

Grace to You :: esp Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time

Keeping a Pure Conscience

Scripture: Numbers 5:6–7; Psalm 32:5; Matthew 5:23–24; Matthew 6:14–15; Acts 24:16; Hebrews 9:14

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John gives practical, biblical advice on how to sharpen the divinely-implanted tool for Christian growth—your conscience.

Through the years I've been a pastor, I have watched our culture unravel in its addiction to corruption. People are enslaved to sex, numb to violence, and terminally self-consumed. The rapid increase in the pervasiveness and openness of sin is paralleled by a decreasing sensitivity to conscience. And no wonder. People are trained to ignore their guilt—and yet their drowning in it.

Our culture has declared war on guilt. The very concept is considered medieval, obsolete, unproductive. People who trouble themselves with feelings of personal guilt are usually referred to therapists, whose task it is to boost their self-image. No one, after all, is supposed to feel guilty. Guilt is not conducive to dignity and self-esteem. Society encourages sin, but it will not tolerate the guilt sin produces.

But the answer to dealing with guilt is not to ignore it—that's the most dangerous thing you can do. Instead, you need to understand that God graciously implanted a powerful ally within you to aid you in the battle against sin. He gave you your conscience, and that gift is the key to bringing you joy and freedom.

If you find your conscience polluted by this fallen world, you are not alone. According to 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, Christians just like you come out of all kinds of sinful backgrounds, some of them quite wretched. But, through the blood of Christ, God has been gracious to "cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God" (Hebrews 9:14).

As a Christian, you have the capacity to walk before God with a clear conscience. In fact, that is your daily privilege and joy. Paul said, "I also do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience both before God and before men" (Acts 24:16).

That can be a daunting task in this world, but rest assured—you have every resource to keep a healthy, sensitive, and pure conscience. Here are some simple principles to remember involving confession, forgiveness, restitution, procrastination, and education.

Confession

Confess and forsake known sin . Examine your guilt feelings in light of Scripture. Deal with the sin God's Word reveals. Proverbs 28:13 says, "He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will find compassion." First John 1 speaks of confession of sin as an ongoing characteristic of the Christian life: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous

to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (v. 9).

We should certainly confess to those we have wronged: "Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed" (James 5:16). But above all, you should confess to the One whom sin offends most. As David wrote, "I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I did not hide; I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD'; and You forgave the guilt of my sin" (Psalm 32:5).

Forgiveness

Ask forgiveness and be reconciled to anyone you have wronged . Jesus instructed us,

Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering. (Matthew 5:23-24)

Jesus also said,

For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions. (Matthew 6:14-15)

Restitution

Make restitution to those you've wronged . God told Moses:

Speak to the sons of Israel, "When a man or woman commits any of the sins of mankind, acting unfaithfully against the LORD, and that person is guilty, then he shall confess his sins which he has committed, and he shall make restitution in full for his wrong and add to it one-fifth of it, and give it to him whom he has wronged." (Numbers 5:6-7)

The principle behind that law is binding on believers living in the New Testament era as well (cf. Luke 19:8; Philemon 19).

Procrastination

Don't procrastinate in clearing your wounded conscience . Paul said he did his best "to maintain always a blameless conscience both before God and before men" (Acts 24:16). Some people put off dealing with their guilt, thinking their conscience will clear itself in time. It won't. Procrastination allows the guilt feelings to fester. That in turn generates depression, anxiety, and other emotional problems.

Guilt feelings may persist long after the offense is forgotten, often spilling over to other areas of our lives. That's one reason people often feel guilty and are not sure why. Such confused guilt may be a symptom that something is terribly wrong spiritually. Paul may have had that in mind when he wrote, "To those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their mind and their consciences are defiled" (Titus 1:15).

Dealing with a wounded conscience immediately by heart-searching prayer before God is the only way to keep it clear and sensitive. Putting off dealing with guilt inevitably compounds the problems.

Education

Educate your conscience . A weak, easily grieved conscience results from a lack of spiritual knowledge (1 Corinthians 8:7). If your conscience is too easily wounded, don't violate it. To violate even a weak conscience is to train yourself to override conviction, and that will lead to overriding true conviction about real sin.

Moreover, violating the conscience is a sin in itself (v. 12; cf. Romans 14:23), bringing legitimate guilt for a real offense against God. So, respond to your conscience, even if it's weak, and then continue to inform your conscience with God's Word so it can begin to function with reliable data.

An important aspect of educating the conscience is teaching it to focus on the right object—divinely revealed truth. If your conscience looks only to personal feelings, it can accuse you wrongfully.

You are certainly not to order your life according to your feelings. A conscience fixed on feelings becomes unreliable. If you are subject to depression and melancholy, you of all people should not allow your conscience to be informed by your feelings. Despondent feelings will provoke unnecessary doubts and fears in the soul when not kept in check by a well-advised conscience. The conscience must be persuaded by God's Word, not by your feelings.

Furthermore, the conscience errs when the mind focuses wholly on your faltering in sin and ignores the triumphs of God's grace in you. True Christians experience both realities. Conscience must be allowed to weigh the fruit of the Spirit in your life as well as the remnants of your sinful flesh. It must see your faith as well as your failings. Otherwise the conscience will become overly accusing, prone to unwholesome doubts about your standing before God.

Learn to subject your conscience to the truth of God and the teaching of Scripture. As you do that, your conscience will be more clearly focused and better able to give you reliable feedback. With a trustworthy conscience, you have a powerful aid to spiritual growth and stability. With a clear conscience, you live in an abundance of freedom and joy.

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