

Conscience - Part 1

by Dai Patterson

Dai Patterson explores the significance of conscience in the believer's life and its impact on their relationship with God.

Scripture: Proverbs 20:27, Matthew 6:33, John 1:6, 1 Corinthians 10:23

Topics: "Christian Ethics", "Spiritual Growth"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of having a strong conscience tempered with the love of God. He explains that a strong conscience is not dominating or overbearing, but rather one that can bear the weaknesses of others. The speaker raises questions about the function and operation of conscience, as well as how it can be readjusted if it is wrong. He also acknowledges that there may be individuals in the audience with different types of consciences, such as legalistic or scrupulous ones. The sermon references Proverbs 20:27, which states that the spirit of man is the lamp of the Lord, searching all the innermost parts of his being. The speaker concludes by mentioning the schedule for the upcoming sessions, where he and another speaker will continue discussing the topic of conscience.

Transcript

What I want to do, in the course of my sessions, and we've made an arrangement. Tomorrow morning, Ron is going to speak, and then tomorrow night, yes, tomorrow night and Monday morning, I'm going to speak, and then Ron's going to do Monday night and Tuesday morning, and I'm going to do Tuesday night and Wednesday morning, and Ron's going to finish on Wednesday night. Did you get that? Good.

That's the arrangement. So, talking about hair, I was walking on the Great Wall of China with Pei, and a young man, who used to be in a fellowship in Lampeter, and has spent six years in China, and a year in Taiwan, and has come back to do some further studies, and he's learned Chinese, and he's learned it really well, and we had walked a fairly long way up the Great Wall, and turned around and were on our way back down, and as we were coming down, there were three or four Chinese girls and they were all chattering away to each other, and they saw us approaching, and they said something in Chinese, which of course I didn't understand, but Nathan did, and he stopped their dead in their tracks, and he spoke to them in Chinese, and the look on their faces, and he said something to them, and they nodded and said yes, and I said, what did they want, Nathan? He said, they want to take a photograph of themselves with the golden haired one. So I got me pictures of my head travelling around China, but they must have got their colours a little bit mixed up by Geoff.

I want to talk about the conscience, and I'm going to take my session, and I'm going to look through the subject. I want Geoff tonight to kind of introduce it, make some observations, comments as to what the conscience is. I've got a couple of quotations, which are not mine, they come from some very clever people, and I want to look at the subject, because I have come to the conclusion that if the conscience is right, then to pick up on what Ron has spoken about, relationship with the Father and the Son is all so easy, and praying is all so easy, and fellowship with Him is all so easy, and faith is all so easy when the conscience is right.

If it's wrong, then no amount of telling ourselves, no amount of trying to summon up something called faith ever works, and that is a constant nagging of uncertainty. I'm going to touch upon a whole range of different things. I'm going to relate the conscience to perfection, because I think when we talk about perfection, we must talk about it in relation to the conscience, not necessarily to our personalities, assuming that everything is absolutely perfect within, but in conscience it can be.

I'm going to relate conscience to faith. You may know that in the New Testament, and perhaps you've noticed as you've read, that the word conscience never appears in the Old Testament. Never.

It's an entirely New Testament word. In fact, it occurs 32 times in the New Testament. Isn't that interesting? Yes.

And of those 32 times, 21 times it's Paul who uses the word. Peter touches it, and the Hebrew epistle speaks of it. Luke does in the Acts of the Apostles, and John does in John's Gospel, Chapter 8. But it's mainly Paul who talks about the conscience 21 times.

Now, although the word doesn't occur in the Old Testament, you can most evidently see the operating of conscience. And I guess the outstanding chapter would be Psalm 51, where you read of David's confession following his sin, and the exposing of it by Nathan the prophet, and he calls out. And you see a man whose conscience has been deeply moved.

When you come into the New Testament, and I'm just going to read it to you, listen to this lot. The conscience bears witness, gives testimony, produces action because things are done for conscience's sake. It's described as being good, as void of offence, as pure, as toward God, as weak, as seared, as defiled, as evil, and finally, as cleansed.

How about that? That's the conscience. Now, how do you define it? How do you put a clear, precise definition on this word conscience? It's most difficult. The Bible doesn't give one.

We're going to go into the Proverbs and into the New Testament in a moment or two, and we'll see some indicators as to what it is, but to give a definition is most difficult. But if you go back to the original word, and as I've already indicated it doesn't appear in the Old Testament, and seemingly it's very rare to find it in classical Greek, but the word is made up of two words put together. The word s-u-n, sun, which means together, and the word to know, which is interesting because Ron has already touched upon it.

To know with oneself. And that's fundamentally what the word really comes down to. It is a knowing together with oneself.

Something within that bears witness. A knowing of one's own conduct, behaviour, lifestyle, as it's related to my moral obligation. Now, before I became a Christian, I can think back to occasions when I knew the operating of conscience and yet the inability to live up to the moral demands that my conscience made

upon me.

I could not live up to its demand, which indicates that something is wrong with it. Something is wrong with the conscience. Let me read you this.

Now, I don't know who this gentleman is. If anybody does, maybe they can help me out. Well, he came across a gentleman called Bishop Butler.

I presume he was an Anglican. He was. Oh, I don't know whether it was Tom.

This goes back quite a long way, I think. It might have been his great-great-granddad or something. But this is what Bishop Butler said.

Had it strength as it had right, had it power as it had manifest authority, it would absolutely govern the world. Let me read that again. Can I? Had it strength as it had right, had it power as it had manifest authority, it would absolutely govern the world.

But sadly, conscience does not have power, does it? It doesn't have strength, does it? And you've only got to live in this world and turn on your TV and listen to the atrocities being committed and you wonder, what's happened to conscience? It does not have the ability, the strength to live up to its moral obligation. Okay. How many of you have ever read Roland Bateson's book on the life of Martin Luther, Here I Stand? If you haven't, it's well worth reading.

And you know that Luther was brought before the Council of, well, I always call it Worms, but you've got to call it Worms, apparently. And at the Council of Worms, Luther was challenged as to the articles that he had written. And this is a quotation of Luther's.

The famous part of the quotation is, Here I stand, I can do no other. But it comes in a much bigger sentence. Listen to this.

Unless therefore I am convinced by the testimony of Scripture or by the clearest reasoning, unless I am persuaded by means of the passages I have quoted, and unless they thus render my conscience bound by the Word of God, I cannot and will not recant. For it is unsafe for a Christian to speak against his conscience. Notice the word speak.

And Rahn's already touched upon that too. It's unsafe for a Christian to speak against his conscience. Here I stand, I can do no other.

May God help me. Amen. That's Luther.

How about that? And it was because he was persuaded in conscience that he could not recant. You will know that many of his peers died as a consequence. They could not recant.

Their conscience forbade them to go back on what they were persuaded of. And this night you and I must all of us understand that we have to be persuaded in our own minds of any biblical position. Else we will not stand and conscience becomes the motivation.

It writes within our hearts a certainty. I know this is true. Let me tell you a little incident from my own life.

Years and years and years ago I came to Exeter as a student. This is when I first met you, Stella. It's a long time ago, isn't it? Oh, you've aged a bit, Malc.

And I remember it was here that God in Exeter, the Lord met with me and filled me with the Holy Spirit. And I remember writing home to Mum and Dad and kind of saying, Mum, Dad, something wonderful has happened. God has brought me into the most wonderful relationship with Him.

And I wrote this long letter and sent it off home. And holiday time came and back I went to the homeland. And I remember sitting in the back room with Mum.

Mum was much more open than Dad. And I remember sitting down with Mum and we were chatting about these things. And she said this to me.

Do you understand, son? She was fairly astute, I guess. She said, if what you are saying is right, then what I've been brought up to believe all my life is wrong. Oh, that's putting it in black and white.

And now I realise that's not quite the case because I believe that Mother had heard things and understood things that were right, but had not come into all that God had got for her. So she said to me, and she was like, you know, now you'd better go away, son, and think about it again, you see. So I said to my Mum, OK, Mum, I will.

And what she had said to me had really challenged me because I had to really consider do I honestly, really, with all my heart, believe that what I was stating in letter and now to Mum, I really believe, could I stake everything on it? And I remember going back to talk to Mother some time later and we sat in the back room in our little tiny place in Cardiff and I said to her, do you know what, Mum? I said, I'm right. And I'll tell you what the consequence of that was. She and I knelt together in our little back room and I prayed for her.

And I said, I'm right, Mum. And boy, I'll tell you, I had struggles in my own conscience. I had to know, Lord, am I right? Do I stake everything on this? Is what I believe in what I believe that you have come to do is my conscience so persuaded, convicted that I could not say other than, Mother, I'm right.

That incident has been etched on my memory. I remember it, I talk about it when I come on to these kinds of subjects because we've got to know with a knowing. And I am going to, in the course of, I don't know, whenever it is, in my sessions, I'm going to talk about the relationship between the conscience and knowledge, knowing.

And how knowing, and you touched it, Ron, knowing and going on knowing and ever increasing in knowing adjusts and readjusts the conscience. So I'm thinking right and I'm responding right and I'm behaving right. But the conscience needs constantly to be educated.

And by that I don't mean educated by simply, you know, reading a book. I mean God taught. I like the little phrase you find in Ephesians chapter 4. I can't think what verse it is, but Paul is talking about learning Christ.

That phrase, I think, is one of the most wonderful ones in the New Testament. He talks about learning Christ. That's how your conscience is constantly readjusted and thinking is brought into line with the will of God.

When I was a student, I did sciences. I did biology and chemistry. And I struggled with the whole evolution creation debate.

I was somewhat on my own in my student days because all my fellow students were all evolutionists and they had been taught it, brought up with it. And if I opened my mouth, I got the normal kind of laughs and ridicules and snidey comments. You can't really believe this.

But listen to this. This is Charlie Darwin. He was a proper Charlie, I recognize.

Charles Darwin wrote In the Descent of Man of all the differences between man and the lower animals, the moral sense or conscience is by far the most important. Even he recognized there was this quality, this characteristic, this something that set apart the lower animals from man. One of the great troubles that evolutionists have is how do you describe the development of morals and a moral judgment which is set in the heart of man.

When did man become a moral being? Now, there's another gentleman. Let me just quote his name. It's great quoting names, isn't it? It looks as if I know what I'm talking about.

This gentleman was... I've never heard of him before, but I came across him. He's called Schopenhauer. You're all familiar with Schopenhauer? You're not? Have you? Schopenhauer.

Shop until you drop. Schopenhauer said this. Listen to this.

Now, this is an evolutionist, a complete humanist. This is his statement. Conscience is one-fifth prejudice, one-fifth vanity, one-fifth the fear of man, one-fifth superstition, and one-fifth custom.

In other words, it's a bit like a kind of a tossed salad. You mix it all in, throw it up, and you end up with something which society is dictating. And part of my background and part of the evolutionary thing that I came through suggested just that.

There is no such thing as conscience. Conscience is simply the corporate view or understanding or position of the society in which you happen to live. But interestingly, when you come into your Bible and you start to read Scripture, you will notice that every time conscience relates to the individual, not to the general, but to the individual.

You, me, my conscience, your conscience. Now, where does it come from? Conscience, that is. What's its origin? What is it? Where is it? What is it a function of? How does it operate? What does it do? How does it get readjusted if it's wrong? What happens if you've got people who've got a strong conscience, a weak conscience, a legalistic one, a scrupulous one? We're going to touch upon all sorts of them.

And I would suppose that in this room there will be one or two, maybe even three or four, who will have maybe some aspect of the kind of conscience that I'm going to be talking about. Okay. Let's turn back into the Old Testament and I want to go into the Proverbs.

And in chapter 20, and I'm going to be done by about nine o'clock, so you'll be very pleased, we're not going to be too long. Chapter 20 of the book of Proverbs in verse 27. Now let's read it most carefully and note.

The Spirit of Man is the lamp of the Lord searching all the innermost parts of His being. Now let's read it again. The Spirit of Man is the lamp of the Lord searching, searching, searching all the innermost parts of

His being.

Interestingly, that could be translated the chambers of His being. And we are fairly sort of complex, aren't we? Some of us more than others. And it's wonderful to have that which can search and expose and get into every nook and cranny of our being.

And how much we need that. So that there are no grey areas, no uncertain areas, with everything laid bare, open before the eyes of Him with whom we have to do. It's a bit like... I remember reading years back all the offerings in the book of Leviticus.

And I sat myself down and I thought I've got to kind of get through this and really get to terms with it. One of the ones that really blessed me was when they were making the offerings that were going to go up in the fire and they had to cut the thing right down, open it right out, wash all its inside parts, put it all together and up it went in the fire. And I thought, now that's it, Lord, that's what I want to be like.

Everything wide open. No areas unexposed to the washings, to the shingings, everything laid bare before the eyes of Him with whom we have to do. I wonder how many of us are radically honest with ourselves like that.

I think if I were honest, I'd have to say it's been a process with me. It's been the goodness and the grace of God that's brought me just to face up to the real, real me. And sometimes, and I would guess most people in this room would probably have to say sometimes, we don't sometimes like what we see.

But how wonderful that God's faithfulness and God's grace will persevere and go on working and moving and bringing everything into the searchlight of His grace. And that's the statement then of the Proverbs. And I think probably one of the best definitions of conscience that you're likely to find.

And clearly, conscience is not a corporate decision, a view gathered from a multitude of people within a society. It's not one-fifth this and one-fifth that and one-fifth the other. It is my individual, personal, given spirit which operates within and is God's means.

It's His lamp. Now notice, my spirit is not the light, but my spirit is the lamp. Something comes from the lamp which is the light and that's why you and I need the blessed Holy Spirit and Christ the light of this world to shine within my spirit so that the lamp casts light upon all that's within.

Now, for what purpose? For what purpose? So that God can see? No, no, no, no. So that I can see. He sees it all anyway, doesn't He? But I need to be able to see it so where I see something is wrong there can be a readjustment.

Let me give you one of the greatest examples from the New Testament that I know and I'm going to come back to this maybe. But it is this. I'm so grateful that this book tells it as it is.

And when you read the life of the Apostle Peter you, perhaps like me, are staggered at the way that God got hold of him and used him, especially in his ministry amongst the Jews. And he was plainly raised up of God for that purpose. But when you come into the Acts of the Apostles and particularly chapter 10 you discover that this man was thoroughly bigoted.

He was prejudiced. Now, when I read that, and again it goes back a long time, but I remember thinking to myself, well Lord, I thought he was perfect. I thought this baptism in the Holy Spirit made this man

uniquely, wonderfully, impossibly perfect.

Surely that can't be the case, but there it was written in the book that this fellow was prejudiced. Now, why was he? Because of his background, because of his upbringing, and he, like I guess most others of his day, looked upon Gentiles as being dogs. I remember reading, I think it was either in one of the laws of the Pharisees, they would pray, Oh God, thank you that you never made me a Gentile or a woman.

Isn't that awful ladies? But that's the way they were. Talk about bigotry and prejudice. And this man Peter was brought up in it, and suddenly the light, the lamp, and the light within the lamp is shed abroad in the innermost person of him, in the inner chambers of his thinking, in the deepest places of his heart, and he discovers he's prejudiced.

And what does God do? Well, he teaches him, and his conscience has to be completely readjusted, and he goes in and preaches the gospel amongst a Gentile family. Now that's a great, great, great thing to understand, that that man was unaware of it. Perhaps he had glimpses, glimmers, maybe by the Spirit he'd begun to see something, but God stops him in his tracks, and he realises, well, and the Spirit of God readjusts.

And this man becomes, if you like, more available than he was previously, because something was dealt with in his being that deals with a prejudice, that he was perhaps maybe aware of, maybe not prepared to face, but the Spirit of God works. And I am ever so grateful to God that he will not give up on any one of us, but move and work and operate until everything is adjusted, readjusted, set properly, so we become a proper whole, body, soul and spirit. We are one integrated whole.

So, that's going to be my sort of theme. Now, two other Scriptures before I finish. Let's go back, let's go to John's Gospel, where John was, where Ron was in chapter 1. And here in the opening chapter, John uses a phrase that, well, I must say, I've thought about it, I've read about it, and the only conclusion I can come to, and if others have got some light on it, please come and talk to me, but in John's Gospel, in chapter 1, we read this, There came a man, verse 6, sent from God, whose name was John.

He came for a witness, that he might bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but he came that he might bear witness of the light. That was the true light.

We've heard of Christ already, this night, being the true light, the true light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man. Something in every man that is able, capable, of responding to the light. I cannot find any other explanation to that, except that it makes reference to conscience.

The word is not used. And then Paul, in his first Corinthian epistle, makes this statement in the first one, and in chapter 2, and he says this in verses 10 through to 12, For to us God revealed them through the Spirit, for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the Spirit, small s, the Spirit of the man which is in him? Even so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit, big S, of God.

Now we have received not the Spirit, small s, of the world, but the Spirit, big S, who is from God, so that we might know the things freely given to us by God. That strikes me as being perhaps the closest definition to conscience in the New Testament. But there is something slightly different here, well more than slightly different, something different.

That statement is a reference to the man or the woman who has been born again of the Spirit of God and has operating in them not just their own human spirit, the lamp of the Lord, but their spirit now united to the Holy Spirit. And the true light has come and that light is now shining within. And what does that light do? It reveals.

It properly exposes, shows up, demonstrates the things which God has freely given to us. Isn't that wonderful? Now that is when the conscience becomes properly adjusted, properly able to live up to the moral obligations which it knows it must. Not now by some outward law, and I am going in the course of my time to talk about legalism and look at the weak conscience and look at the strong conscience and while I am on it, can I just make a passing observation? One of the biggest problems in church life are people with weak consciences, not strong ones.

Have a think about that one, we'll come back to it. Because weak consciences can be so legalistic and it seems it's the only way they can operate, but we'll come back to that. Don't worry about it tonight, will you? Sleep well.

God gave us all a strong conscience and strong consciences are not dominating, overbearing consciences. Strong consciences are ones which have been tempered with the love of God and can bear the weak ones. Now then, what more do I want to say? I think probably that's it.

So, I'm looking forward to the next 3 or 4 days and I'm sure the Lord is going to speak to us all. Alright, let's pray. We want to say, Father, thank you to you that you have done in and through your Son that work which is sufficient to make us clean in conscience so that we can, as we've heard already this night, come to you and say, Father, and know that there is nothing, nothing between us, nothing to prevent our speaking out that which we know to be true within that I have been fathered by the true and the living God that I am in relationship to Him.

We want, Father, in these days, please will you come and if we need to be taught in our conscience, teach us. If we need to be readjusted, readjust us. If we've been prejudiced in whatever way, come and deal with it.

Come and take out of us any attitude of conscience that makes us think we're superior. Come and take out of us, Lord, any weakness of conscience that makes us legalistic, judgmental. How wonderful, Lord, that you have come to put right this conscience that's been damaged by sin and needs constantly to be readjusted by the workings of the Spirit.

Then, Lord, we say to you, please, let the light shine through the lamp.

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