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

Cauterizing the Conscience
Scripture: Selected Scriptures
Code: 80-235

This is, as we said earlier, the time which we set apart to come to the Lord's table. We do that at least every month and kind of alternate between a Sunday evening and a Sunday morning so that we can all participate. And along that line I want to address a subject that is appropriate.

The Bible tells us when we come to the Lord's table that we need to examine ourselves, and we need to look to see if there's sin in our lives. Self-examination is, of course, a critical and vital part of our spiritual life and development. Being honest with ourselves and honest before God calls for that self-examination and that's why the Bible says, "Let a man examine himself and then partake of the table."

In this matter of self-examination, we have to get in touch with our conscience. And I want to address that issue this morning. A number of years ago I wrote a book called The Vanishing Conscience which, at least for me, was a very, very important and foundational book and it is still in print, for which I'm grateful. But in that book I recounted a news report that I had read some years before.

It is 1984 and an Avianca jet crashed in Spain. As always, after a crash like that, investigators study the accident scene looking for the black box, the black box is the cockpit recorder and that's important so they can reconstruct the conversation as well as the electronics, the technology that is recorded in that black box unit to try to determine why the accident happened. Amazingly when they found the black box and they played the recording, it revealed that several minutes before the plane flew straight into the side of a mountain, a shrill computer synthesized voice from the plane's automatic warning system told the crew repeatedly in English, "Pull up...pull up...pull up...pull up." The pilate inexplicably snapped back, "Shut up, Gringo," and flipped off the switch. Minutes later the plane smashed into the mountain and everybody was, of course, instantly killed.

And when I read that it appeared to me to be a great illustration of how the conscience functions and how modern people treat their conscience. Conscience is the soul's warning system and it tells us when it's time to pull up, to go another direction, to make an immediate mid-course correction because we're flying into disaster.

Conscience is described for us in the second chapter of Romans, verses 14 and 15. Here we learn that everybody has a conscience when they come into the world. It's a gift from God given to every human being. The pagans, called Gentiles here, the nations, who do not have the law...they don't

have the Mosaic Law, they don't have the Scripture but they do instinctively things that are in the law because though they don't have the written law, they are a law to themselves. Now what that tells us is that when God made man He made him not only a physical creature, but He made him a spiritual creature. In his physical creation man has certain capabilities, certain reflexes. He has senses, physical senses. And in his spiritual creation he has also some moral senses, some moral reflexes, some moral information and that is the law of God written in the heart and everybody comes into the world has a sense of right and wrong, has a built-in ethical code, a built-in moral compass.

In addition, verse 15 says, "To the law written in their hearts their conscience bears witness." Now that introduces us to the conscience. The conscience is a witness. The conscience gives testimony. The conscience speaks and it speaks as to how we respond to the law. And so verse 15 says, "The conscience works in the thoughts alternately accusing or else defending."

Now let me sum that up by simply saying everybody who is created comes into the world with a sense of right and wrong. That is the law written in the hearts. In addition to that, God has put the conscience and the conscience is a warning device that sounds off when we violate that law, or affirms us when we obey it. The conscience is not that law, it is merely the warning device.

As such, it's priceless to us because when it says, "Pull up, pull up, pull up," it is giving us critical information, warning us that continued flight in the same path is deadly. Conscience is to the soul what pain is to the body. We would like to avoid pain as much as possible, but at the same time we recognize that pain is a gift from God. If you didn't have pain, you would destroy yourself. So we learned last week, didn't we, in studying leprosy, or Hansen's Disease, once you are anesthetized, once your nerves no longer respond, you can literally destroy yourself because you feel nothing. Pain is critical to physical preservation. And so the conscience is critical to spiritual preservation.

Now when you come into the world with this sort of basic morality and a responsive witness to that morality that either indicts you or honors you in response to how you conduct yourself according to that innate morality, when you come into the world that's only a minimal provision by God. To strengthen your conscience, you need to continually inform not only of that basic morality that's written in your heart, but of that very refined and comprehensive moral law recorded...where?...in Scripture. As you raise your children you teach them the law of the Lord. Deuteronomy 6 says you teach them the law of the Lord when you stand down...stand up, lie down, sit down, walk in the way. In other words, all the time...all the time you're teaching, you're teaching, you're teaching your children the law of God because you want that law, that basic law written in their hearts strengthened and developed and built up and fulfilled and completed. And so you teach them the law of God. And the more they know about the law of God, the richer their understanding of Scripture, the more truth there to activate the conscience to warn them. The more information the conscience has, the better.

Our society attacks that. Our society under the prince of the power of the air has two objectives. Objective number one is destroy the moral law so that the conscience is misinformed. Train people against what is innately the law that is in their hearts when they're born, give them a new morality, not the morality of the Bible, not God's law. We want people not to think biblically. We want them freed from that so we'll construct another morality that will pour that into their lives through every means possible. That's destructive.

And then the second thing that society wants to do orchestrated by the enemy of your souls is to tell you that your conscience is a liar. That's what's wrong with you isn't sin, it's a lack of...what?...self-esteem. It isn't that you're bad, it's that you're good and you need to think better of yourself. And so you need to turn off your switch. You need to say to your conscience, "Shut up, Gringo." The wisdom of our age, the modern psychology says that guilt feelings are nearly always wrong, always erroneous, always harmful...switch them off. You're good, you're noble, and if you do go wrong it's because you're a victim of someone else's views, or negative influence. The guilty conscience isn't healthy, it shouldn't be tolerated, switch it off.

So we have a whole society of people who are working hard to do that and succeeding and flying blind into a deadly crash. So the society wants to do two things, misinform the conscience and desensitize it. And so, always the world works on overturning biblical morality and replacing it with the tolerance of sin and it works on silencing the conscience...and that's doubly deadly. The conscience is the soul reflecting on itself.

And frankly, the conscience is at the core of what it means to be human, as opposed to being an animal. What distinguishes human beings and animals is self-consciousness, that is the ability of the soul to reflect upon itself. Humans are the only creatures in the material world who can think about their thoughts, who can contemplate why they think the way they think, who can understand their motives, who can make moral self-evaluations. And that is a God-given gift, the innate ability to sense what is right and wrong, the innate ability to know that I am flying into a deadly mountain. And when conscience is violated, it produces feelings of shame, feelings of regret, feelings of guilt, feelings of fear. You think somebody's watching, feelings of anxiety, feelings of disgrace and feelings of anguish and feelings of depression. And conscience is designed by God to create those feelings when the law is violated.

Conventional wisdom today says "Shut that stuff up. Those are illegitimate internal indictments, guilt and shame are not legitimate, you are good, you maybe just made a mistake. You're not to blame, society is to blame, or your parents are to blame, or you ate too many Twinkies, or whatever. You're having a reaction." Everything has a quasi or medical psychological explanation, it's some disorder, or some syndrome that is somehow invaded your innate goodness. Just tell your conscience to shut up.

Now sadly, if you work at this you can succeed. The pilate could flip the switch and shut it off, and he did and so can people. It is possible to nullify, to minimize, to silence conscience. In fact, there are people who have worked so hard at it and so well at it that their conscience has become so convoluted that their conscience which was a device given by God becomes so twisted that they are actually proud about their sins. We say about people like that that they have done something that is unconscionable. There are people who parade their iniquities like notches on their belt.

I always think about that when I see the Gay/Lesbian Pride Parade. How do you get to that point? How do you get to that point where you're reveling and boasting in your iniquity? What happened to conscience?

Paul describes such convoluted consciences in Philippians 3:19 when he says, "Their glory, their boast is in their shame." Amazing, you can so destroy your conscience that you literally come to the point where you consider the highest point of your honor your iniquity. Paul described it in Titus 1:15, "To those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, both their mind and their conscience are defiled." You can get to a point where nothing is pure, your conscience is silent, non-functioning, totally defiled. Everything comes to you defiled because your mind is defiled. You have abandoned the true morality, you have a defiled body of truth you believe, or really body of deception, you have a defiled belief system and you have defiled conscience and to you all things are defiled. On the other hand, to the pure all things are...what?...pure.

It's essential to understand, and just make sure it's clear in your mind, that the conscience doesn't act independently. It can only act upon a belief system. It is not a belief system. The conscience is not the law of God. It is not the voice of God. It is not moral law. It is simply a mechanism.

On that airplane there was radar and radar shoots out waves and finds the mountain, sends back the bounce...the message is, "You're getting closer and closer to a mountain." The little voice which is like conscience says, "Pull up, pull up, pull up." You have to have the reality dealt with in order for the conscience to react properly. So your conscience works off your belief system. The more you know about the Word of God, the more you're consistently in the Word of God, learning the Word of God, hearing the Word of God, meditating on the Word of God, the more informed your conscience is truly informed. But even a Buddhist has a conscience and feels guilty by violating Buddhist ceremonies. The Mormon has a conscience. The Muslim has a conscience. Anybody's belief system informs their conscience. And a wrong belief system will wrongly inform the conscience because it's only a device that reacts to what you believe.

Satan knows that. He knows that he can conquer people and devastate their lives two ways. One, by misinforming their conscience. They might have a sensitive, active conscience even like a fastidious Pharisee or somebody who is an orthodox Jew or an orthodox anything who covers every

single jot and tittle of everything, a very fastidious conscience, but it's all pointless because the system is wrong, it's not the truth. And so this fastidious conscience is reacting to deceptive things. Or he can destroy the conscience so that by constantly overruling the conscience it no longer functions, or better yet, he can just destroy both. Take a whole society like ours and give them a false moral system and then give them a whole psychological view that teaches them how to silence their conscience and they don't have radar or warning system.

Conscience is the human faculty that judicates human behavior by the light of the highest perceived moral standard. And if your moral standard is low enough, it has nothing to say to your conscience that can help you. And/or if you have trained your conscience into silence, you're also in a disastrous condition.

Let me say it another way. The conscience is a skylight, not a lamp. It doesn't have light of its own, it just lets light in. The light is the truth, the light is the law of God and it shines through the conscience. Its effectiveness is determined by the purity of the light and the clarity of the conscience. If you have a skylight in your house and it's filthy dirty, you're not going to enjoy the light, you have to clean it. The pure light can only shine through if it's clean. So Paul is very concerned that we have the pure light of truth and that the conscience is clean. He talked in 1 Timothy 3:9 about a clear conscience, a clean conscience. And he warns, 1 Corinthians 8:7, against anything that would muddy the conscience, or as we read earlier, Titus 1:15, anything that would dirty or defile the conscience. Paul wrote about a calloused conscience, hardened over with callouses, insensitive, 1 Corinthians 8:10. He wrote about a wounded conscience that had been wounded to the degree that it no longer functioned in verse 12 of that same chapter. And he also mentioned to Timothy a seared conscience, literally burned over. I have a section on my back that was when I was thrown out of a car I slid about 75...well I slid 120 yards down the highway at 75 miles an hour and created some significant scar tissue in the middle of my back, it has no feeling whatsoever. It has no sense whatsoever, the nerves were permanently destroyed in that area. To keep the conscience quiet, all you have to do is just literally destroy it, just burn it off or callous it, or wound it, and that's what people are being told to do today, don't listen to your conscience, it's lying to you, you're a lot better than that. And then informing them wrongly about the truth, they don't have the right moral law and they don't have a sensitive conscience and truly they are flying blind.

Now why am I talking about this? Because, people, I'm telling you, this is the society in which we live. Why do so many people in the church...you hear about it and you read about it, including pastors...all of a sudden crash morally? Why? Why does that happen? They're just flying along and they've got the congregation in the plane and they crash. And somebody says, "Whoa, what went wrong?" That is not the beginning of anything, that's not some serendipitous thing, that's not just some accident, people crash for the very reasons I'm talking to you right now, because they're not rightly dealing in the inside with sin issues.

People say to me often, they say, "John, don't you ever do that, don't you ever run off with some woman. Don't you do that. What would happen if you did that?" What...that would...you know, we see this happening again and again...don't do that. Or people say to me, "Who's holding you accountable? Who holds you accountable?" And that's a fair question and I could say, "Well, the elders at the church, pastors that are friends, their expectations of me raise the level of my accountability and I have friends around me who have high expectations. I have you as a congregation that I would never want to disappoint. I would never want to bring disrepute upon the name of Jesus Christ, or dishonor His Word, or the pastorate, or the ministry, or anything that would wound or harm you. There's accountability there. My precious wife, Patricia, who is the most intimate point of accountability for me. She is really God's gift to me. Do you know she expects me to 24 hours a day always live everything I've ever preached? This is ridiculous, you know. I mean, give me a little break here and there. Perfection comes difficult for me." But that's a high level of accountability and I have four children who expect me to live what I preach because they love the Lord that I preach. And now I have eleven grandchildren who have the same expectation. And so there's a lot of that human accountability.

But let me tell you something, folks, none of those people know what's in my mind...none of them. You don't, nobody does. First Corinthians 2:11 says, "Only the spirit of a man knows the thoughts of a man." And if I don't win the battle there, then I'm not going to win the battle on the outside. The battle for me is not won or lost on the level of human accountability. You could never create that kind of accountability. That accountability is inside.

So what is my approach to this problem, this potential disaster of sin in life? One is to continually love the law of God, to know the law of God, to love the law of God and to love the God of the law. And to keep my conscience clear and sensitive so that at the first impulse of conscience, I run. I don't want to be guilty of having a misinformed conscience. So there are some things that I don't expose myself to. I don't want to become soft on sin. I don't want to become tolerant of sin. So there are things that I don't let in my computer. If you're sitting around messing with the Internet and looking at pornography all the time, or watching that kind of stuff, or reading that or sitting listening to popular music with all of its vile lyric, to say nothing of much of the very musical side of it being base, if you expose yourself to that and if that's the kind of stuff you digest and then you try to fight the battle on the inside, you're foolish. I'll tell you one thing, you start losing the battle on the inside and it isn't going to be long before you've lost it on the outside because James 1 says, "Lust conceives in the heart and then it brings forth sin."

And you know when you're talking about your children and you're talking about your own life, you know, you can't ever get enough of the Word of God, you can't ever get a too high view of God, or a too lofty view of the law of God, and the holiness of God and His holy standard. It just breaks my heart that people go to churches and they get these sermonettes for Christianettes, these little ditties

that are supposed to make everybody feel good and they go out there and they have nothing that can aid them in battling sin on the inside. In places like that it's not surprising that people crash and burn all the time. It's very difficult to develop a right understanding of sin in our society, it's impossible from the culture because it's so warped. And now the church is afraid to even impose that on people, in the process they aid and abet the work of sin in the heart.

And I guess it's looking down the road, it's important to say no matter how good you are at silencing your conscience now, or misinforming your conscience now, that's not going to last forever. You know what hell is? Hell is a place of torment. And the primary torment may be rendered by conscience. Conscience one day will turn on the sinner with fury. Conscience will be precise and relentless forever, reminding that sinner that he alone is responsible for the agonies he is suffering eternally. Men's consciences in eternity will be fully informed and relentless and not able to be silenced. That's why Jesus described hell as a place with weeping, wailing, and gnashing of teeth. That's because you can't silence the accusing conscience.

John Flavil wrote in the seventeenth century, "Conscience which should have been the sinner's curb here on earth becomes the sinner's whip that will lash his soul in hell. That which was the seat and center of all guilt now becomes the seat and center of all torment," end quote. Conscience will make the damned sinner acutely aware that he deliberately, freely, gladly chose the life that led him to hell. It will force him to admit the truth of every charge it brings and the absolute justice of every pain he suffers.

If you're going to win the battle with sin, folks, there's only two ways that can be done. You can't mask your internal vice permanently. There's two ways to win the battle. One is to fully inform your conscience by having a high understanding, a thorough understanding of the holy law of God. And secondly, learning to respond to every pang of conscience.

Turn to 2 Corinthians 1, for a minute. I have to close here but I want to show you this. Paul was being accused of all kinds of things. According to chapter 4 of 2 Corinthians verse 2 he was accused of a hidden life of shame. They said he's wretched, he's wicked on the underneath side, he's a hypocrite. He was accused of walking in deceit. He was accused of adulterating the Word of God. These false teachers that were in Corinth were really, really brutal to Paul and they were saying terrible things about him. So he wrote 2 Corinthians to answer those accusations. They said he was wicked, deceitful, corrupt.

Now how did he act...how did he answer? Verse 12, 2 Corinthians 1, "Our proud confidence," and he means this in a spiritual sense, "Our proud confidence is this, the testimony of our...what?...conscience." Now remember I told you from Romans 2 that the conscience gives testimony. It either indicts you, accuses you, or it exonerates you and defends you. And Paul says I've listened to your accusations, folks, I've heard them all. I've heard the accusation of a hypocritical

life, a secret hidden life of shame, deception adulteration of the Word of God for gain, for self-aggrandizement, etc., etc. I've heard all of this and, folks, here's my answer, "My conscience doesn't accuse me of any of that."

That's where you have to go, folks. It's not what people think about you, it's not what the most intimate friends think about you, even your spouse, your family. In fact, you know what? If they all think well of you and your conscience knows that you're cultivating sin on the inside, their thinking well of you will just make you feel worse. Paul said, "My proud confidence is this, the testimony of our conscience that holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom, but in the grace of God we've conducted ourselves in the world and especially toward you." He says...I'll tell you this, my conscience tells me that I'm living my life by the grace of God in holiness and godly sincerity.

People can say terrible things about you. They can say good things about you. But it's only what you know to be true about yourself that gives you joy, true joy. You know, a preacher whose life is full of secret sin and people commend him and commend him and commend him, I can't imagine what kind of guilt that heaps on him. Paul says...I don't have that. In fact, this was kind of common for Paul. In Acts 23:1 Paul looking at the council said, "Brethren, I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day." I like that. He won the battle where you have to win the battle. In Acts 24:16 he said, "I do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience, both before God and before men." I work to keep my conscience clean and fully informed, that's why he said in 2 Timothy, "I serve God with a clear conscience."

That's where you have to win the battle, folks, because James 1 says, "Lust when it conceives brings forth sin." And if you don't win the battle on the inside, it will show up on the outside. A pure conscience is more to be sought than a good reputation.

Charles Wesley wrote about six thousand hymns, isn't that amazing? Here's one you've never sung. I've never sung, I've never heard sung. What a great hymn. He wrote it about the conscience, listen to what he wrote, "I want a principle within of watchful, godly fear; a sensibility to sin, a pain to feel it near. Help me the first approach to feel of pride or wrong desire, to catch the wandering of my will and quench the kindling fire before the logs ever get lighted, let me quench it at the kindling level. From Thee that I know more may stray, no more Thy goodness grieve, grant me, I pray, the tender conscience give."

That's great, isn't it? He understood it. He wanted a principle within of watchful godly fear. He wanted a sensibility to sin. He wanted to feel pain at the first nearness of iniquity. He wanted to catch the wandering of his will at the kindling level. That's where the battle is fought. That's where it's won. If you don't win it there, you will do what 1 Timothy 1:9 describes as making shipwreck of your faith. So as we come to the Lord's table, it needs to be with a sense of dealing with sin at that level.

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