

**My Conscience Bears Me Witness:
The Testimony of the Conscience (Romans 2:12-16)**
Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on June 9, 2019

Introduction

- ❖ As most of you know, the normal steady diet in our pulpit is to simply walk through books of the Bible. But every so often, we set aside a short series to look at what the Bible teaches concerning a particular topic. **In this case, we've developed a sermon series that aims to help you develop a theology of the conscience.**
 - Perhaps you've never heard a sermon on the conscience. Maybe you've never given it much thought. We're all familiar with the word "conscience". We know we all have one. But maybe we haven't thought through its importance and relevance to the Christian life and especially to our life together as Christians.

- ❖ **I would contend that some of you are living under a needless weight of guilt because your conscience is even stricter than God's.** Because of various factors in your upbringing, your conscience is always pricking you – constantly condemning you over issues where the Bible is actually silent. You're missing out on the joy of living with a clean conscience.
 - **But there are others who have clean consciences – but only because they're ignoring them.** They're suppressing their consciences, which leads to a searing of their consciences, and results in calloused consciences. That's a scary place to be – to live with a damaged conscience completely unaware of the danger you're in.
 - **And then there's the way that matters of conscience affect our life together.** We come from different upbringing and cultures. And too often well-intentioned Christians are judging and condemning other Christians who hold different convictions on matters of conscience. If we want to maintain our unity, then we need to develop a biblical theology of the conscience.

- ❖ This is why we're doing this series. It'll be five weeks long. We'll be looking at the danger of a seared conscience, the blessing of a good conscience, the clashing of consciences, and the freedom of the conscience. Each message will unpack a particular Scripture passage. **This morning it'll be Romans 2:12-14, and we'll focus on the testimony of the conscience.**
 - If you noticed, we're calling this series *My Conscience Bears Me Witness*, which comes from Paul in Romans 9:1. There he was expressing his great sorrow that his kinsmen, his fellow Jews, were so opposed to the gospel. He was stressing how he was telling the truth when he said how much it pangs him to see their resistance. He says, *"I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit."*

- ❖ **So there's this idea that the conscience is part of you – yet independent of you. And it's able to testify for you or against you.** And your conscience could be working with the Holy Spirit or counter to him. Your conscience is meant to bear witness in your soul – testifying for you or against you.
 - Let's turn our attention to Romans 2. Because this is where Paul addresses the idea of the conscience being God's witness in the soul. Now my goal in this first message is to simply introduce this concept of the conscience and try to describe it biblically. I've got six observations.

A Voice in Everyone's Head

- ❖ The first observation is to think of the conscience as a voice in your head. It's a voice in everyone's head. One common depiction of the conscience would be what's known as the shoulder angel. We imagine a little devil standing on one shoulder whispering sweet temptations to sin, while our conscience – the angel on our other shoulder whispers into our other ear reminding us of what's right and what's wrong. That's not too far off.
 - **The conscience is like a voice in your head.** It's part of you. But independent of you. It's not the same as the every day thoughts going on in your head. Your conscience is something that speaks to you. It accuses you or excuses you. That's how Paul puts it.

- ❖ Let me set the stage for the book of Romans. It's a letter Paul is writing to a church he has yet to visit, but he knows there are tensions between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians threatening to divide the church. Now since he's never met these people, he's compelled to explain, in detail, the gospel he preaches.
 - **His main point is found in chapter 1:16-17 where he says that he's not ashamed of the gospel.** For it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

- ❖ **And he goes on, to the end of the chapter, demonstrating how everyone, Jew and Gentile, needs this salvation because everyone has rejected God and everyone is without excuse.** Even if you're a Gentile who doesn't have access to God's Law. You have no excuse. For what can be known about God is plain to you. He's made his invisible attributes clearly perceivable through what he has made, through creation (1:19-20). That's Paul's argument.
 - So even if you didn't grow up in a Christian home/environment – even if no one ever taught you the Bible or told you about Jesus – Paul's saying what you already *do* know about God – that knowledge that you're suppressing – that's enough to condemn you. That's how Paul indicts all Gentiles under the righteous judgment of God.

- ❖ But it's not like he's giving the Jews a pass. He's not easing up on his own kinsmen. **In chapter 2, Paul shifts focus to those who have the Law, and he proves that they too are lawbreakers and how just knowing the Law does them no good if they're not actually doing the Law.** That's what he means in v13, "*For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified.*" Mere possession and knowledge of the Law of Moses is of no advantage to you if you don't obey it.
 - The argument actually starts in v11, "*For God shows no partiality.*" **Meaning he's going to judge everyone by the same standard.** Paul goes on to explain in v12 that those who are without the written Law – Gentiles who have never heard or read the Scriptures – will still perish even if they're not judged by the written Law.

- ❖ Now his reasoning for the legitimacy of their judgment is found in vv14-16. **They may not possess or know the written Law, but Gentiles have the moral demands of the Law written on their hearts and confirmed by their consciences.**

- ❖ **We'll get into that but the first point I'm trying to make is that everyone has a conscience.** Both Jew and Gentile. Both the religious and the irreligious; the pious and the pagan. Everyone has a voice in their head because everyone is created in God's image, and he has left behind in all of us a witness. **The conscience is God's one remaining witness in the soul of every man, woman, and child.** And it can speak to us like a voice.

A Voice that Confirms the Rightness of God's Word

- ❖ Now whether we listen to that voice is another thing, but that's the first observation about the conscience. It's a voice in everyone's head. Here's the second one: It's a voice that confirms the rightness of God's Word. **Even if you don't have access to a written witness like Scripture teaching you right from wrong, your conscience acts as an inner witness – confirming the righteousness of God and his law written on your heart.**
 - Look at v14, *"¹⁴For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. ¹⁵They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them."*
- ❖ Paul is pointing out that the fact that Gentiles – who don't have the Law – will at times, by nature, do what the Law requires. **That's why no matter what country you visit or what culture you step into, there are certain moral standards that are universally observed.** To kill your neighbor, to steal from your neighbor, to take your neighbor's spouse for yourself – these are all actions that are frowned upon and typically condemned.
 - **Paul is saying it proves that God has written his morality on human hearts, and so even the Gentiles possess the Law in a real sense.** It's not written on a scroll but on their hearts. But it's the Law of God nonetheless.
- ❖ Now remember his overall point in chapter 2 – it's that the Jews are not better off. Merely having the Law gives you no advantage. He's saying to his kinsmen, *"Look, if you agree that the Gentiles have the Law – in the sense that it's written on their hearts. And yet if they're still guilty for their sins, then by implication, it means that mere possession of the Law doesn't save you. But if that's the case, then stop relying so much on the Law – on the fact that you know the Scriptures. Hearing and knowing the Law is not enough."* (2:17-20)
 - **If possession of the Law written on hearts is not enough to save Gentiles, then the same principle applies to Jews and their possession of the Law written on scrolls.** That's the point that Paul is making in our text.
- ❖ But for our purposes, we can draw an inference when it comes to the human conscience. **The point that's relevant to our discussion is that everyone has a heart imprinted with the moral demands of the Law, and our conscience serves as inner witness confirming the existence of that moral knowledge and warning us when something's wrong.**
 - The presence of a conscience demonstrates that the Gentile is aware of the moral demands of the Law. He has a twofold witness: (a) the demands of the Law written on his heart and (b) the conscience testifying to what's right or wrong.

- ❖ It's like how every car has an engine. That's what makes it a car. That's what makes it go. Every car also has a check engine light. Now when things are operating fine, we don't think about the engine. It's when there's a problem, that's when the check engine light comes on.
 - **So the conscience is like a check engine light.** It comes on when there's a problem in your heart, and it bears witness to your soul that something's wrong. That you're not operating according to the law that's written on your heart.

A Voice that Comforts or Condemns You

- ❖ That leads to our third observation of the conscience. It's a voice that can either comfort or condemn you. It can excuse you or accuse you. Look at v15 again, *"¹⁵They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them ¹⁶on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus."*
 - **Some people unfortunately confuse the conscience with an individual's personal temperament.** We all know some people are particularly anxious, and they tend to obsess over guilty thoughts. While others never seem bothered and are rarely affected by guilty feelings. We know those kinds of people. We might be one of those people. But we tend to chalk it up to differences in personality and temperament.
- ❖ **But a more biblical category would be to see these differences as indicative of the health of your conscience.** If your conscience is working properly, it will neither be overly sensitive nor calloused. It will work, as it should, to condemn you of your sins – even the ones you commit in secret, the ones you're currently getting away with.
 - That's what Paul says in v16. **We often imagine that courtroom scene in heaven and picture the devil dressed up like a slimy prosecutor, accusing us before God.** There's biblical warrant for that image. But you know, the devil doesn't even need to show up in court. He can stay home and let your conscience do the job.
- ❖ **You think it's scary to have the devil accuse you of sin? What about your conscience?** That should scare you more. The devil's not omniscient. He's not omnipresent. He's not always around to observe your behavior. He can't read your thoughts or discern your intentions. So there's a limit to his knowledge of what to accuse you with.
 - **But your conscience is with you all the time. It knows your every thought, your every desire, your every intention.** Maybe you didn't say that hurtful word, but your conscience knows what you meant. Maybe you didn't carry out that deed, but your conscience knows what you wanted. Nothing escapes its attention. One day – on that day when God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus – **your conscience will bear witness that you are guilty in your sins and God is righteous in his judgment.**
- ❖ That's what Paul means when he speaks of your conscience bearing witness to accuse you. But please don't see it as your enemy. The devil is your enemy. He's trying to destroy you. **But your conscience is there to help. It's actually a gift. It's like the pain receptors in your nervous system.**

- ❖ **Sometimes we wish we never felt pain because it hurts so bad. But it's actually a gift to feel pain.** Do you realize that those with abnormal nervous systems, who are insensitive to pain, live in constant danger of harming themselves? If you can't feel pain, you don't know if you're picking up a hot pan or if you've cut the back of your leg and you're bleeding out. The ability to feel pain is actually a gift.
 - In the same way, to have a sensitive conscience that works properly in accusing you when you sin – making you feel guilty *when you are* – is a gift of God. **We shouldn't bemoan a sensitive conscience. We should listen to it.**

- ❖ Friends, when your conscience rightly condemns you, there's only one thing to do. **Confess your sins to God and be thankful that your conscience still works.** And thank God for giving you a heart of repentance that's able to trust in his Son for salvation.
 - That's our only hope and salvation – that Jesus died for our sins. **Because he was condemned in our place, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus** – who place their trust and identity in his life, death, and resurrection.

- ❖ Friend, if you're carrying around a guilty conscience, I know it's a heavy burden. It's probably keeping you up at night. It's probably eating you up from the inside. But thank God your conscience is still working properly. Now it's time to listen to it.

A Voice You Should Listen to

- ❖ That leads to our fourth observation: The conscience is a voice you should always listen to. And I'm not exaggerating. You should always listen to your conscience. It doesn't mean your conscience is always right (that goes to our next point). **But it's never wise to go against your conscience. In fact, it would be flat out wrong.**
 - When **Martin Luther**, the Protestant Reformer, made his famous stand at the Diet of Worms in 1521, he was asked to recant his past writings in defense of the gospel of justification by faith alone. He refused and said, *“my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience it neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen.”*

- ❖ Luther was simply reflecting Paul's teaching on the conscience found in Romans, especially in chapter 14. We'll look at that passage later in this series, but basically Paul is telling the Romans that what you eat or don't eat is a matter of conscience. **God has deemed all foods clean, so you can eat whatever you want with a clean conscience.**
 - But then Paul says in Romans 14:23, *“But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.”* **In other words, if your conscience is warning you not to eat something on the assumption that it's a matter of sin and disobedience – then even if your conscience is mistaken – you shouldn't do it.** It would be a sin to go against your conscience. Not because the action is necessarily sinful, but because you're intending to sin if you ignore your conscience.

- ❖ So let's imagine if one Christian is raised to believe that wearing shorts – for men and women – is immodest and displeasing to God. His conscience says it's a sin. And imagine if another Christian is raised to believe that buying consumer products that aren't fair trade is morally wrong and harmful to others. Her conscience says it's a sin.
 - **I hope you see I'm trying to choose examples from two sides of a conservative-liberal spectrum and examples I think we can safely assume that no one here considers to be sinful.** Now we can try our best to persuade these fellow believers that their consciences are too strict – even stricter than God's. But if they can't wear shorts or buy coffee that's not fair trade – without feeling the pangs of a guilty conscience – then they shouldn't do it.

- ❖ Call him a prude. Call her too progressive. *We* know it's not a matter of sin or disobedience if they wear the shorts or buy the coffee. But if their consciences say otherwise, then they need to listen. **It would be a sin to go against your conscience.** Even if it's *not* a sin issue, in that moment your intention would be to sin. And intentions are what matter.
 - We should never encourage anyone to violate their conscience. **That's how you end up searing a conscience – if you get used to ignoring your conscience or blatantly going against it.** You might loosen up on these rather innocuous issues, but now your conscience is hardened and unable to warn you when one day you're dealing with something truly dangerous and sinful.

- ❖ It's like losing all the pain receptors in your hands. You'll have no idea if you're handling something hot or dangerous. Or it's like constantly ignoring that check engine light until one day you find yourself unexpectedly stuck and feeling very lost in life. Like Luther said, it's neither right nor safe to go against conscience. So let's honor that principle of always listening to your conscience.

A Voice That You Can Calibrate

- ❖ But that doesn't mean your conscience is absolute. That's not to say it can't or shouldn't change. Which leads to our fifth observation: The conscience is a voice that you can calibrate. I like that word "calibrate". I get it from a book I recently read on the conscience.¹
 - **There it uses the example of calibrating your car's speedometer.** If your car's speedometer is off and always reading ten miles per hour too slow, then one day you might find yourself pulled over for going ten miles over the speed limit. You can try to explain to the officer that your speedometer says you weren't speeding. You can use the defense that you were diligently listening to your speedometer. But he'll still write that ticket and say that's your problem. Get your speedometer calibrated.

- ❖ So if you're in sin, but you tell God you didn't know. If you say you were just listening to your conscience. If you tell him it's neither right nor safe to go against conscience. He'll tell you to go get your conscience calibrated.

¹ Andy Naselli & J.D. Crowley, *Conscience: What it is, How to Train it, and Loving Those Who Differ*, Crossway. Wheaton, IL, 2016.

- ❖ **But how do you calibrate your conscience?** Think about how you calibrate a speedometer or scale. You measure it against a standard and adjust until it reflects that standard. Well in the case of your conscience, the standard is the Scriptures. It's true that Luther was all about respecting his conscience, but remember he said his conscience is captive to the Word of God. **Your conscience is not King. God is.**
 - That means we use God's Word to correct our consciences. **You measure your conscience against the truth of Scripture, and you keep adjusting until it reflects that truth.** So make a habit out of reading God's Word. A regular diet of Scripture reading will strengthen a weak conscience and arouse a numbed conscience.

- ❖ **John MacArthur says your conscience is more like a skylight than a light bulb.** He says the conscience lets light into your soul. It doesn't produce its own. So like a skylight, a conscience works well when you expose it to pure light and when you keep it clean. If you keep it in the dark and let it get cloudy and muddled, then it ceases to function properly. **That's why we have to be diligent to keep our consciences clean and to constantly expose it to the light of God's Word.** That's how you calibrate the conscience.

- ❖ Now before we go on, let's be clear— no one's conscience is perfectly calibrated. **No one has a conscience that perfectly matches God's will.** Now by his gift of his Holy Spirit and through faithful calibration using his Word – some believers may have a conscience that more closely resembles God's. That's a goal of discipleship. But there are things that we consider wrong that God sees as right. And things we see as right that God considers wrong.
 - **So just like with anything else, calibrating your conscience is going to involve adding and subtracting from it.** There are going to be some issues that we might consider morally good (or at least morally neutral), but upon closer examination of Scripture, we realize we need to add some moral demands to our conscience that weren't there before. Or we might be come away realizing we need to subtract some moral demands that have been overburdening our conscience.

- ❖ **For example, many younger believers are growing up in a culture where having premarital sex and cohabiting before marriage is commonly practiced and considered normal.** Even as Christians, their consciences may not raise an alarm. But that's why they need to calibrate their consciences. They'll need to add this issue to the category of right and wrong as they're confronted with the scriptural commands concerning fornication and the sanctity of sex within the covenant of marriage.
 - **But then older believers who grew up in a much more conservative day and age may need to calibrate their consciences by subtracting some moral demands – that upon closer examination of Scripture, turn out to be issues of conscience and personal preference.** Maybe it has to do with the use of certain instruments in a church service or listening to certain genres of music. Or maybe it has to do with a something like getting piercings or tattoos. **Perhaps your conscience once told you that these things were unbiblical and wrong, but now you've calibrated it with Scripture, and you've subtracted them from the category of right and wrong.**

- ❖ Of course, I'm only scratching the surface of examples. And I purposely avoided the more debatable ones. This is hard work, but it's so important. You have to learn to calibrate your conscience because it'll be a constant task as a disciple of Christ.

A Voice that Only You are Accountable to

- ❖ If you expect to grow as a Christian, then you'll always be calibrating, trying to match your conscience closer and closer to God's will as revealed in Scripture. That means we're all in this process, all in different stages of calibration. **And that means no two consciences are going to look exactly the same. We all have different consciences.**
 - That's such an important point to make and to accept, especially if we hope to maintain Christian unity among a body of believers who possess different consciences. If we all have very different consciences, then that leads to our sixth and final observation: The conscience is a voice that only you are accountable to.
- ❖ Now like we said, everyone's conscience is captive to the Word of God. No one's conscience is absolute. No one's conscience is king. But everyone's conscience is their own. **That means your conscience is meant to speak to you and you alone.** And my conscience speaks to me and me alone.
- ❖ **So it would be wrong for me to bind your conscience using mine.** And it would be just as grievous for you to do the same to me. I would contend that if more churches had (1) a robust theology of the conscience, (2) a high view of Scripture and a submissive attitude towards its authority, and (3) the graciousness to respect each other's consciences – much of the conflict that goes on within churches would be resolved.
 - **A lot of the conflict found between Christians is related to matters of the conscience.** That's Paul's point in Romans 14. He raises the same point in 1 Corinthians 8. We're going to cover those two passages later in this series, and there we're going to see how the true exercise of Christian love and Christian freedom will help us live together in community – with not just clean consciences – but full hearts with sincere love and patience towards each other.
- ❖ There's so much more that could be said about the conscience. This is merely an introduction. Next week, we'll look at the dangers of *not* tending to your conscience. How can you damage your conscience, and what is bound to happen if you continually ignore your conscience? That's for next Sunday. Let me conclude by making a plug for the book called *Conscience: What it is, How to Train it, and Loving Those Who Differ*. We have a few copies in our bookstall and I encourage you to get a copy and read it with a friend this summer.