

Defending Yourself in the War on Sin

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

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Nobody understood justification better than Jonathan Edwards. C.J. Mahaney in a marvelous message to us, really more than a message, it was an experience, wasn't it? It was an event. But he rehearsed to us that great doctrine which Jonathan Edwards so mastered in his own thinking. And Jonathan Edwards, like John Bunyan would never have allowed his conscience to rob him of the purity of his understanding of justification. He would never have allowed his conscience to ultimately and finally condemn him. But neither would Jonathan Edwards ignore his conscience. In fact, it strikes me that when he made these resolutions, he wasn't talking to another person, he wasn't making a promise to men. Frankly, that would have been far more than any man would have expected. Seventy resolutions? Nobody would have held him to that standard. Nobody would have expected him to articulate all of that. And, on the other hand, he didn't make those promises to God either. He knew better than that. That's stepping into the danger zone. That's why I said I could never be a Promise Keeper. If they start an organization for promise breakers, I'll join. I'm not about to make pledges to God that I can't keep, that's pretty dangerous.

Jonathan Edwards made 70 resolutions, are you ready for this, to himself. He made pledges to his own heart...to his own soul because he understood the severity of the battle of sanctification, and he knew where it had to be won, and it wasn't going to be won outside of him, it was going to be won inside of him. Why 70 resolutions? I mean, I used to go to camp when I was a kid and they'd say, "Read the Bible for 15 minutes a day," like that was some spiritual triumph. You know, try to get your act together, spend a little time with God, like this was really the great maximum commitment that was required, 70 resolutions? And maybe if you were dumb, and somewhat shallow and trivial and not particularly gifted or devout, you might need 70. But, as we heard last night, if you're the most gifted whoever lived and the most godly who ever lived, maybe one would work, wouldn't it? Or two? Seventy?

What do you think he knew? They called him to seventy resolutions. And what do you think he knew about himself that he made promises to himself, 70 of them, and determined and kept the pledge that he would recite them to himself every week of his life, and at the end of every month and at the end of every year? What was he doing? I mean, to be really honest, some of you can barely get your flip-flops on and make it to the Saturday-night service, and you wonder why you don't have any spiritual victory? What did Jonathan Edwards know? You'd think if you were that profound and that gifted and

that godly, it might be a little easier.

I'll tell you what he knew. He knew the severity of the battle going on in his own soul for his own sanctification. And he knew that he was his own worst...fill in the blank...enemy. It was in that imaginary Orwellian year of 1984, a jet crashed in Spain. Flew, as far as we can tell, straight into a mountain and, of course, investigators studied the accident site, recovered the proverbial Black Box and they made an eerie discovery. The Black Box from the wreckage of that Boeing aircraft had contained in it a voice recorder which revealed the several minutes before the fatal impact. And the first thing the investigators heard was a shrill, sort of computer synthesized voice from the plane's automatic warning system and it told the crew in English, they were a Spanish crew, it told the crew in English, "Pull up, pull up, pull up, pull up." And then astoundingly the voice of the pilot was heard, snapping back, "Shut up, Gringo," and he switched the system off. In a matter of minutes the plane smashed into the side of a mountain and everybody was instantly killed.

As I read about that a number of years ago in connection with a book I was writing on The Vanishing Conscience, it struck me that that is in some ways a parable of the way modern people treat the warning system that God's put in their souls. God has given us some very, very gracious gifts and one of them is conscience. And we hear about it with their little phrases of guilty conscience, etc., and that we often perhaps use or hear used. But I think the conscience is one of the least understood gifts that God has granted to us, one of the least understood areas of biblical teaching and I want to draw your attention to it.

Maybe to give you a parallel is a good place to begin. You also have another system in your body, it's called pain. It's very helpful. It is very helpful. It's a warning system, it's exactly what it is and it's designed to tell you that something is wrong with you physically. And if you just continually override that pain, you will do permanent damage to yourself. One of the most interesting diseases that I've ever read about is leprosy. I mean, I like you grew up as a little kid hearing all about lepers, you know, in the Old Testament, the New Testament and how Jesus healed the lepers and I remember hearing that lepers were people who had no ears and no noses and no chins and no fingers and no toes and sometimes no feet and the hands were nubs and that leprosy eats away the perimeter of your body. I found out a lot later by doing some reading on it that leprosy doesn't eat anything. Leprosy is a nervous disease, a nervous system disease, it destroys your nerves so you can't feel anything so you rub off your nose and you rub away your chin and you rub off your ears and you rub off your fingers and your toes because you cannot feel, you cannot sensitize the level of pressure, the degree of pressure that's being applied and you literally start erasing yourself.

You can thank the Lord that you can feel pain. That's a gift that God has given us to warn us when we are doing damage to our bodies. And conscience, like that, is the same kind of warning system that God has given to us to tell us when we're doing damage to our souls, when we're doing damage to the spiritual part of us. Look at Romans chapter 2 for a moment and I'm going to give you a long

introduction and a very short message, whatever that might be worth, it may not be worth much. But just so we're working up to something, in Romans chapter 2 it says, "The Gentiles," verse 14, "who do not have the law do instinctively the things in the law, these not having the law are law to themselves," verse 15, "in that they show the work of the law written in their hearts," and then I want to get to this part, "their consciences, their conscience bearing witness." The conscience is a witness and it has two functions. It either, according to that verse, in their thoughts accuses or excuses. It either indicts you or it defends you. It either says this is good for you or this is bad for you. It is the most important warning system because it's dealing not with the outside but with the inside.

To do anything to make conscience function less than perfectly is to engage in soul-destroying activity. The wisdom of our day wants to render the conscience ineffective. The enemy, the god of this age who develops the system that surrounds us in the world, wants us to ignore conscience and misinform conscience. Conscience may be saying, "Pull up, pull up, pull up," while the culture is saying, "Shut up, Gringo," and turning off the switch. It may be contemporary modern psychology that says man is basically good and to have a guilty conscience is...is...is to fail to recognize the necessity you have for feeling good about yourself and having self esteem. It may be just a reversal of all moral values. It may be the idea that guilt is toxic or whatever, but we live in a society that's trying to do two things, and I just want you to think about these two things; one, misinformed conscience, and two, say to shut it off. There were two things happening in that airplane. One thing that was happening was radar was finding a mountain, right? Radar was sending out a bounce-back signal that was informing that warning system that there was a mountain. Radar was articulating reality. And then there was the responding warning system that told the pilot what to do in face of that reality.

Only two things needed to happen to save the lives of those people. One, you had to know what was reality and secondly, you had to accept the warning. Sanctification functions on those same two principles. It starts with knowing the truth, your conscience has to be fully informed about the truth in order to properly warn you. False information telling you to pull up confuses everything.

I'll give you an illustration. A couple of weeks ago I happened to be on Larry King Live and I know some of you have seen me on there. It's always really interesting and what's interesting is what you don't see. What happens in between, you know, between Depoc and me and so....which is really kind of funny. Depoc is a pantheist who is convinced that God is in all of us but...but mostly in him. And what makes it so interesting is he's very short and it's hard to be short when you're God and a lot of people who aren't God are really tall. But anyway we have some interesting talks.

But anyway, we were talking and Dennis Praeger(?) was there, you know who Dennis Praeger is, a Jewish commentator, and we're talking about convictions and religion, this was in between air time, and Dennis Praeger said to Larry King, "What kind of a Jew are you?"

Well he said, "Well, I'm an agnostic secular Jew."

He said, "So you're not a religious Jew?"

"No, I'm not a religious Jew at all, I'm a secular Jew." But he said, "I'll tell you this. I was raised in a very kosher Jewish family and to this day," now this is Larry King and he's in his sixties, gone through seven wives and a whole world of experience, "But from my childhood," he said this, "If you gave me milk and meat in the same meal, I'd vomit."

Wow. What would make him vomit? Because from the time he was a little kid he was informed that that violated the law of God and that has so stuck in his mind that it triggers his conscience and makes him sick. You know, that's encouraging to me. If he's still got that sensitive of a conscience, if we could just get it the right information, it could function.

You know, in Paul's letter to the Corinthians he said, "If you go to a...you go to a non-believer's house, a non-believer, a Gentile non-believer invites you over, okay?" For dinner, an unbeliever, you're going to go on a little evangelistic deal. You go to his house and you bring along a weaker brother, right? You bring along a new believer who's just been saved, let's say, out of idolatry and you go to this guy's house and he serves you dinner and here's this weaker brother and he's just been saved out of idolatry and he asks the question...where did you get this food? Where did you get this meat?

"Oh, I bought it down at the Aphrodite Temple Butcher Shop."

"Ahh...was this meat offered to idols? I don't think I could eat that. I just was saved out of that, I know what that's all about. I don't think I can handle that."

Now the stronger Christian has a dilemma, right? So he's...he's going to either have to say to this guy, "Look, buddy, this is evangelistic, eat the stuff. You know, the last thing we want to do is be in this guy's house and offend him." Or he's going to say to this guy, "Well, you know, it's a little weird and being a Christian is a little weird, I guess, because he's not going to eat what you're given him because it was offered to idols, even though an idol is nothing." Who does he offend? Well the modern seeker-friendly movement wouldn't have any problem with that question. The issue is, however, they'd get the wrong answer. You know what Paul says? He says, "You offend the unbeliever and do not ever train another believer to ignore his conscience because you are divesting him of an instrument that God wants to keep sensitive." That's why Paul says that in 1 Corinthians, that's why he says it in Romans, and there's a little bonus. The unbeliever might conclude that if you defer to him and don't love your brother, that it's better to be an unbeliever because you get more love than if you become one of those. The conscience is a critical part of our spiritual life.

Jonathan Edwards was talking to himself. He was talking to his own conscience in all those resolutions when he went over them again and again and again. He didn't need a crowd. He didn't need somebody there. He didn't tape record it to be publicly broadcast. It wasn't even prayer, are you ready for that? You don't find "Dear God" in there, do you, Steve? You might find, "Dear Jonathan." The conscience is the soul reflecting on itself. It is at the core of what distinguishes human beings from animals. No ape ever made a resolution. This is what it is to be self-conscious, self-aware, reflecting on ourselves. It is our own innate ability to understand what is right and what is wrong and to make determinations to do what is right and not what is wrong. When the conscience functions as it should, when it violates it produces shame, regret, guilt, fear, anxiety, disgrace, anguish and sometimes even depression.

Now conventional wisdom would say, "You need to go see a counselor." I'm afraid some people in the evangelical world would say if you have shame, regret, guilt, fear, anxiety, disgrace, anguish, depression, you better go see a Christian counselor. You can't allow yourself to be indicted like that. I mean, even if Isaiah in chapter 6 showed up and said, "You know, I'm a man of unclean lips," somebody might say to him, "You need some counsel, you need some help, you've got to think better of yourself, you're the best guy going, you speak, God speaks. You're really not to blame. Hey, hey, hey, you've got toxic parents," as one writer said. Or you ate too many Twinkies and it's having this effect on you. Or you took a pill, that's why you killed your grandparents, right? There's going to be a quasi-medical or psychological explanation for everything, but this does damage to sensibilities and it's tantamount to saying to your conscience, "Shut up, Gringo," flipping the switch.

In fact, you can get so good at it, Paul says in Philippians 3:19 that with some people, this is really amazing, their glory is in their shame. Boy, now you know that thing is not functioning at all. Their glory is in their shame. Look at the MTV generation. What are they proud about? How base can you get? You think that's new? Go back and read Isaiah 5 where they substitute good for bad and bitter for sweet. The mind and the conscience, Titus 1:15 says, can become totally defiled. When that happens there's really no way back.

And I've often thought, too, you can even sit in a place and hear preaching and teaching and the same sun that melts the wax, hardens the clay. If you keep listening and keep listening and keep listening, and keep denying the role that your conscience plays, you're going to get very good at becoming hard. Jonathan Edwards knew that and the way he continually cleaned his conscience was to go back through the seventy resolutions. That was like taking out the spiritual Windex and washing off the conscience.

Now let me tell you about the conscience. The conscience is not the light, okay? The conscience is the skylight through which the light shines, okay? The light is divine truth. The conscience is just the mechanism through which that truth comes. If it becomes dirty, the truth doesn't come through clearly.

Jonathan Edwards was taking out the spiritual Windex and cleaning off the skylight so that divine truth came through.

Now there are two ways to halt your spiritual progress. One is misinformation, you've got the wrong radar. And Rick said this, "People who know me know that I live and die on the hill of the truth. I eat, sleep and breathe the truth. The truth is my passion writ an incarnate. I can't make a separation." But the truth is everything, not just in justification but it's in everything in sanctification. People say, "Why do you get so upset about the modern movements in evangelicalism? Why are you so concerned about, they're preaching the gospel, aren't they?" Well in some cases maybe they are, not necessarily in all cases but what I'm concerned about are congregations of people who've come into a minimalist understanding of the gospel and who the rest of their life are going to try to battle and live a life to the glory of God with a conscience that has no information. There isn't any radar. Nothing's coming in so the conscience is unable to function. I would like to think that for me to do something against I know what my Lord wants me to do would make me vomit. But I'm going to have to have a conscience that is literally captive to that truth.

Now in New Testament there were no jets. So Paul talked about a ship and he said in 1 Timothy 1 verse 19, "Keeping faith and a good...what?...conscience," and he said, "some have rejected that good conscience and the faith and suffered shipwreck." Same thing. Obviously the analogy is consistent with the first generation but the point is, you're going to wreck the ship if you don't know where you're going and you don't react to the proper warnings.

The ancient Greeks even understood this. They...they had a goddess by the name of Nemesis, it's come into our language and we know what a nemesis is, it's an enemy, right? But that's really a pretty shallow understanding of nemesis. Nemesis was a goddess in Greek understanding and she was believed to be the personification of conscience. And this goddess was characterized by an extreme devotion to moral law. Okay, that's how the Greeks defined her. She was a goddess whose siren call was a call to virtue. And they said about her that if she was ignored she became the angel of vengeance. Where do you think they got that? What goddess could both be the one calling to virtue and the one who becomes the angel of vengeance? That's conscience. It either excuses you or accuses you. They got it. There is a depiction of Nemesis done in an oil painting, pretty dramatic. And it...it survived through the centuries from, I don't know exactly the early times, but I've seen representations of it, and it shows this...this guy who's fleeing as fast as he can. His eyes are bulging out of its sockets like some cartoon character. And he has this terrified look on his face and behind him is coming Nemesis and she's got this flashing axe in her hand ready to strike him. That's conscience.

I used to be interested in English literature and read not just poetry, I used to love to read poetry, but something about the poets. One of the most troubled of them was Lord Byron whose life was just packed with sins. And he wrote an ode to Nemesis. This is what he said: "O thou who never yet of

human wrong let the unbalanced scale, great Nemesis, thou didst call the furies from the abyss and bid them howl and hiss." Now what does our society want to do with that kind of stuff? Shut up, Gringo, leave me alone. The conscience has a bully function and it can be most relentless and it can be most disturbing. It is the enemy of the sinning soul. It is also the truest friend of the righteous soul.

I'm going to tell you something, young people, you can talk about accountability till you're blue in the face, till you're purple, till you're out of breath. You can talk about who are you accountable, who are you accountable. I'm going to tell you this right now, you will never know truly sanctified life until you win the battle where no one in the world can hold you accountable except God Himself and that's right inside your own heart. Jonathan Edwards knew that.

We see this. Pastors accountable to congregations and boards and friends and wives and children, morally crash into a mountain and explode. And sometimes people will say, "Well, maybe they didn't have accountability or who was ministering to them?" I'm not saying there's no place for that, I'm just saying that's not where the battle is fought. The real battle for your spirituality, I'll tell you this, your conscience fights all by itself. And time and truth go hand in hand, given enough time if you're losing it inside, it will show up outside. Very few men's sins follow them after though some do. Most find that their sins discover them while they're still here.

Well let's get a little more specific. Let me define conscience for you. It is the soul's warning system. It is the gift of God. It plays a critical role in salvation and sanctification. It senses moral violation when rightly informed and says pull up, pull up, pull up or you're going to crash. Now listen, conscience is part of you, okay? And that means it's not perfect, it's not infallible.

That's right. That's why Paul said, do you remember in 1 Corinthians he said, "It's a small thing...chapter 4...what men say about me?" It's a small thing what you say about me. And then he went on to say, "Even when I know nothing against myself, herein am I not justified?" I'm not even an accurate judge of myself. I can't even fully count on my conscience as being infallible. I will say this, the clearer it is and the more well informed it is with the truth, the more it will do what God has designed it to do. Still, even though the conscience is felt the curse, when it is informed accurately by the Word of God and when it is cleaned by repentance and when it is maintained by the Holy Spirit is still able to say, "Pull up, pull up, pull up." And to reject the voice of your conscience, if you're now doing things in your life secret private things in your life that are going against your conscience, the future is going to be far worse than the present because you will become skilled at silencing your conscience. It's still while you're young critical that you feel the full anguish, shame, anxiety, fear, regret, disgrace, doubt, depression, the absence of joy, you need to feel the fullness of that. God help you if you're past that and you're only 20.

This is what Charles Wesley understood. Listen to what he wrote. This is a hymn I'm sure you've never sung. But he wrote this hymn, this is it, listen. "I want a principle within, I want...he said...a

principle within of watchful, godly fear, a sensibility of sin, a pain to feel it near." He said, "Help me the first approach to feel of pride or wrong desire, to catch the wandering of my will and quench the kindling fire." And then he wrote another verse. "From Thee that I no more may stray, no more Thy goodness grieve. Grant me the grace I pray, the tender conscience give. Quick as the apple of an eye, O God, my conscience make. Awake my soul when sin is nigh and keep it still awake." He knew what he was talking about, didn't he? I mean, he was dealing with the real deal.

It's pretty common for people in my life to say to me, "You know, John, please don't fail, please don't desert your wife or run off with the church money or please don't..." And I appreciate that. And I encourage people, if you knew my wife you would know that I would never leave her. She is the greatest adventure I've ever been engaged in my entire life and every day is a greater joy than the day before. There's...there's still this fear and people will say, "Well, you know, we're praying for you that this wouldn't happen." And I know in my own heart and no one else knows whether that could happen or not, whether I'm on that path or not. You know, when disaster comes, it's not the beginning of anything, it's the end of a long process of ignoring your conscience.

Now, let me be precise. The conscience is not the voice of God. Scripture is the voice of God, right? Okay. Even non-Christians have a conscience. Muslims have a conscience. Their reacting to their conscience when they blow people up. Mormons have a conscience, they feel guilty if they violate church law. Conscience really functions in all religions, misinformed conscience. It's really critical then that our understanding start at one point, the conscience has to be accurately informed as to the truth. And what Jonathan Edwards knew and what we have been reminded of and what we all know is that God's standard is very, very high. The church continues today to set a lower and lower and lower and lower and lower standard of holiness which lets the conscience get away with murder, or the person get away with murder in responding to an ill-informed conscience. So we have to start with an accurate instruction of the truth. And Jonathan Edwards in his, numbers of times, in his resolutions said things like, "I resolve in one way or another to learn more whatever I don't yet know, whatever invention, whatever insight I don't know I need to know." There was a certain relentlessness and if you've ever...if you've ever read his theological machinations, I mean, the man could literally squeeze the last drop out of every conceivable concept. So we start with the teaching of the Word of God and don't let yourself think for any moment that you can sit in a place year after year where the Word of God is not taught that you can get by with a minimal approach to learning the truth, you can not engage yourself with reading great theology, with reading the Word of God constantly with understanding the great truths of Scripture and somehow you're sanctification will go on without it because it won't. You know, this isn't pie in the sky here, you've got to have accurate radar. And I will tell you, whatever church is emphasizing psychology and entertainment and cleverness and stories and cultural cuteness and all that kind of stuff, the harvest is going to be unholiness. It will always be unholiness because the conscience gets no help.

You go into a Christian bookstore even and try to find something that's going to inform your conscience regarding the eternal varieties of the Word of God. Pop psychology and fiction dominate. And the standard therefore of understanding divine truth is dropping like a rock. And the culture, of course, is involved in this. I remember years ago reading, and this was in the book as well, a survey that MTV did and they did a survey on the seven deadly sins to ask people what they thought about the seven deadly sins. Now mediaeval theology came up with seven deadly sins, not in the sense that they were the only seven sins but they were what they thought were the seven motivational sins that sort of motivated a lot of other sins...pride, lust, covetousness, anger, envy, gluttony and sloth, or laziness. So these were the seven deadly sins. This was an amazing MTV survey and guess who they surveyed? You know, great theologians like Ice Tea, Queen Latifa, a whole bunch of people like that. And they basically every one of those people denied that those were categorically sins. One of the rappers said, "Lust a sin? Are you kidding? That's what I live for." Another one said, "Pride a sin, are you kidding? We all need pride." And they came to the end and I just wrote down the last statement. When the survey was ended, this was the MTV writers comment, "No sin is as evil as the killjoy attitude of those who think someone's behavior is an offense to some holy God." Now that's our generation. How in the world is conscience going to function with that kind of information? And that's why Isaiah says in Isaiah chapter 5, "Look, when you substitute sweet for bitter and good for bad, it's over and no way back and the judgment will come." And he closes that fifth chapter with that credible picture of what essentially the reality of the Babylonian invasion.

If we're going to evangelize a culture, we can't start with the gospel. That's the big mistake in much of modern evangelism. You'll hear more from Kirk Cameron about this but you can't start with the gospel because they don't understand what their relationship is to the law of God. That's why their glory is in their shame. Both mind and conscience are defiled. If the mind is defiled, then the conscience is going to roll along with it because it can only respond to the light coming in or the darkness.

So first of all, dealing with sanctification in the heart requires an accurately informed conscience by the Word of God continually, continually being fed into that conscience. Secondly, as I said, is to make sure we listen to the conscience. Suppressing it, overruling it, ignoring it is deadly stuff, but it's also part of the way the unregenerate world works. Do you remember Romans 1:32? "Though they know the ordinance of God," there are people who even know what God's law is, "that they who practice such things are worthy of death. They not only do the same but give hardy approval to those who practice them.:" Even people who know God's law can train themselves to find pleasure in disobedience.

We had a situation, a couple of situations like this in our church and a man was sitting in my office and he had been caught in a horrific adulterous situation. And he said, "You know, I want to do better. I want to do better." Since you've been here in this church fully informed, you've been taught, you've been led, you've been directed, you've studied, you've been to a Christian school, Christian college, you've had it all. You've known these things, how can you live this double life?"

Well he became a master at silencing his conscience. And I said, "You know," he said, "You know, I'm going to do better." I said, "Well let me just give you a little scenario. You trashed the Lord Jesus Christ. You trashed your wife. You trashed your parents. You trashed your friends. You trashed everybody who knows you. You've trashed the elders of the church. None of those people had any kind of ability apparently to set any standard that mattered to you. You had no interest in pleasing them, in honoring them, showing respect to them. All of us together were no deterrent because you were so evil on the inside. Now that you've trashed everybody, why am I going to believe that all of a sudden you're going to live to honor Jesus Christ? By what constraint is that going to happen? By what constraint?"

:"I don't know."

Yeah, I said, "All we can do is pray that the Spirit of God will do a major work on your conscience. It's so caked up that the light can't get through and only the Spirit of God can clean that thing." And then people typically say to me, "Was he repentant?" I don't know, maybe he says he is. But you want to know something? Our hearts are deceitful. I don't think he knows if he's repentant. I don't know. I don't think he even knows. I'm not sure what's coming through the clouded conscience. Young people, I'm telling you. You can end up a disaster if you don't win the battle on the inside.

Now, that was the introduction. But I have a couple more things in the introduction to say. You know what hell is? You say, "There's a leap, shouldn't there be a transition sentence in there?" You know what hell is? Yeah, I'll tell you what hell is. Hell is a fully informed conscience and that's why there's weeping and wailing and grinding of teeth. You may cover your conscience over as an unregenerate person, but no one's conscience will be muted or silenced forever. Conscience will in the end turn with a vengeance on the sinner, reminding him everlastingly in hell that he alone is responsible for the eternal agonies he suffers and he deserves them. Conscience, I believe, is the chief tormentor of the damned and cannot be misinformed, nor can it be silenced. Conscience is Nemesis gone berserk.

Listen to what John Flavel seventeenth century Puritan wrote. "Conscience which should have been the soul's curb here on earth becomes the whip that lashes the soul in hell. Neither is there any faculty or power belonging to the soul of man so fit, enable to do it as his own conscience, that which was the seat and center of all guilt now becomes the seat and center of all torment." Sinners will have a fully informed and relentless conscience forever.

I think it's...it's the conscience that really gets us to the cross. You say, "Why do you say that?" Because the cross is where you go to be forgiven, right? The cross is where you go to get delivered. The cross is where you go, in Bunyan's word, to dump the load, right? So it's the conscience that gets you there. Somehow the gospel comes and by the miraculous work of sovereign grace God cleans off the darkened conscience, the light of the truth shines through and we see and our conscience is

activated and there's repentance and confession and pounding the chest and God be merciful to me a sinner. And in the book of Hebrews, Hebrews 10:22, salvation is described in beautiful words, "Being washed from an evil conscience." So what happens is, your conscience is tormenting and tormenting and CJ you're talking about that, you came and you came to the cross on that one day and instead of your conscience tormenting you, your conscience washed you and you came out the other side and you spent all night reading the Bible. I mean, this is the dynamic of what happened. Hebrews 9:14 says, "The blood of Christ cleanses the conscience."

Now listen, young people. You've had that done in Christ. Are you going to let the thing get muddied up again? The conscience fights all alone inside there. Edwards knew that. First Corinthians 2 says, listen to this, "Only the spirit of a man knows the man." You're the only one who really knows what's going on. That's the introduction.

Now turn to the text, 2 Corinthians 1. Relax, Rick, it's not going to be a long one. Second Corinthians 1, I wish I could help you get your arms around this whole epistle but I want to read a verse, verse 12, just one verse. Second Corinthians 1:12, "For our proud confidence is this, the testimony of our conscience that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom, but in the grace of God we have conducted ourselves in the world and especially toward you."

Paul is my hero. People ask me who is my mentor, while I'm thankful for my dad and seminary professors and lots of people, Paul is really my hero, my mentor. And this is such a stunning statement. The Corinthian church was breaking his heart. The only time he actually says he was depressed was over them. Life was tough, he was suffering, been chased out of Ephesus. They accused him of suffering for sin. They said he had a secret life of hidden shame. They said he was in the ministry for money. They said he sought sexual favors from women. They said every rotten thing they could say about him. They said his persona, you know, his presence was very unimpressive and his oratorical ability was absolutely below standard. They said he was a huckster and a con-man. They said he had no official letter from the Apostles in Jerusalem. They said he was corrupt. They said he was a deceiver. They said he falsified his ministry reports. They said he was proud. They said he was mentally imbalanced. They said he was manipulative. They said he was weak. They said he was evil. False teachers did this to Paul, it was a massive smear campaign.

How do you defend yourself? How do you defend yourself? Well he could have said, "Well, okay, I need to get a bunch of letters and I'm going to send these letters from people who know me. I know Paul, he's a good guy. You're wrong."

By the way, I met a famous TV preacher on a plane one night and he...we had a very interesting conversation, I'll leave it at that. And he wanted to convince me that the conclusion that I drew from the conversation wasn't accurate, so I got an envelope full of letters from people who knew him telling me how great he was. That's just a private situation, but I was really not that convinced nonetheless.

But where did Paul go? Where did he go to find his defense? I think he went to the highest earthly court, the highest human point he could go and look at verse 12 again, here's how he answered. "All I can tell you, folks, is this, my boasting is this, the testimony of..." and you can see his humility in the plural pronoun, "our conscience," he just hates to say the word my. Try to find him saying it, it's just almost impossible. "All I can tell you is my conscience is clear. My conscience tells me that in 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." All I can tell you is I've gone to the highest tribunal I know to go to in this world and it's my conscience and my conscience is not accusing me. Wow. Boy, you can go to sleep at peace with that, can't you? You can sleep a good night's rest. His conscience knew what nobody knew. His conscience knew what no one could write a letter about. His conscience knew what no committee could affirm about him, no church could demonstrate. He was winning the battle where the battle has to be won and he says that my conscience tells me that I am ministering in moral purity and *enlicrinea*(??) which is transparency, that there is nothing to hide.

This isn't about human wisdom. This isn't about a game. This is about the grace of God working in my sanctification so as to calm my conscience. This was repeatedly his testimony. Acts 21:1, listen, "Brethren," because he was always being accused, "Brethren, I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day." He said that to the Sanhedrin trying to indict him. Acts 24:16, "I do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience before god and before men." He said that to a Gentile ruler by the name of Felix. All I can say is I appeal to my conscience and it's clear. And in 2 Timothy 1:3, the end of his life, the whole finale, the swan song, the last letter and I love this, at the very beginning, 2 Timothy 1:3 he says, "I thank God whom I serve with a clear conscience." Now that's a godly man.

All leaders, all believers are to follow that pattern. First Timothy 3:9 calls pastors and elders to be faithful to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. Sin is never mortified when it's covered up. It's never mortified when it's exchanged for a different sin. It's never mortified when it's repressed. Sin is only mortified when conscience is satisfied. Peter said this, "Sanctify the Lord God in your hearts," 1 Peter 3:15 and 16, "and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you with meekness and fear, having a good conscience so that when they defame you as evil doers, those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed."

My little world, my simple little world, I get a lot of flack, you know that, some of you do. I get a lot of accusations, I get a lot of things said about me and thrown around. Where do I go? Where do I go? I go to my heart. I go to my conscience. Is there something there? Is that legitimate? Is that real? Is that bonafide? And I have to ask my conscience, do you accuse me there or do you excuse me? And by the way, this is a footnote, just a free one thrown in, and Edwards knew this because I think it was number 26 of the resolutions. He said he would set aside anything that would effect his assurance. Where do you get your assurance of your salvation? From a past event? I don't think so. From good

feelings? No. From being associated with Christians? No. True assurance is a function of the conscience. True assurance is a function of a good conscience because my heart knows that I am loving the Lord Jesus Christ and seeking His honor and seeking His glory.

Well what can I say? Time is gone and I'll leave this for another time. Can I show you two other illustrations? Turn in your Bible, if you will, out there in the dark to 1 Chronicles 29, 1 Chronicles 29 and verse 16. And this is David and he's blessing the Lord in the sight of all the assembly because of all the offerings that have been brought with regard to the temple. And this is so...so important. "O Lord our God, all this abundance that we have provided to build Thee a house for Thy holy name is from Thy hand, all is Thine." Then verse 17, "Since I know, O my God, that Thou tryest the heart and delightest in uprightness, I in the integrity of my heart have willingly offered all these things." Isn't that great? And when you come to worship, that's what you want to be able to say. "I'm here, Lord, in the integrity of my heart." Integrity from integer, integer for you mathematicians, you know it means one, an undivided heart, a loyal heart, a faithful heart. And I have offered all these things. And then in verse 18, "O Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, our fathers, preserve this forever in the intentions of the heart of Thy people and direct their heart, or their imaginations toward You and give to my son Solomon, this would be my prayer for you, a perfect heart to keep Thy commandments, Thy testimonies, Thy statutes, do them all to build the temple for which I have made provision." It's about the heart. David can honestly say to God, "I've come in the integrity of my heart." He says in the Psalms, "My heart is fixed, O God, my heart is fixed."

And a final illustration of this is in Job 31. Job had a lot of stupid friends who gave him bad counsel. For seven days they said nothing and then they opened their mouths and all wisdom fled. Their silence was purely golden. And they had this little theology that if you suffered it's because of sin, pretty typical one. It's still a part of Jewish thinking even today. And so his friends give him all these speeches, you know, your family is all dead except for your wife, and there are days you had wished she had been killed with everybody else. You know, you've got the loss of everything that you own and you are sick and physically...there's got to be sin. And so in chapter 31 he says, "I've made a covenant with my eyes, how then could I gaze at a virgin?" Hey, that's a resolution, isn't that a resolution? I made a covenant with my eyes. And what is the portion of God from above or the heritage of the almighty from on high? Is it not calamity to the unjust and disaster to those who work iniquity? He says I understand that theology. He sees my ways, numbers my steps. If I have walked in falsehood, if my foot has hastened after deceit then let Him weigh me with accurate scales, let Him know my integrity.

In other words, he just opens up in transparency and says, "God, I'm telling you, I made these promises, I've done an inventory, I don't see it." Verse 9, "If my heart has been enticed by a woman or I have lurked at my neighbor's doorway, may my wife grind for another." Bring it on me, God. I'm not protective. Boy, this is...this is...you're looking into the heart of a righteous man. God, I'm telling you, do whatever You want to me if I deserve it.

And it goes on. Verse 13, "If I've despised the claim of my male or female slave." Verse 16, "If I've kept the poor from their desire." Verse 24, "If I put my confidence in gold." Verse 29, "If I rejoiced at the distinction of my enemy." And you see elements of this in Edwards resolutions, these various things. In verse 38, "If the land cries out against me, let it." Give it to me, God. Bring it on.

And this was so frustrating to these three lame theologians. In verse 1 of chapter 32, "Then these three men ceased answering Job." Why? Because he was righteous where? Where? In his own eyes. You say that's pretty proud, isn't it? No. No, because if he was proud about it he wouldn't have been righteous. He had to deal with humility like he had to deal with everything else. This is not something unique to Paul. This is what David experienced in his own heart. This is what Job experienced in his own heart. And young people, this is where it has to be. You talk about legalism. The best of legalism is that you're righteous in somebody else's eyes...not God and not you. True spirituality is to be right before God in your own eyes. Don't train yourself to be a hypocrite. Rightly inform your conscience and when it says pull up, pull up, get your hands on the wheel and pull hard.

Father, thank You for our morning together. We thank You that You have given us this gift of a conscience and the gift of truth to inform it. O God, help us to know the truth, to love the truth, to have a passion for the truth, a desire for the truth, to search the truth and keep that conscience, that skylight clear by Your Holy Spirit through confession, repentance, wash it so it's always revealing to us the full light of the truth that we might do that which pleases You and live to Your eternal glory. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

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