

SERIES: The Absolute Supremacy of Jesus Christ

SERMON: **How to Clear a Guilty Conscience**

SCRIPTURE: Hebrews 9:1-14

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God has been very good to me. I have a wonderful wife, two fine sons, two lovely daughters-in-law, four grandkids, a nice home, a job I love, faithful friends, and excellent health. I've never missed a meal, divorce has not touched my birth family for many generations, I've never been unemployed, and my parents and grandparents have lived into their 90's. I've had relatively little suffering, as compared to many of God's people.

My life, however, has not been completely pain-free; no one's is. My early years were spent in real poverty, I've experienced broken relationships that were very painful, I've had some dreams that were never realized, I experienced a life-changing car accident, and I've made some costly mistakes I wish I could reverse. But as I look back at the last 60 years (those are all the ones I have memory of!), I think I would have to say that probably the greatest pain in my life has been the pain of a guilty conscience.

I will never forget one time in the 7th grade when I got in trouble for the umpteenth time at Webster Groves Jr. High School. I lay in my bed that night, tossing and turning, unable to sleep, and terrified at the thought of what my behavior might eventually lead to. Finally, I got up, went into my parents' room, woke them up, and between sobs spilled out my wretched feelings.

I am not the first person in history nor the last to be overwhelmed by a guilty conscience. Esau sold his birthright with profane indifference, but bitter tears were his legacy when he woke up to the seriousness of his action. Judas Iscariot also wept following his heinous act of treachery and tried to give the money back that he was paid to betray Jesus; then he went out and hanged himself. After King Herod beheaded John the Baptist, he was plagued by insomnia, and when the fame of Jesus began to spread throughout Galilee, Herod imagined that Jesus was John the Baptist, risen from the dead and returned to haunt him. Felix, the Roman governor, stood trembling before his prisoner Paul in the imperial praetorium of Caesarea, because he, Felix was the slave of a guilty conscience.

It is said that Richard III, who murdered his two nephews in 1483 in order to usurp the English crown for himself, was so tormented by his conscience that he often got up in the night, took his sword and fought with imaginary foes. King Charles IX of France, whose reign during the mid-sixteenth century was marred by fierce persecution of the Huguenot Christians, was reported to have told his doctor, "For months I have been in a fever physically and spiritually. If only I had spared the innocent, the weak-minded and crippled, I might get some sleep. But my conscience torments me day and night." Not many years ago in the state of Nevada a man who had committed a murder 30 years before, surrendered to the authorities saying he would gladly give up his freedom for the rest of his life in exchange for some peace of conscience.

Next to some of these crimes, misbehaving in a 7th grade class may seem rather benign, but nothing is insignificant when the conscience seizes upon it and refuses to let go. Very wisely, that night my father told me that a guilty conscience was a valuable thing that God provides toward us when we are headed for trouble. He told me I should confess my sin to God and he prayed with me. But then he told me something even more important—that I must believe that Jesus had forgiven me, I must accept His forgiveness, and I must even forgive myself. The relief I experienced after that late-night conversation is as vivid as the pain that instigated it. I learned a very important lesson—that I didn't have to suffer long-term from the pain of a guilty conscience. Relief was possible.

There were times later in my life, unfortunately, when I tried to deal with guilt in other ways. There were times when I tried to rationalize it, hide it, deny it, or ignore it, but all those efforts were totally unsuccessful. Eventually the pain would be so bad, the sleeplessness so intolerable, and the hypocrisy so overwhelming, that I would have to return to the simple truth my dad taught me back in 7th grade.

Only rarely in the last 20 years have I suffered greatly from a guilty conscience, and never to the extent I once did. The reason is not that I no longer sin, but rather because I have come to realize that one of the major blessings Jesus achieved for me as my high priest under the New Covenant is the privilege of a clear conscience. I don't mean that my conscience no longer works, but I can say that it no longer has the power to destroy me. I can enjoy a clear conscience not because of who I am or what I have done or not done, but rather because of who Jesus is and what He has done.

I invite you to go on a study journey with me so that we can discover what the Bible teaches about the conscience. Just how important is this topic? Oswald Sanders writes,

“Ignorance of the function of conscience and of the divine provision for its healthy exercise leads to serious spiritual disorders. Many sensitive Christians have limped through life because of a morbid and weak conscience whose condemning voice allowed them no respite. Their very sincerity and desire to do the will of God only accentuated the problem and caused them to live in a state of perpetual self-accusation. Deliverance from this unhappy state is possible through the apprehension and appropriation of the teaching of Scripture on the subject.”

We have been working our way through the book of Hebrews in an expository fashion the past several months, and we come today to chapter 9:1-14. Twice the cleansing of the conscience is mentioned in these verses, and I want you to watch for it.

Now the first covenant had regulations for worship and also an earthly sanctuary. A tabernacle was set up. In its first room were the lampstand, the table and the consecrated bread; this was called the Holy Place. Behind the second curtain was a room called the Most Holy Place, which had the golden altar of incense and the gold-covered ark of the covenant. This ark contained the gold jar of manna, Aaron's staff that had budded, and the stone tablets of the covenant. Above the ark were the cherubim of the Glory, overshadowing the atonement cover. But we cannot discuss these things in

detail now.

When everything had been arranged like this, the priests entered regularly into the outer room to carry on their ministry. But only the high priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year, and never without blood, which he offered for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance. The Holy Spirit was showing by this that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed as long as the first tabernacle was still standing. This is an illustration for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper. They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings—external regulations applying until the time of the new order.

When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this creation. He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption. The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!

Now we are not going to go through this passage verse-by-verse today, as we have been doing most of our way through Hebrews. One reason is that there is much in this chapter that we have already covered: we've talked about the tabernacle or the temple, about the curtain between the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place, and how only the High Priest could go into the Holy of Holies, and never without blood to cover the sins of the people for another year. As long as the tabernacle or the temple were standing, and as long as the curtain was hanging, the message was clear that access into God's presence was limited.

But chapter 9 adds an important element not previously discussed. Do you see it there in verses 9 and 14? "This is an illustration for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were *not able to clear the conscience* of the worshiper." But then the next paragraph goes on to say, "When Christ came as high priest . . . everything changed, including the fact that . . . "He is *able to cleanse our consciences* from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!" How is Christ able to do this?

Before we try to answer that question, I think we need to study the concept of conscience.

Meaning of the conscience

I have read some very philosophical, scholarly definitions of conscience, but it's hard to improve upon the definition offered me by a teenager: "The conscience is an internal alarm system that tells us when we have violated our own moral standards." That alarm system is placed, I believe, within every human being at conception, and it is initially programmed to respond to God's moral law. In Romans 2:15 we are told that the moral law of God is "written on their hearts, their

consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.”ⁱ
Our moral standards are hardwired in us by God!

This is important, for there are those who teach that the conscience is acquired through culture, environment, and experience. Invariably such people view the conscience as simply a personal guide to one's moral actions. The job of society and schools is to help educate the conscience to line up with the collective conscience. Of course, each person is free to a certain extent to determine for himself his own moral standards.

Now I would not deny that culture and environment have an effect on one's conscience, for they surely do, but I am suggesting that their effect is not to establish the standards to which the conscience reacts, but rather to either reinforce or contradict what God has already written into the human conscience. That is why I would say that a small child's conscience is generally more reliable than an adult's, for there has been less opportunity for the child's conscience to be tampered with.

To summarize, then, the conscience is an aspect of the immaterial part of man (surgeons can't operate on it and medicine won't cure it) which sounds an alarm when one's personal moral standards, originally given to him by God, are violated.

Functions of the conscience

After examining over 30 references to conscience in the New Testament, I would suggest that the conscience has essentially three functions:

- It discerns right from wrong.
- It predisposes one to do right.
- It produces remorse when one chooses to do wrong.

1. It discerns right from wrong. We are not a blank tablet when born; we have innate moral knowledge. Every person knows when he comes into this world that it is
 right to love and wrong to hate,
 right to share and wrong to be selfish,
 right to preserve life and wrong to kill,
 right to nurture children and wrong to abuse them,
 right to tell the truth and wrong to lie,
 right to respect property and wrong to steal,
 right to be loyal and wrong to be a traitor.

These truths are written into our very constitution.

But does that mean our consciences are always infallible in discerning right from wrong? No, because there are certain distortions of the conscience that can make it unreliable (which we're going to look at in a minute). But the conscience is an important tool, given to us by God, to help us discern right from wrong.

2. It predisposes one to do right. It would do no good for the conscience to discern the right thing if it provided no motivation to do the right thing. But it does. It never forces us to do right but it strongly nudges us in that direction. That still small voice, for example, says, “Pay your taxes!”, according to Romans 13:5-6: “Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience. This is also why you pay taxes. . . .”

3. It causes pain when one chooses to do wrong. I would suggest that even if the conscience discerned right from wrong *and* predisposed one to do right, it would have little influence over us if it weren't for its ultimate weapon—the pain of remorse when we choose wrong. That pain can be so severe that it can drive a person to suicide. Byron was right when he wrote, “No ear can hear nor tongue can tell the tortures of that inward hell.”

Distortions of the conscience

We have already observed that even a believer's conscience is not infallible, but now I want us to examine three specific distortions of the conscience mentioned in Scripture.

1. It can grow weak. The conscience is referred to five times in 1 Corinthians 10:23-33, a passage which deals in some detail with the issue of doubtful things in the Christian experience, that is things which are morally gray. The specific issue at hand is the eating of meat offered first to idols. In the course of his instruction (as well as in the parallel passages in I Cor. 8 and Romans 14) Paul makes it clear that the one who has a conscience against eating such meat suffers from a weak conscience.

Of course, that's the opposite of the way the legalist sees himself. He thinks he's strong in his moral standards. But he is actually weak; his conscience bothers him about all sorts of insignificant things. He is too weak spiritually to enjoy his freedom in Christ and live by biblical principles, so he bolsters his precarious walk with God with all sorts of external spiritual props. I would not say that a weak conscience is sinful, but it is unhealthy.

Paul attempts two things with the Christian who has a weak conscience. First, he gently tries to educate him, because he knows the best answer to a weak conscience is better knowledge of God's word. For example, he tells him that idols don't exist, and therefore they can't really defile food. But he also bends over backwards to avoid offending him. The reason is that a weak conscience can easily become a defiled conscience, which is worse.

2. It can be defiled. In 1 Cor. 8, following a strong argument to the effect that eating meat offered to idols is not sinful, Paul says in verse 7, “However, not all men have this knowledge; but some being accustomed to the idol until now, eat food as if it *were* sacrificed to an idol; and their conscience being weak is *defiled*.” I would assume that a defiled conscience is a particular danger for Christians who already have weak consciences.

What he is saying is that it's unhealthy to have a weak conscience, but if you have one you

shouldn't intentionally violate it. Educate it, yes; violate it, no. If you do violate what you think is wrong you end up defiling your conscience, with the result that it is not going to be as reliable the next time you consult it on this or any other issue.

We should note that defilement of conscience is an especially serious problem for false teachers. Titus 1:15 speaks of just such individuals:

“To the pure, all things are pure; but to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their mind and their conscience are defiled. They profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him, being destestable and disobedient, and worthless for any good deed.”

Have you ever wondered how religious leaders can demand abortion rights and promote same-sex marriage, when God's Word is so clearly opposed to both? The only possible answer, in my estimation, is a total defilement of mind and conscience, brought about by false doctrine and/or long-term personal moral corruption.

Now the defilement of conscience can be very subtle. It can cause something wrong to appear right or something right to appear wrong. Let me share an example of each. I believe children have to be taught racial prejudice. A child naturally respects the image of God in another child and hardly even notices color, hair, or unusual physical features. But if over a period of time, whether by precept or example, the child is programmed, tampered with, defiled (either by direct teaching or by the behavior of those close to him) to believe that people of a certain race are inferior, eventually he will come to accept that particular wrong as right and his conscience will fail to sound the alarm it should.

On the other hand, the conscience can be defiled so as to make right look wrong. Paul struggled with this a great deal among the legalistic Christians of Galatia. They were more conservative than God, borrowing rules and regulations from the Old Covenant that were no longer in effect. The same problem is evident in the church today. There are some Christians who have a conscience against any and all forms of dancing. I would assert categorically that they weren't born with that moral standard, for small children naturally love to dance. Nor did they get such a standard from God's Word, for some forms of dancing are not only approved in Scripture but even commanded (see Psalm 149 and 150 for just two examples). I believe most people who have a conscience against dancing got that notion through a church tradition that is more conservative than God.

Please don't misunderstand me. I'm not even beginning to suggest that all forms of dancing are appropriate; rather what I'm fighting is the *condemnation* of all forms of dancing—folk dancing, square dancing, or even sacred dance.

So the conclusion I am driven to is that some people's consciences have been defiled so that wrong looks right and right looks wrong. But, believe it or not, there's something worse than a weak conscience or even a defiled one.

3. It can be seared. An American Indian once gave the following definition:
 “Conscience is a little three-cornered thing inside me. When I do wrong it turns and the corners

hurt me very much, but if I keep on doing wrong it turns so much that the corners come right off and it doesn't hurt me anymore.” It is possible for a person to defy the voice of his conscience habitually until it is reduced to complete insensitivity. I saw an interview on television of a man who had confessed the murder and mutilation of a number of people. When asked by the reporter if he had any regrets he responded, “Only that I didn't kill more.”

Friends, there are people who are evil incarnate, and our culture has a very difficult time figuring out what to do about them. The intelligentsia wants desperately to believe that individuals come into this world basically good, that no one is irredeemable, and that the death penalty is incompatible with a civilized society. But then along comes someone like Adolph Hitler or Charlie Manson or Sadam Hussein, and they don't know how to deal with it.ⁱⁱ

Well, we can explain it as the result of a seared conscience. These people have sinned so much and for so long that their consciences are no longer operative. Believe it or not, such a condition can even be found among church people. Paul says in 1 Timothy 4:1, “But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron.”

Probably few of us here this morning are in grave danger of a totally seared conscience, but the fact is the conscience of any one of us can become seared in some particular area of our lives. Years ago a well-known pastor in the Twin Cities and a leader in world missions was fired after being arrested for molesting little boys for 20 years! How could that happen when he was preaching truth, leading people to Christ, helping to heal marriages, and setting an example of godliness in virtually every other area of his life? It was undoubtedly because years ago he allowed habitual sin in that area to sear his conscience.

I don't know in what area of your life you are most in danger of a seared conscience, but I dare say there is probably *some* area for each of us. It may be an illicit moral relationship; it may be greed or lying or gossip; it could be pride or self-sufficiency. Whatever it is, if we see in God's Word that the behavior or attitude is wrong but do it anyway, habitually and with little or no remorse, we are probably experiencing a seared conscience in that area.

Returning now to Hebrews 9, we are first confronted with several clear statements to the effect that the cleansing of the conscience was impossible under the Old Covenant but available under the New.

The cleansing of the conscience was impossible under the Old Covenant. Why?

1. Because the sacrificial system provided only temporary outward cleansing, not permanent inward cleansing. (9:9-10,13) Verse 9 says “the gifts and sacrifices being offered (under the Old Covenant) were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper. They are only . . . external regulations applying until the time of the new order.” And look again at 9:13: “The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially

unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean.” These external provisions offered ritual cleansing from the defilement of the flesh, not spiritual cleansing of the inner life.

In effect I believe the author is saying that OT sacrifices dealt with symptoms, kind of like aspirin with a fever, but were unable to heal the real illness. They could forestall divine judgment on the individual but they couldn't give him a sense of peace and security in his relationship with God. The conscience of the person bringing a sacrifice was never freed from feelings of guilt because the guilt itself was never removed. A deep and abiding sense of forgiveness was impossible.

2. Because the sacrificial system stirred up the *consciousness* of sin without relieving the *conscience*. (10:1-4) Let's take a peak into the next chapter:

“The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming--not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.”

What is implied here is that the sacrificial system actually worked against the clearing of the conscience, because it never let a person forget. There were constant reminders in the constant sacrifices. Every offering that was made testified to the inadequacy of the previous offering and reminded the worshiper that another offering must follow. That kept the consciousness of sin continually before the people. The only hope was for the conscience to be purged from this constant awareness of failure. So God made provision for the cleansing of the conscience.

Cleansing of the conscience is available under the New Covenant. How?

1. Cleansing is obtained through the blood of Christ. Let's read 9:13 again, only this time let's add verse 14:

“The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. (It dealt adequately with the symptoms). How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!”

Please understand, there is only one ultimate cure for a guilty conscience. It is not confession,ⁱⁱⁱ it is not penance, it is not religious activity, it is not promising to do better. It is plainly and simply the death of Christ. He didn't just deal with the symptoms, namely sins, but with the disease, namely sin. He offers to cleanse not just the outside but the inside, to the point of making us new creatures.^{iv} Did you notice the third verse of *Join All the Glorious Names*, which we sang earlier in the service?

Jesus, my great High Priest, Offered His blood, and died;

*My guilty conscience seeks
No sacrifice beside:
His powerful blood did once atone,
And now it pleads before the throne.*

2. Cleansing enables us to serve the living God. Our consciences are not cleansed by the blood of Christ just so we can sleep well and avoid knots in our stomachs. The ultimate purpose, says 9:14, is so that we may serve the living God. You see, that's man's highest end but he cannot do it effectively when his conscience is constantly accusing him. Have you ever tried to witness or teach Sunday School or sing when your conscience was troubling you deeply? Then you know what he's talking about. But the blood of Christ assures us that our sin has been paid for and therefore, we are acceptable to God. The conscience still sounds an alarm when necessary, but it can no longer convince us we are worthless.

3. Cleansing allows us to draw near to God. (10:22) I want us to just glance at a passage we will examine more closely in a later message, and that is 10:22: "Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience." None of us will try to enter boldly into the presence of God in prayer if we are plagued with a guilty conscience. In fact, we will probably try to stay as far away from God as possible until we find cleansing. Pastor Steve Zeisler of Peninsula Bible Church asks,

Have you ever wanted to pray but felt unable to do so because of guilt? When I feel that way, I think that if I could be "good" for awhile, change my habits and clean up my act, then I could sneak into the presence of God with my prayers. I feel so burdened by what I have done and so responsible for my actions, I imagine I may not go into the presence of God until I do something, until I make some offering for sin that will allow me access. When we do that we deny the message of Hebrews. Christ died once and for all. There is nothing we can do that will add to that. If we choose to try we are denying him."

Conclusion: Years ago an evangelist had just completed a series of tent meetings and was pulling up stakes (literally). A young man approached him in tears and asked what he had to do to be saved. The evangelist answered, "Sorry, it's too late." "Oh no," was the response, "I *knew* I should have gone forward when the invitation was given!" "That's not what I mean," the evangelist said, "I mean it's too late for you to *do* anything because it's *already been done*. Everything that could be done for your salvation has already been done."

I might add that everything that could be done to deal with your guilty conscience has already been done too. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and allow Him to cleanse your conscience.

i. If the conscience is given to every man at conception, then it must be distinct from the Holy Spirit, and indeed it is. Believer and unbeliever alike have a conscience; but the believer has the Holy Spirit as an additional and superior witness to God's moral law. Further evidence of the distinction between the conscience and the Holy Spirit can be found in the fact that the believer's conscience can be weak and even defiled, but such could never be said of the Holy Spirit.

ii. Another example is found in the book *Peace Child*, by Don Richardson, who went as a pioneer missionary to some very primitive natives in Irian Jaya. Richardson found a tribe whose highest achievement was the practice of deceit and treachery. If they could convince a member of a neighboring tribe to accept their offers of generous hospitality and get him to relax his guard and trust them as friends, then they would turn on him and murder him when he least expected it. That was considered the epitome of manhood. I cannot believe that God programmed the Sawi Indians any differently than the rest of humanity, but generations of practiced treachery resulted in a wrong being accepted as a right, with the result that consciences no longer sounded the same alarm.

iii. It struck me as I was studying this section of Hebrews that nothing was said about repentance and confession relative to the cleansing of our consciences. But then this whole portion focuses almost exclusively on Christ and His finished work. The author is assuming his readers understand that in order for the blood of Christ to be applied to their own lives they must exercise repentance and personal faith in Him. While the words “repentance” and “confession” are not mentioned in the passage, one could easily see them as included in the phrase, “Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith” (10:22). One who refused to repent of his sin or confess it could certainly not draw near to God with a sincere heart.

In fact, I would suggest three practical steps we can take to maintain a strong, pure conscience.

1. Repent of known sin and confess it to God. 1 John 1:9 says, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” I believe the cleansing here includes the cleansing of the conscience. We need to keep short accounts with God. Unconfessed sin means interrupted fellowship and can lead to a defiled or even a seared conscience. But if our sin has affected others it may be necessary for us to confess it to them also and perhaps even to make restitution. A pure conscience is sometimes costly. The Apostle Paul used the verb “strive” to describe his own efforts to maintain a pure conscience before God and man (Acts 24:16).

2. Know and adopt God's standards. We are all born with a conscience respecting God's moral laws, but we also live in a fallen world and are sinful creatures. The result is that God's standards have been distorted and our consciences do not always sound an alarm at the right time and place. The only solution is to study and learn what God's standards are and commit ourselves to adopting His standards even if we aren't comfortable with them.

As parents we must make sure we are reinforcing God's standards with our children. I always appreciated the fact that my parents distinguished between the rules of our church and God's rules. We were not allowed to attend movies because my dad pastored a church in which many of the people considered movies immoral. But my dad never justified the rule by calling movies immoral. He simply said, “As long as we're serving a church whose people have a conscience against movies, we will defer to their conscience.”

3. Accept by faith the cleansing Jesus offers. This is the flip side of our first point—repent and confess. I mentioned that Paul strived to maintain a pure conscience, but there's no way that striving alone will do the job, for we can never **earn** a clear conscience. There is a point beyond which repentance, confession, and even the study of God's Word cannot take us. We must say in

simple faith, "I believe." I believe Jesus' blood was shed for me. I believe His sacrifice has cleaned my slate and cleansed my conscience. I believe God is not going to bring my sins up again for He has chosen to forget them. Therefore, I'm going to forget them and I denounce the Devil when he reminds me of them.

iv. Isaac Watts wrote a hymn that goes like this:

*Not all the blood of beasts
On Jewish altars slain
Could give the guilty conscience peace,
Or wash away the stain.*

*But Christ, the heavenly Lamb,
Takes all our sins away,
A sacrifice of nobler name
And richer blood than they.*