖ And that leads to our second consideration. We need to consider how our conscience – whether it's weak or strong – may need some calibration. It may need correction. Maybe my conscience is too strict or too loose. Just like how you need to calibrate a scale that's off and constantly giving a wrong reading – you might need to calibrate your conscience.
 - **Weaker consciences – that are too strict and burdened by so many rules – may need to subtract some convictions.** That's what Paul would say to the Christian whose conscience says it's a sin to eat meat sold by a temple. He would suggest that some things need to be subtracted from that conscience, starting with this restrictive stance towards eating meat from the meat market – even if it was previously sacrificed to an idol.

- ❖ Listen to chapter 10:25, "*Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience.*" In other words, don't let your conscience be bothered by this. And he gives the same advice, in v27, if you're a guest in someone's home. "*If one of the unbelievers invites you to dinner and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience.*"
 - He's not saying don't ask where the meat came from because ignorance is bliss. No, Paul's saying it truly doesn't matter. And he already gave the reason why in v26, "*For, 'The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof'*", which is a quote from Psalm 24:1. His point is that we're free to enjoy meat regardless of where it came (whether the temple or the ranch) because it all comes from our Creator. **So, some of us have to consider the very real possibility that we're stricter than God. That we have more rules in our conscience than God does in his Word.**

- ❖ But then there are Christians whose consciences are stronger – as in rarely bothered – mainly because their consciences are more informed by the Word. **But even so, there's a possibility that even strong consciences are missing some important biblical convictions and are being too lenient and tolerant towards sin.** We may need to add some convictions.
 - Paul made this argument prior to our text. It's related to the second sub-issue mentioned earlier – **about eating sacrificed food in the context of a temple feast.** That, Paul says, is just wrong and spiritually dangerous. Even if you possess the knowledge that idols aren't real, you should still avoid anything associated with idolatry because demons, who are very real, are behind all idols.
 - Look at chapter 10:19, "*¹⁹What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? ²⁰No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. ²¹You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.*"

- ❖ Just as participating in the Lord's Table fellowships you with Christ and his people, participating in a temple feast fellowships you with the devil and his demons. So eating meat sacrificed to idols is in itself permissible. It's neither good nor bad. Like Paul said, "*We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do.*" (8:8) **But in certain scenarios, an activity that is morally neutral in itself could, in that context, violate Scripture and be wrong for Christians.** Eating in a temple feast dedicated to an idol is one of those scenarios, and those Corinthians needed to add that conviction to their consciences.

- ❖ Let me offer a more contemporary example. I realize someone's conscience may say that Christians shouldn't drink alcohol at all. **But even for those with stronger consciences that free them to drink in moderation, they still need to recognize, that in certain situations, drinking would be wrong.** If you were drinking underage or if it led to drunkenness, then the same activity, that was permissible, becomes prohibited in that particular context.

- ❖ Those with stronger consciences on drinking should do some reflection here. **Those who feel liberated to drink without raising any questions of conscience are, at the same time, at risk of being too lenient towards situations of drunkenness.** Do you often find yourself excusing your behavior by telling people, "I wasn't drunk. I was just buzzed."?
 - Let's be clear: I'm not trying to bind your conscience if you believe you're free in Christ to drink alcohol with thankfulness. But at least be open to the possibility that your conscience may be too loose in this area, and you've been tolerating drunkenness in yourself or your Christian friends.

- ❖ **But again, the point is that – whether your conscience is weak or strong on an issue – you have to keep going back to Scripture to see what it says or doesn't say about that issue.** You don't want your conscience to be stricter or looser than Scripture. So calibrate using the Word of God.

Consider how your conscience may lead you to sin against another

- ❖ Let's turn to our third consideration when consciences clash. Consider how your conscience – whether weak or strong – may lead you to sin against another who holds a different conscience. Weak and strong consciences have different tendencies in harming the other.

- ❖ **Those with weak consciences that restrict them and prick them quite frequently – their tendency is to grow judgmental.** To denounce other Christians for being ungodly or going too liberal. We see Paul alluding to this tendency of weak consciences in chapter 10:30.
 - Starting in v29, he questions why we would allow someone else's conscience determine my liberty – what I believe we're free to do and enjoy in Christ. *"For why should my liberty be determined by someone else's conscience? ³⁰If I partake with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of that for which I give thanks?"*
 - **So there's a tendency among those with stricter, weaker consciences to denounce and judge those with looser, stronger consciences.** If you always find yourself in a situation where you're aghast at how the Christians around you can be so worldly and not care as much about holiness as you – consider the possibility that maybe the problem doesn't lie so much in them but in you.

- ❖ **But at the same time, those with strong consciences have their own sinful tendencies to deal with. Their tendency is to grow arrogant.** To look down on those with weaker consciences. We think we know better since our positions are more theologically informed.
 - It's important to point out that Paul's primary audience in these chapters are those with strong consciences, and he's basically calling them unloving and puffed up with arrogance. Listen to chapter 8:1. *"Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that all of us possess knowledge." This "knowledge" puffs up, but love builds up.*
 - **Sure, those with stronger consciences may know better – we know it's not a sin, it's not in the Bible, it's not an issue of right or wrong – but does that theological knowledge help us love better?** That's more important.

- ❖ But unfortunately, as Paul points out, Christians with strong consciences have a tendency towards arrogance. “Thank God that I’m not like those hyper-conservative Christians. That I’m not such a prude or so uptight and narrow-minded.” **If any thought remotely similar to that is often in your head, then your strong conscience could very well have developed a spiritually prideful attitude.** You might know better, but you’re not loving better.

Consider the fullest extent of our Christian freedom

- ❖ That leads to our fourth and final consideration when consciences clash. This is directed specifically towards those with stronger consciences: We should consider the fullest extent of our Christian freedom.
 - Paul already said the Corinthians can eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any questions of conscience (10:25). And your liberty shouldn’t be determined by someone else’s conscience (10:29). **So that means as a Christian – whose conscience is informed by Scripture and submitted to its authority – you’re free to follow your conscience.** You’re free in Christ. You have freedom in Christ.

- ❖ **But is that a freedom to do whatever I want and nobody can judge me?** No, that was the attitude of these Corinthians that Paul was trying to correct. In v23, he quotes what the Corinthians had previously written in their letter, “*All things are lawful.*” That’s their words. They’re arguing that have knowledge. They have freedom in Christ. And as long as you’re not dealing with something that violates Scripture, then all things are lawful.
 - Paul’s response is to show them how that understanding of Christian freedom is short-sighted and basically selfish. It fails to appreciate the full extent of our freedom in Christ. Listen to vv23-24, ““*All things are lawful,*” *but not all things are helpful.* “*All things are lawful,*” *but not all things build up. Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor.*” **So according to Paul, Christian freedom is not a focus on what you’re free to do as you see fit – but on what frees you to build up others and do them good.**

- ❖ **When we think about this idea of having Christian freedom, we assume it means a freedom from being judged by others.** I’m free to live according to my conscience – without you judging me – so long as I’m not violating Scripture or sinning.
 - But that falls so short of what it means to be free in Christ. **It doesn’t mean you’re free to seek your own good – to do whatever you want so long as it is not a sin.** Christ didn’t die for your sins to free you to live a self-centered life where you use your freedom to serve yourself.
 - That was our condition *before* he died for us. We were all born enslaved to sin and selfishness. **Without Christ, we’re *not* free to seek the good of others because of our selfish bent.** But if you turn to Jesus and receive him by faith, the enslaving power of sin is broken and you’re truly free! **True Christian freedom means I’m finally free to act in whatever way is needed to build up others – even if it means limiting or laying down my freedom.**

- ❖ Paul goes on to illustrate this idea starting in v27, “*27If one of the unbelievers invites you to dinner and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience. 28But if someone says to you, “This has been offered in sacrifice,” then do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience – 29I do not mean your conscience, but his.*”
 - If Paul were in that situation and someone with a weak conscience was at the dinner table – if that person would be offended or might stumble in the faith by seeing Paul eat food offered to idols – then Paul would gladly pass the plate and skip the dish.
 - He's not changing his own convictions. Paul's conscience on the issue is going to stay the same. He still thinks there's nothing wrong with eating the meat. **But for the good of his neighbor and for the sake of that guy's conscience, Paul will lay down his rights to build up another person's faith.**

- ❖ So if you think your conscience is fairly strong and it rarely bothers you – because you've studied Scripture and you know the issue is not a sin – that's good. Enjoy whatever it is with thankfulness to the Lord.
 - **But part what it means to live in Christian community – to be in fellowship with other church members – is to recognize that your conscience on certain issues may be different than others.** And your response to those with the weaker consciences should *not* be, “Hey, they just need to loosen up and subtract that from their conscience. They need to be more theologically informed like us.”
 - Unless you're discipling them and have deep enough of a relationship where you can help them calibrate their weak conscience, then your responsibility is *not* to correct them. **But rather out of love for your fellow brother or sister, your responsibility is to lay down your own freedoms to build them up.**

- ❖ **Friends, what's even more important than having a strong conscience is having a considerate, selfless heart that prioritizes the good of others and the glory of God.** That's basically what Paul says in vv31-33, “*31So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. 32Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, 33just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved.*”
 - Here's another way to say that: **Being free in Christ is not about what you're freed to do – but what frees you to build up others. It's not about your freedom to do whatever you want – but magnifying God's glory in whatever you do.**

- ❖ If your stance on a particular issue is theologically informed and your conscience is clean, then do what you do with a thankful heart to God. **But if God's glory is better served by you abstaining from certain things for the sake of others, then do so cheerfully.**
 - Knowing that when you limit your freedom for the glory of God, you demonstrate that God is far better than anything in this world. That's why you're willing to give it up to better love and build up others.

- ❖ **This is the fullest extent of Christian freedom. It's when we place Christian charity over Christian freedom – for the sake of others.** This is the example Christ left for us. He limited his divine freedom. He laid down his divine rights. He emptied himself by taking the form of a servant and humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Phil 2:7-8) – so that he could better love and build up others. So that he could atone for sins and achieve our salvation.

- ❖ In chapter 11:1, Paul says, “*Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.*” **Because Jesus laid down his freedoms, his rights, even his life – Paul had no problem laying down his own, as he seeks the advantage of many, as he seeks their salvation.**
 - Can we say the same? Are we those who imitate Paul and imitate Christ? Or are we those who insist that we have certain freedoms and rights and people should stop judging us?
 - Church, be thankful that you are free in Christ. But even more so, be humble and loving, knowing that your freedom from sin is what enables you to freely lay down your freedoms for the good of others.