

**My Conscience Bears Me Witness:
The Danger of a Seared Conscience (1 Timothy 1:18-20)**
Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on June 16, 2019

Introduction

- ❖ Last week we started a new sermon series on the conscience. **We introduced this concept of the conscience as God's witness in every soul.** It's based on the biblical assumption that everyone is a sinner. That our hearts have been corrupted by sin. We have sinned against God and against each other – by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have no excuse. **We can't say we didn't know what was right or wrong.** Why? Because the moral demands of God's Law have been written on our hearts, and our consciences confirm the reality of our guilt and the rightness of God's judgment.
 - **When your conscience is working properly, it won't let you get away with anything.** It'll make you feel its presence. It'll testify to the fact that you're doing something wrong. Now I know you don't like the feeling of a guilty conscience. None of us do. **But like I mentioned last week, the ability to feel a guilty conscience is an unforeseen gift – just like the ability to feel pain.**

- ❖ All of us are naturally pain-averse. **If we could have it our way, we'd never feel pain again.** To never hurt, to never suffer. I used to think that way. That is, until I learned about this rare genetic condition where certain individuals are **born without the ability to feel physical pain.** I watched this TV show about these young children who were discovered to have this condition. My first thought was to think, "That's so cool." That's like a mutant ability. You could be a superhero.
 - But then the show went on about how this is an extremely dangerous condition, especially for kids. This poor toddler was always biting her fingers raw. Her tongue was destroyed because she would chew it like gum. She'd break her leg and keep playing as if nothing happen. She could be touching a hot stove and not even know it. **So while we think of it as a blessing to never hurt again, for these parents and these kids, it was a curse. They would have welcomed the ability to feel pain.**

- ❖ **In the same way, we should welcome the prodding and pricking of a properly functioning conscience.** It's when your conscience has grown cold and silent – when it's no longer speaking to you, telling you you're in the wrong – that's when you should be worried.
 - The conscience is a tender thing. If you keep ignoring it and neglecting it – if you keep abusing it and going against it – it'll grow numb and callous. It'll desensitize and no longer work the way it was meant to. It'll no longer be able to warn you when you're faced with the true dangers of sin and judgment.

- ❖ **This morning we're going to talk about what happens if you don't take care of your conscience – if you don't take care to listen to it.** We're going to be looking at 1 Timothy 1:18-20. We'll start by considering what's at stake if we continually neglect our conscience. We'll look at **(a) the danger of shipwrecking the faith.** Then we have to ask: How does one arrive at a point where there's a strong possibility of shipwrecking their faith? We'll consider **(b) the damage one inflicts by rejecting your conscience.** And lastly we'll look at what we can do to **(c) discipline ourselves into cultivating a good conscience.**

The Danger of Shipwrecking the Faith

- ❖ Let's start by recognizing the danger of shipwrecking the faith. This is a concept that the Apostle Paul alludes to in his First Letter to Timothy. He's writing to the young pastor of the church in Ephesus. **He's warning Timothy of false teachers who have crept into the fledgling church and are threatening to destroy the faith of many.**
 - Chapter 1 begins with this warning (1:3) and ends with Paul recounting his own conversion testimony in vv12-16. I think the story of Paul's dramatic conversion is so familiar to many of us that we often take it for granted. **We forget how unthinkable it was for the early Church – that the chief adversary of the Christian faith had become its chief advocate.** What a powerful testimony! That a man with such a tragic beginning could have such a marvelous ending to his story.

- ❖ **But Paul's story runs in sharp contrast to that of two other men, Hymenaeus and Alexander (v20).** Hymenaeus and Alexander were most likely pastors in the church of Ephesus since they apparently had the authority to teach. Paul says later in the letter that the teaching authority of the church was a responsibility of pastors/elders (2:12; 3:2; 5:17). Well they had that authority to teach – an authority they were abusing. Paul says in v19 that these two pastors had made shipwreck of their faith.
 - Let's read this starting in v18, *“¹⁸This charge I entrust to you, Timothy, my child, in accordance with the prophecies previously made about you, that by them you may wage the good warfare, ¹⁹holding faith and a good conscience. By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith, ²⁰among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander.”*

- ❖ Now Paul was no stranger to shipwrecks. He personally survived three of them (cf. 2 Cor 11:25). So it's not surprising that he chose the metaphor of a shipwreck to describe falling away from the faith. **To shipwreck the faith means to abandon the faith.** To reject the core tenets of the faith, of the gospel. Now later we'll look at one theory as to what doctrine these men rejected and were falsely teaching.
 - **But the point is, when someone shipwrecks their faith, it means they appeared at one point to be gospel-believing Christians, but now for whatever reason, they've rejected some essential aspect of the faith.** Now we have no confidence to call them Christians. They've wrecked their faith – they've made shipwreck of it.

- ❖ Think about how shipwrecks typically occur. The vessel is sailing along – by all appearances – just fine. Nothing out of the ordinary. **But due to carelessness or indifference, the captain and crew ignore certain warnings.** They don't take necessary precautions. They go full steam ahead. And suddenly find themselves on the bottom on the sea. No one saw it coming.
 - When the **RMS Titanic** left the port of Southampton, England on route to New York City, she left with such glory and grandeur. Many people, including the passengers on her maiden voyage believed the Titanic to be unsinkable. When embarking passenger, Mrs. Sylvia Caldwell, asked a deckhand if the rumors were true, he's reported to have answered, “Ma'am, God himself could not sink this ship.” Who would have guessed on that day that the Titanic's story would end at the bottom of the North Atlantic?

- ❖ The same goes for Hymenaeus and Alexander. I'm sure when they were first installed as pastors in the Ephesian church, no one would've guessed a shipwreck. They had a great start. **But as our passage proves, how a story begins is not nearly as important as how it ends.** You can start off as a pastor or a persecutor but end on a completely different note. The big question is, "How will your story end?" Because in the end, it's the end that counts.
- ❖ **Friends, we have to consider the real risk for professing believers – those who claim to be Christians – there's a risk of making shipwreck of your faith.** Now I realize this opens up a can of worms and the question of whether or not you can lose your salvation. To shipwreck your faith sounds like you've lost your salvation. Is that what happened to Hymenaeus and Alexander? Were they saved at one point, but then they did something to lose that status? Did they fall out of God's saving grace? **This is a question about eternal security – about whether it's possible to lose your salvation.**
- ❖ I'll say two things. **First, at the end of the day, in order to rightly apply this text, it doesn't matter where you stand on the doctrine of eternal security.** Because those who believe you *can* lose your salvation and those who believe you *can't* – would both agree that if you die in a state of unbelief – if your story ends with a shipwrecked faith – then it means you're not saved. It doesn't matter how long you were a member of a church or how involved you were – how your story ends is what matters in the end.
 - The only difference is that those who believe in eternal security also believe that God will see to it that his children – those who have been born again by the Spirit, those who have repented and believe in Christ as Lord and Savior – **God will see to it that true believers do not end their stories with a shipwreck.** He will personally see to it that you end well.
- ❖ **So the second thing I'll say is that I do believe the Bible teaches the eternal security of true believers.** Let me offer two supporting verses. In **John 10:27-28**, Jesus says, "*My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.*" And in **Philippians 1:6**, Paul says that believers can be confident, "*that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*" That is, the day of his return.
 - **So the Bible teaches that Jesus knows his own and guards his own from shipwrecking their faith.** True believers may stumble for a season, but they'll eventually be restored because God will not fail to complete what he started in them.
- ❖ **But then how do we explain the very real experience that many of us have – of friends or family that started in the faith but eventually fell away and stayed away?** I would say that they probably were never saved no matter how involved they were in the church. Listen to **1 John 2:19** and what it says about those who have left the faith, "*They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.*"

- ❖ Did you hear that? If they had been of us – been truly saved – they would have continued with us. That’s the doctrine of eternal security. But they went out – they shipwrecked their faith – that it might become plain that they are not of us. They weren’t actually saved.
 - **So if we go back at our passage, I think we can believe in the doctrine of eternal security, and at the same time, believe a shipwreck of faith is possible for those who profess to be Christians, even those who serve as leaders in the church.**

- ❖ It’s disturbing to think that a Christian could lose his or her salvation – that Jesus could lose one of his sheep. But what’s far more disturbing (and dangerous) is to convince yourself that you could never fall away simply because of a profession of faith you made in the past or because of the years of involvement you’ve put into the church.
 - **Shipwrecking your faith is a risk for everyone who professes to be a Christian.** That’s why Paul gives Timothy instructions in v18 to guard against such an outcome. Paul’s counsel to Timothy is this: **If you want a good ending to your story of faith, you have to fight for it.** You have to fight the good fight of the faith (6:12).

- ❖ **The point is you can’t coast along in the Christian life and expect it to end well.** The Christian life is not a leisurely cruise on a nice, calm lake. It’s a battle to go upstream in a mighty river with a vicious current that flows downstream towards a waterfall. And at the bottom of this waterfall are jagged rocks that will destroy any vessel that falls into it.
 - **There is no standing still in the Christian life.** Too many of us are floating along – thinking the Christian life is a leisurely cruise. And we’re totally unprepared to wage the good warfare and fight against a shipwreck of faith.

The Damage of Rejecting the Conscience

- ❖ This leads to our second point. To better resist a shipwreck of faith, we need to understand how it occurs. Well we should consider what happened to Hymenaeus and Alexander. How did they shipwreck their faith? Paul says they rejected their conscience. So let’s consider the damage of rejecting the conscience.

- ❖ I think it’s important to note that you can damage your conscience in one of two ways. **You can damage your conscience by making it either *oversensitive* or *insensitive*.** Now in our text, Paul focuses on the latter – on insensitive consciences. They get that way if you constantly reject them. If you just keep ignoring your conscience until its voice gets so weak that it goes silent. **That’s how you sear a conscience – making it insensitive and no longer able to warn of danger.** We’ll focus more on that.
 - But let me quickly mention oversensitive consciences. You can also damage your conscience by overburdening it with rules not found in Scripture. **If the problem with an insensitive, seared conscience is that it’s gone silent, rarely accusing you – then an oversensitive conscience is always screaming at you.** It’s always accusing. It’s too easily wounded. That’s why Paul describes those with oversensitive consciences as being “*weak in faith*” (Rom 14:1). We’ll talk more about weak consciences when we get to Romans 14 later in the series.

- ❖ **The focus in our text is on seared consciences that have grown insensitive due to constant rejection.** This is found in v19. Paul tells Timothy to wage the good warfare, “*holding faith and a good conscience.*” What does that mean? Well when he talks about “*holding faith*”, **Paul is telling Timothy to hold onto the essentials of the faith.** To hold it firmly. To hold it faithfully. To hold it courageously.
- ❖ Now when he talks about holding “*a good conscience*”, that’s another way of saying “mind your conscience”. He’s telling Timothy to listen to his conscience. **Like every ship captain, Christians have a moral compass called a conscience that we rely on for guidance.** And if we don’t listen to our consciences when they point us in a particular direction, then we’ll eventually abandon the gospel or twist sound doctrine and end up shipwrecking the faith.
 - That’s what happened to Hymenaeus and Alexander. Look back at v19 and notice how Paul says, “*by rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith.*” This (a singular pronoun) is referring specifically to “*a good conscience*”. **It’s that act of rejecting their good consciences that led to them to reject the faith – to make shipwreck of it.**
- ❖ How does this work? Somehow Hymenaeus and Alexander acted against conscience. They didn’t listen to their moral compass. **They rejected a good conscience and tolerated a guilty conscience, neglecting all of its warnings.**
 - We don’t know exactly what sin they were dealing with. We can assume their consciences initially accused them. But they ignored it. And after repeated abuse, their consciences grew numb and calloused. The voice grew weaker and softer. **And in order to silence the voice for good, they rejected the faith.** They shipwrecked it. They began to abandon ship – throwing out essentials to the faith.
- ❖ This, at least, is what happened to Hymenaeus. Paul mentions him again in his Second Letter to Timothy. In **2 Timothy 2:17-18**, Paul warns that false teachers like Hymenaeus have swerved from the truth and are now teaching that the resurrection of the dead has already taken place. He was denying a future bodily resurrection.
 - Now what’s the advantage of that? **If you’re trying to silence a guilty conscience for good, why would denying the resurrection help?** Because the NT teaching on a future resurrection for all is always connected to a future judgment for all. Paul teaches in places like **2 Corinthians 5:10** that everyone will be raised with resurrection bodies to stand before the judgment seat of Christ to give an account for all the deeds done in the body.
- ❖ So think about it: **If you deny a future resurrection – if you claim it’s already taken place in some spiritualized sense – then you don’t have to worry about a future judgment for deeds done in the body.** And by denying these realities, you can silence your conscience for good and continue in sin without any reservations.

- ❖ I've been in ministry long enough to see individuals, who profess to be Christians, slide down a similar path. **They start off by making certain compromises.** Compromises they know are wrong because their consciences immediately speak up. Their consciences cry out, "You shouldn't date that person. You shouldn't be watching that. You know you just stretched the truth there. That was a blatant lie. You shouldn't have gotten so mad. You really shouldn't have said that." That's the conscience speaking.
 - **But by continued abuse through continued neglect, our consciences grow numb.** They get desensitized. And yet the conscience is not completely gone. So every so often you hear a quiet voice, and the guilt still eats away at you. **So you're faced with two options: (1) repent of your sins and have your guilt forgiven by Jesus or (2) change your beliefs so you don't feel guilty anymore.**

- ❖ You would hope more people would choose Option One and listen to their consciences. **But unfortunately, many would rather entertain new interpretations of certain passages and accept unorthodox teachings – if it helps then justify some prior action or decision or if it helps put to rest any lingering feelings of guilt.**
 - Friends, if you ever find yourself open to changing a long-held conviction – mainly because it'll quiet your conscience and you hopefully won't feel bad anymore over something you did or you're currently doing – you at least need to realize what's happening. You're on the verge of making shipwreck of your faith.

- ❖ Hymenaeus and Alexander chose Option Two and made shipwreck. So in v20 we read that Paul dealt with them by handing them over to Satan, meaning he put them out of the church and into Satan's realm, which is how he describes the world. "*Among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.*"
 - **So Paul exercised discipline and put them out of the church, but notice how he still holds out hope.** Yes, they've shipwrecked their faith, but their story hasn't ended. They're not dead yet. There's still breath in them. So they're not beyond the reach of God's grace. They can still be saved. That's why Paul hopes that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth (2 Tim 2:25).

- ❖ Friends, the point here is that you need to realize how tender and delicate your conscience is. You have to take care of it and avoid damaging it. **You can weaken a conscience and make it oversensitive when you burdened it with too many rules and obsess over issues that aren't even sins.** A weak conscience is too strict – even stricter than God's. **But then you can also damage your conscience by searing it, by abusing it through constant neglect.** And over time it grows numb and calloused and eventually goes silent.
 - Now typically you'd expect to find **weak consciences among those who are prone to legalism and judgmentalism.** Those prone to obsession over the law. And you'd expect to find **seared consciences among those who are prone to lawlessness and immoral behavior.** Those prone to disregard the law. And there's truth to those generalizations.

- ❖ **But the irony is that both kinds of damage can occur to the same person – to the same conscience.** Turn over to chapter 4:2. Here Paul refers to the false teachers that he’s been warning Timothy about. He calls them “*liars whose consciences are seared.*”
 - **But then he goes on to say these same consciences – though seared and insensitive towards some serious issues – were oversensitive on some non-issues.** They were treating good things like marriage and certain foods as sinful or ungodly. Like the Pharisees, who were known for straining out gnats while swallowing camels (Mt 23:24). **They were majoring on the minors and minoring on the majors.** Ignoring serious sins while obsessing over non-issues.
 - This dynamic can happen in any of us, in any church. This explains how churches in generations past could be so strict in prohibiting certain kinds of music and dancing. While, at the same time, not batting an eye to racial segregation in their congregation or opposing things like interracial marriage. Apparently we’re good at straining out gnats while swallowing camels.

The Discipline of Cultivating a Good Conscience

- ❖ This is why we need to pay more attention to this category of the conscience. And growing as a disciple would involve growing in the discipline of cultivating a good conscience. This is our third and final point. **We’re able to counter the typical damage we do to our consciences by mindfully cultivating them – helping them to grow stronger and more aligned with God’s will as revealed in Scripture.**
- ❖ In Disney’s *Pinocchio*, Jiminy Cricket tells Pinocchio, “*Always let your conscience be your guide.*” And that’s generally good advice. But we’ve already seen how our consciences can be damaged. They can be oversensitive or insensitive, weak or seared. **So the voice of your conscience is not equivalent to God’s. That voice in your head, accusing or excusing you, is not necessarily what God would say.**
 - So Jiminy Cricket’s advice goes too far when he says “always”. *Always* let your conscience be your guide? Well for those who ascribe no higher authority over you than yourself – this is probably the best advice you’re going to get. **But for those of us who ascribe the highest authority to God and his Word – we recognize that our consciences are *not* absolute.** Conscience is *not* king – God is. And so we cultivate our consciences by submitting them under the authority of God’s Word.
- ❖ **So let’s say you’re dealing with an oversensitive (weak) conscience. The first thing to do is to be open to listen.** Listen, first of all, to Scripture. Make a habit of regularly reading the Bible, so that your convictions are constantly being tested by Scripture.
 - **And then be intentional about being in community with Christians who come from different backgrounds.** If you’re always surrounded by people who were raised like you and think like you, then it’s easy to justify an overly-sensitive conscience. But if you’re listening to and learning from people who love Jesus and the Word – but come from different backgrounds – you might discover that what you considered a matter of right and wrong is a matter of preference based on culture or upbringing.

- ❖ And then you'll have to begin a process of calibrating your conscience. **As you study the Word and test your convictions by it, you'll probably end up subtracting some issues from the category of right and wrong and moving them to the category of opinion or preference.** We'll go more into this process of calibration in a subsequent message.
- ❖ **Now what if your issue is not an oversensitive (weak) conscience but an insensitive (possibly seared) one?** Well obviously if your conscience has already been completely seared, then you're probably not aware, and you'd probably disagree or simply not care if someone pointed it out. In that case, it might require an act of church discipline – like what Paul referred to in v20 – in order to arouse your conscience. There's still hope for anyone in that situation, but we would have to leave it to the mercy and will of God.
- ❖ **But if your conscience is numb – but hasn't gone completely silent – then I believe God providentially brought you here this morning to hear this Word.** Friend, you're being warned. Warned that you're searing your conscience by constantly abusing it. Warned that you might be on the verge of making shipwreck of your faith.
 - But God also brought you here this morning to remind you of a saying – one that is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance. Listen to chapter 1:15. Paul writes, "*The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.*"
- ❖ Friends, Jesus came to save. He took on flesh. **He became a man and had a conscience just like ours. But his conscience never accused him because he lived perfect obedience to his Heavenly Father.** He is one person who ever lived who never experienced a guilty thought. His conscience was perfectly clean.
 - And yet out of love for sinners like us, Jesus bore our sin upon his shoulders. **He who had no sin became sin for us as he hung there on the cross. And for the first time, his conscience screamed.** For the first time, he felt the weight of a guilty conscience and experienced just wrath and divine judgment. For the first time, he was forsaken by his Father. It was a selfless sacrifice, and he did it all for us.
- ❖ Friend, if even the foremost sinner like Paul who persecuted the Church – if he can be saved and wiped clean of a guilty conscience – then there's definitely hope for you. **Take care of your conscience this morning by washing it clean in the precious blood of our Savior.** Let's draw near to him with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. And let's hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised to save us is faithful (cf. Heb 10:22-23).