

Developing Transparency - Larry Coy

Sermon Summary: The Principle of a Clear Conscience

This summary recaps the sermon, focusing on the biblical principle of a clear conscience as the key to a genuine, joyful, and free Christian life. The pastor uses his own personal journey and biblical teaching to outline why and how believers must make past wrongs right with God and others.

The Search for a Real Faith

- The pastor begins by sharing his personal struggle as a Christian. For many years, he longed for the Christian life to “work” on the inside. He desired the genuine joy and peace that the Bible promises but found it was not a constant experience.
- He tried various approaches, from focusing his ministry on the Lordship of Christ to reading books by great Christian thinkers, but the key to a vibrant internal faith eluded him. He describes his Christian life at that time as being dogmatic and theologically correct, ready to defend doctrine, but lacking the inner reality of what he was teaching.

An Insight from Scripture

- The turning point came when a speaker quoted from **1 Timothy 1:5**: “The ultimate aim of the Christian ministry is to produce the love that comes from three things: a pure heart, a good conscience, and a genuine faith.”
 - **A Pure Heart:** Our inward motives and thought life.
 - **A Good Conscience:** Our relationships with other people.
 - **A Genuine Faith:** Our relationship with God.
- The speaker then asked a piercing question: “Is it possible that there are things that have happened in your past that every time you recall them to your memory, you wish they’d never happened?” This question provoked a hostile and defensive reaction in the pastor, showing an area of his life he was unwilling to confront.

Understanding Different Types of Problems

- The pastor explains that a major reason for his lack of freedom was trying to solve every problem with a single, sweeping prayer (“God, forgive me for all my sins”). He learned that Scripture teaches different approaches for different types of problems.
 - **Struggles with Truth (Spiritual):** When God’s truth is challenged, the response is to **stand** firm in the truth (**Ephesians 6:14**). You don’t need to argue or defend God’s truth; He is not threatened.
 - **Moral/Sensual Problems (Physical):** The command is to **flee**. Citing **2 Timothy 2:22** (“Flee youthful lusts”), the pastor emphasizes that running from sensual temptation is not cowardice but God’s prescribed way out. One cannot intellectually stand against it.
 - **Attitude Problems (Psychological/Spiritual):** The instruction is to **resist**. As it says in **James 4:7**, “Resist the devil and he will flee from you.”

God’s Conditions for Answered Prayer

- Our relationship with God and others directly impacts our prayer life. The pastor highlighted several scriptural conditions:
 - **Psalms 66:18:** If you regard iniquity in your heart, the Lord will not hear you.
 - **Matthew 6:14-15:** If we do not forgive others for the wrongs they have done to us, our heavenly Father will not forgive our sins. This is a core part of the Lord’s Prayer.
 - **Matthew 17:21:** When the disciples could not heal a boy, Jesus explained that “this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting.” This shows that some spiritual victories require more than a simple prayer; they require specific spiritual disciplines.

The Central Role of a Clear Conscience

- **Definition:** A clear conscience is defined as the “inner joy and peace of spirit which results from having made all personal wrongs right with those whom a person has offended.”
- **A Weapon for Faith:** The pastor referenced **1 Timothy 1:19**, where Paul urges Timothy to battle for the right, armed with two weapons: **faith and a clear conscience**. Paul warns that some have rejected these and, as a result, have “run their ships on the rocks” regarding their faith. This was a perfect description of the pastor’s own experience: a great desire to trust God that repeatedly ended in shipwreck.
- **A Witness to Others:** According to **1 Peter 3:15-16**, we are to be ready to give a reason for the hope within us, but we must do so with a “perfectly clear” conscience.

- **A Daily Endeavor:** The Apostle Paul, speaking before Agrippa, stated in **Acts 24:16**, “I endeavor to maintain a conscience void of offense toward God and man.”

The Missing Insight: Making Wrongs Right

- The key insight the pastor had missed was a simple but profound distinction:
 - If I sin against God, I need to make it right with God.**
 - If I sin against someone else, I am responsible as a Christian to go to them and make it right with them.**
- This is the work of a “peacemaker,” as described in both the Beatitudes (**Matthew 5:9**) and **James 3:18**: “peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.”
- **Example of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15):** When the son came to his senses, he recognized his sin was “against heaven and against you [father].” He got right with Heaven (God) in the pigpen and then returned to get right with his father.

The Challenge and Personal Response

- The pastor recalls his initial, resistant reaction to the challenge of clearing his conscience. The speaker had challenged everyone to get alone with God, take a piece of paper, and write down every past event that brought regret upon recall, starting with the biggest one first.
- His immediate thoughts were full of fear and pride: “There must be a thousand things,” “There’s no way I’m going to run around and start apologizing to people... I would make a fool of myself,” and “This is absolutely ridiculous.”
- Despite his internal arguments, the more he thought about the challenge on his drive home, the more curious he became, sensing that this difficult path might hold the very breakthrough he had been seeking.

Dealing with Your Past: The List of Regrets

- The pastor decided to actually write down the list of regrets, despite a paranoid fear of what might happen if someone found it. He pulled over, determined to write the list and then destroy it.
- When he sat down to write, he was surprised that only a few specific items came to mind, not the thousands he expected. The list was surprisingly short:
 - **Regretting his marriage:** The night before, he and his wife, Carol, had a severe argument that left her crying all night. He didn’t know it at the time, but that night, Carol had surrendered their marriage to God, saying, “Lord,

I have tried and tried and tried to please him, and nothing works. You can have him back.” This was the turning point God had been waiting for.

- **Stealing money from his boss:** A past action that weighed on him.
- **Immoral behavior with five young women:** His conduct before marriage was not in line with God’s standards. This was a source of conflict with his wife, to whom he had lied about his past when his sister revealed his history to Carol before their wedding.
- **Conflict with a deacon:** In his first church role, he had arrogantly told the deacons they were unspiritual, leading to a sharp rebuke from the chairman. He had always seen himself as a martyr but it continued to bother him.

The Nature of Guilt and Conviction

- **God’s Prompting:** The pastor explained that our minds naturally block out unpleasant memories, so the things that persistently trouble our conscience are often the very things God is trying to bring to our attention.
- **The Cone of Conviction:** He described our unresolved wrongs as a cone. God brings conviction down on the most significant issues at the top of the cone.
- **From Conviction to Guilt:** When we refuse to deal with God’s conviction and “cap it,” that conviction festers and turns into guilt.
- **The Fruit of Guilt:** Guilt automatically produces a negative, critical, and condemning spirit. We begin to judge and criticize others as a result of our own unresolved sin.
- **Transferred Guilt:** The pastor realized that his guilt over past sins—stealing money, his behavior with other women, the fight with the deacon—had nothing to do with his wife. However, he had been unconsciously transferring the negative spirit caused by that guilt onto her, making her the primary target of his critical attitude.

The Path to Reconciliation

- The pastor realized that his wife was not the problem; he was. Within 24 hours of his wife surrendering him to God, the Lord revealed the true root of their marital strife: his own unconfessed sin and resulting guilt. He went back to Carol, confessed his wrongdoing, and began the process of making things right.

Key Principles for Making Things Right:

1. **Apply God’s Solution, God’s Way:** Simply confessing is not enough; it must be done correctly. If you apply God’s principles in the wrong way, the situation can explode.

2. **The Circle of Confession:** Your confession should only extend as far as your offense.

- **Example:** A teenager who gossiped *about* her teacher *to* her friends should confess her sin to her friends, not to the teacher (unless he was aware of the gossip). If the offense has already reached the person, then you must go to that person.

3. **Distinguish Guilt from Other Feelings:** It is crucial to discern if you are dealing with true guilt (responsibility for a wrong you committed) or other negative feelings like a poor self-image or bitterness toward God.

- **Wronging Someone vs. Being Wronged:** If you have wronged someone, you need to ask their forgiveness. If someone has wronged you, your responsibility is to forgive them in your heart. These are different situations.

Confession, Defrauding, and Restitution

- **Confessing to Carol:** The pastor told his wife, Carol, about the money he stole and then about the five women he had been immoral with before their marriage. He knew he had to correct the lies he had told her.
- **The Principle of Defrauding:** He explained the concept of defrauding from the Bible, likely referencing **1 Thessalonians 4**. To “defraud” means to arouse sexual desires in another person that cannot be righteously fulfilled. He explained that this behavior, even if short of intercourse, plants seeds of distrust and jealousy in a relationship.
- **Carol’s Response:** Her reaction was not anger, but understanding: “So that’s the reason you’ve been acting this way all these years.”
- **Confession, Not Details:** The pastor noted that God does not want us to share the explicit details of past sins. He cited **Ephesians 5:12**, “It is a shame to even speak of those things which are done of them in secret.” The focus should be on identifying the root sin (e.g., “I was not the example of a Christian man I should have been”) and asking forgiveness.
- **The Fallacy of “Under the Blood”:** Many Christians mistakenly believe that salvation erases the need for restitution. Just as Zacchaeus was responsible for paying back those he had cheated after meeting Jesus, we are responsible for making things right where we can.
- **Going Back to the Fork in the Road:** Citing the prophet Jeremiah, the pastor explained that you must go back to the point where you went wrong and get on the right path. For him and Carol, the “fork” was their behavior before marriage. When he confessed this, she confessed her part as well, and for the first time in seven years of marriage, they had a real basis for trust.

Renouncing the Hidden Things of Dishonesty

- After his conversation with Carol, the pastor re-evaluated his list. He realized that of the five women, he only needed to confess to one. This left one woman he needed to contact, a pastor's wife somewhere in Kansas. He told God, "If you really want me to take care of this, you'll have to get me in touch with her."
- Two weeks later, he found her name and address in a college bulletin. He was petrified but knew God had answered his prayer and was calling him to complete the act of restitution.
- **The Struggle and the Phone Call:** The pastor described his intense fear and internal conflict. His heart pounded, and his mind created excuses. He even placed her number in a drawer he never intended to open. However, God orchestrated a moment where he was forced to open that drawer.
- Mustering his courage, he finally called and confessed his wrongdoing, specifically how he failed to be a proper Christian example to her. He asked for her forgiveness directly. Her unexpected response was to ask for his forgiveness in return.
- **The Result of Obedience:** After the call, he felt like "a free man." This act of obedience liberated him from guilt. This freedom is a spiritual reality rooted in Scripture, such as **John 8:32** ("You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free") and the principle in **2 Corinthians 4:2** of "renouncing the hidden things of dishonesty."

Practical Steps to Clearing Your Conscience

1. **Purpose to clear up all offenses at any cost.** The first step is a firm decision to obey God in this area, regardless of the difficulty.
2. **Begin with the biggest offense first.** Tackling the most significant issue demonstrates great faith and, when you see God work, it empowers you to clear up the rest.
3. **List your offenses.** Be specific. Consider things you regret, people who dislike you because you offended them, instances where you were a poor Christian example, and areas of disobedience to authority.
4. **Approach each person with an attitude of contrition.**
 - **Focus on *your* part.** Even if you feel you were only 10% wrong, that 10% is your 100% of the responsibility.
 - Do not get drawn into re-litigating the past. The goal is to confess your sin. The pastor shared his experience with a deacon, where humbly agreeing and asking for forgiveness for each point raised ultimately restored the relationship.

Handling Difficult Scenarios

- **What if the person is deceased?** You can clear your conscience with those who were aware of the conflict (e.g., family members). Express your regret to them: "I've come to realize how wrong I was... and I wish I had a chance to apologize."
- **What if they won't forgive you?** Your responsibility is to repent and ask for forgiveness; their forgiveness is not required for you to be free. Your obedience is to God. Continue to love them. The pastor shared that his brother, Jeff, did not forgive him at first. For a year and a half, the pastor continued to show love through small notes and gifts, which eventually broke through his brother's bitterness.

The Story of Jeff: A Testimony to God's Redemptive Power

- The pastor shared a deeply personal story about his relationship with his younger brother, Jeff, to illustrate the power of bitterness and the freedom of repentance.
- **The Offense:** The pastor, trying to be "God" in his brother's life, verbally tore into him for choosing to marry his non-Christian girlfriend, Susie. This created a deep, painful rift.
- **The Apology & Rejection:** Years later, the pastor apologized to Jeff and Susie. Jeff accepted with a handshake, but it was not sincere.
- **Living Out Repentance:** The pastor understood his repentance had to be proven. He continued to love his brother from a distance with small gifts, expecting nothing in return. Scripture says, "A brother offended is harder to be won than a fenced city."
- **The Breakthrough:** A year and a half later, Jeff confessed with tears that he had not forgiven his brother and, in fact, hated him. He then genuinely asked for forgiveness.
- **The Ultimate Salvation:** Eleven years after the initial offense, the pastor was speaking in his hometown. He shared an illustration about bitterness that pierced Jeff's heart. That night, Jeff recognized his own bitterness toward his wife, repented, and truly gave his life to Christ for the first time. Upon his salvation, a lifelong "terror" and fear of the dark immediately disappeared as God set him free from spiritual bondage.

Conclusion: Responding to God's Call for Purity

- **Who God Is:** God is a God of truth who desires to set His people free. He is patient but persistent in calling us to holiness. He is sovereign over timing and provides the courage and faith we need to obey Him.
- **Who We Are & How We Are to Live:** We are called to be people who have renounced the "hidden things of dishonesty." Our pride and fear are tools of

Satan to keep us in bondage. We must stop worrying about what others will think and trust God with the outcome.

- **The Call to Action:** As it says in **James 4**, we are to “resist the devil and he will flee from you.” We do this by drawing near to God with broken, sorrowful, and repentant hearts. When we, as Christians, get things right with God and with one another, the Spirit of God has the freedom to bring revival, because “judgment must begin at the house of God.”