



WEEK 8 - Conscience

William Wilberforce was called the conscience of a nation.

- **Wilberforce story**

In the same way that your conscience is not you, Wilberforce was not the nation, but he shined a light on the moral state of the nation, which when revealed either condemned the nation or approved of it in light of the word of God. It's the same thing with your conscience. Conscience shines a spotlight on

your moral choices in light of the word of God.

It was this week, in 1521, when young Martin Luther was called before Holy Roman Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Worms and uttered the famous phrase: “Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Holy Scriptures or by evident reason — for I can believe neither pope nor councils alone, as it is clear that they have erred repeatedly and contradicted themselves — I consider myself convicted by the testimony of Holy Scripture, which is my basis; my conscience is captive to the Word of God. Thus I cannot and will not recant, because acting against one's conscience is neither safe nor sound. God help me. Amen.” (Martin Luther)

For your conscience to function properly it must be captive to the Word of God. Secondly, to go against conscience is not safe.

Why do some people have freedom of conscience and others do not? Is everyone's conscience the same? If not, why not? What shapes our conscience? And if your conscience is shaped, can it be deformed?

How does God use the conscience in our lives?

There are 28 references to “conscience” in the Bible.

Acts 24:16

16 So I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man.

1. Our conscience is something we must attend to in order to keep it clear. We must take pains to make it captive to the Word of God.

Because a simple definition of conscience is that it's your awareness of what you believe is right and wrong in light of the word of God.

Romans 2:14

14 For 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.

2. There is a sense of right and wrong that is innate to every human being. Everyone has a conscience.

Even when ignorant of the word of God, there is written on the human heart the law “do not murder.” Humanity did not create the law “do not murder” as a positive social construct. We have laws against murder because that law is written by God on the human heart.

God is a moral God, so being created in His image we are moral creatures. That’s why we all have a conscience.

15 They 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

3. Our conscience travels in the realm of black and white.

Based upon our thoughts or actions, our conscience either accuses or condemns us. It says, “This is a good thing or this is a bad thing.”

16 on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.

Again, God judges our conscience in light of His revealed truth.

4. God is Lord of our conscience.

“Whenever ‘obey conscience’ collides with ‘obey God,’ ‘obey God’ must come out on top — every time.”

1 John 3:19-20

19 By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; 20 for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything.

5. Your conscience is trained by the word of God.

When your conscience is in line with the word or informed by the word, then it accuses or condemns you according to truth of the word. THIS IS HOW YOU DEVELOP A STRONG CONSCIENCE, BY HAVING IT SHAPED BY THE WORD OF GOD.

All of us know people who are not Christians and who do not lead Christians lives, but still brag, “I have a completely clear conscience.”

This doesn’t mean they are living in accordance with the truth. It generally means they are ignorant of the truth. This is why their

conscience is clear. It is uninformed. It has not been trained by the word of God. Everyone who learns to ignore their conscience can have a clear conscience. This doesn't mean they're doing things they shouldn't be ashamed about.

If you think something's wrong, don't ignore it. Look into it. Because if you condemn yourself for something, how much more the God who knows your heart?

21 Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God;

6. This is why it's so important to have a clear conscience — confidence before God.

This is the nuance of justification and sanctification. We know we are justified before God by the work of Christ on the cross alone. We are adopted into God's family by the Holy Spirit who raised Christ from the dead. We are now God's children. This gospel brings us into relationship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, so when we do not walk according to the ways of God, we shrink back. We no longer have confidence before God, because our conscience is not clear.

That doesn't mean we're not Christians. It means the Holy Spirit is showing us something He wants made right. He's putting His finger on something in our lives, a sore spot. When we have a clear conscience before God, we have confidence before God.

But when we ignore that sore spot, it's a problem. It is neither safe nor sound to do so.

1 Timothy 4:1-2

4 Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, 2 through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared,

The faith referred to here is shorthand for the essential elements of the gospel. So, there are people who depart from the basic gospel by believing deceitful spirits. These are spirits they want to believe because it eases their conscience.

7. By ignoring our conscience repeatedly, we can sear our conscience.

To illustrate a seared conscience — take your fingertips. Your fingertips have nerves. These

nerves serve a purpose, one of which is to warn you about dangerous objects that can hurt you, like fire or needles. When a flame touches your fingertip, it sears it. It makes it hard. This protects you from more pain.

But in the case of your conscience, to go against your conscience hardens it so that you can't feel it. It becomes ineffective. It gets weaker and weaker, until it's not noticeable. It's seared.

On the other hand, we can make our conscience overly sensitive by forbidding things the Scripture doesn't, and that's not good either.

1 Timothy 4:3

3 who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.

Now, who are these people who can marry freely and partake of every bacon wrapped delicacy? People who know and believe the truth of the gospel. People whose consciences are informed by the word of God.

Each Christian's conscience is being conformed more and more to the truth of Scripture, but here's something to always remember — none of our consciences are conformed perfectly to Scripture. So, there will be some differences. How do we treat those differences?

8. You cannot demand that others conform to your conscience.

These are things neither explicitly condemned or required by Scripture.

If you're convinced in your mind that buying fair trade coffee is morally right, then you will feel guilty if you buy any other kind of coffee.

If you're convinced in your mind that Halloween is evil, then you will undergo pangs of conscience when you participate in different aspects of this holiday.

Romans 14:1-3

14 As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. 2 One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. 3 Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him.

The wrong response by those who have faith that they can do certain things is to despise those who can't do the things they are free to do. Their response is arrogance.

Example: Those who are free to read the Harry Potter books can speak of those who think it's wrong to read the Potter books like they're nincompoops. That's arrogance.

The wrong response by those with a weak conscience is to pass judgment upon those who engage in things they do not feel free to engage in. Their response is judgmental.

Example: Those who aren't free to read the Harry Potter books judge those who do read them like they're committing a sin.

4 Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand. 5 One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.

- **Birthday illustration**

So, there's the deal — each group should be fully convinced of their position, and yet... welcome those who disagree.

6 The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. 7 For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself.

The point is both groups are doing what they do in order to please God.

8 For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. 9 For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

10 Why do you **pass judgment** on your brother? Or you, why do you **despise** your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; 11 for it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God."

12 So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.

This to me is more sobering than any end times scenario. You are going to give an account of your life before the judgment seat of Christ.

13 Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. 14 I know and am persuaded

in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. **15** For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. **16** So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil.

If your conscience is clear in reading Harry Potter, don't brag about it. Don't flaunt it. If you're free to have a glass of wine with dinner, fine. Don't make a public spectacle of it.

Notice what Paul does here. He doesn't believe eating meat sacrificed to idols is wrong, but he doesn't harangue those weak in conscience. He doesn't try to convince them that they're wrong. He just explains how those who have a stronger conscience should handle themselves around those with a weaker conscience.

Your freedom to engage in whatever it happens to be is correct, but don't let your freedom destroy the faith of someone with a weaker conscience.

17 For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. **18** Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and

approved by men. **19** So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.

20 Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. **21** It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble.

There are lots of things we might feel the freedom of conscience to do, if our conscience is in fact being shaped by the word of God. But that doesn't mean we should engage in everything we're free of conscience to engage in.

"Christians with a strong conscience must not allow their freedom to embolden a weaker brother or sister to sin against their conscience."

The two dangers of those with a stronger conscience are arrogance, which can lead to the second danger — crossing the line into lawlessness and immorality.

The two dangers of those with a weaker conscience are being judgmental, which can lead to the second danger — crossing the line into legalism.

22 The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God.

The faith he's speaking of here is the faith you have to engage in certain behaviors. He's not referring to the gospel here.

Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves.

9. You are blessed if you listen to your conscience.

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.

If you say to yourself, "I doubt this is pleasing to God," then you probably shouldn't do it or you should stop doing it, because you're not fully convinced that it's okay.

10. Ignoring your conscience is dangerous and can bring tragedy to your life.

1 Timothy 1:19

19 holding faith and a good conscience. By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith,

The only thing that can cleanse our conscience is the gospel.

Hebrews 9:14

14 how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.