

Conscience Training

A Few Thoughts on the Threats to a Good Conscience

Wage the good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience. (1 Timothy 1:18b-19a)

St Paul writes to young pastor Timothy, “The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.” (1 Timothy 1:5) What does Paul mean by “good conscience”, and how can we live before God in this manner?

First, what is the conscience? Our conscience is a gift of God, a part of our created nature. It is our innate and natural ability to know the law. We might think of the conscience as an internal referee, calling us out when we break the rules, sin against our Lord or our neighbors. When it is functioning properly our conscience troubles us when we do something wrong, and sends us in repentance to the Lord's mercy and grace in Christ.

But our consciences don't always function properly. Like any referee, it can sometimes make the wrong call. The devil is constantly attacking our conscience tempting it to make the wrong call, to become calloused or overbearing. When we know the dangers to our conscience we can fight back the devil and give heed to having a good conscience before the Lord.

Danger #1: A Calloused Conscience

Through continued sinning our consciences becomes calloused, hardened, “seared” (1 Timothy 4:2). Like scar tissue, a calloused conscience has lost the sensation of guilt, it has ceased to feel the pain of sin.

The hardening of a conscience is especially dangerous with habitual sins or addictions. The first time we commit a particular sin our conscience is troubled. The next time it is slightly bothered, and each time less and less until finally we've forgotten that a thing is even a sin. It could be missing church, living together without being married, speaking behind someones back, holding a few dollars back in the taxes, being angry with the children, or whatever it is.

Addictions and repeated and habitual sin deadens the conscience and it ceases to call “foul” to our sins. But the Lord has help for us, and in this case it is the Ten Commandments. The Lord's law works like the video review in a football game. If the referee makes the wrong call this can be examined and reversed. If our conscience does not accuse us of a sin, then the law comes in and corrects the call. Or to have it another way, the Law works like a meat tenderizer to soften our conscience and break our hearts over our sin. “A broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.” (Psalm 51:17b, see also Jeremiah 23:29)

If we have missed church for months and our conscience has stopped getting after us, the Third Commandment still stands, “Remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it holy.” If we have a habit of speaking poorly of our neighbor, the Eighth Commandment corrects our conscience, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.” When we consider our life through the lens of the Ten Commandments the Holy Spirit tenderizes our conscience, showing us our sin and our need of the Lord's forgiveness.

Danger #2: An Evil Conscience

A second danger is an evil conscience, that is, a conscience that accuses where it should not. The devil knows law and Gospel, and he perfectly confuses them to give us an evil or bad conscience. Here's how the devil works. When temptation comes the devil preaches the Gospel to us, easing the path to sin. After we sin the devil comes with the law, accusing our conscience before God. The result is the evil conscience, the conscience that cannot hear the Gospel, a conscience that is weighed down with guilt and shame.

But the Lord Jesus has medicine for an evil conscience, His sin forgiving death and resurrection. Our Lord Jesus delivers His forgiveness, and therefore a good conscience, through our baptism, through the preaching of the Gospel (Absolution) and through the Lord's Supper.

...and since we have a great priest [Jesus Christ] over the house of God, let us draw near 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. (Hebrews 10:21-22)

It is especially the gift of the Absolution that the Lord has given us to fight back an evil conscience. We stand before the Pastor and say, "Look, this sin is really, really bad, and it troubles me. Can even this sin be forgiven?" And the Absolution answers, "Yes. I forgive you all your sins." The promise of the Gospel undoes an evil conscience and gives us a bold, good, forgiven one.

Sometimes we simply don't feel forgiven or loved by God, our conscience doesn't register with the Gospel. In these times we walk by faith and not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7), trusting that the Lord's promise of forgiveness is true in spite of our feeling.

By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. (1 John 3:19-22)

Danger #3: A Counterfeit Conscience

Finally, a counterfeit conscience is a conscience that thinks that it becomes "good" by "good works". When our conscience is troubled we attempt to mollify it through good works. This is especially true of non-Christians who are constantly found doing good works of charity to "feel good about themselves". This is an attempt to quiet the conscience through the law, through obedience.

It is true that doing a good work and serving our neighbor is often satisfying, but it is not what gives us a good conscience. The forgiveness of sins, won by the Lord Jesus through His death of the cross is the *only* way that Lord delivers a good conscience to us. Any other means, from works of service to psychotherapy, only gives us the illusion of peace, a counterfeit conscience.

The solution to a counterfeit conscience is the Lord's law and Gospel, and the repentance that results when the law and Gospel have their way with us. By the Lord's law we are shown the depth of our sin, and by the Lord's Gospel all that sin is forgiven. This is the one and only way to have a good conscience to stand before the face of God, clothed, not in the rags of our own works and efforts, but

in the robes of Christ's righteousness, made white and pure by His shed blood.

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?
(Hebrews 9:14)

May our Lord Jesus, through His law and Gospel, deliver to us a good conscience, now and until He returns for us. Amen.

Lord's Blessings in Christ,

Pastor Wolfmueller