

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

Soften Your Conscience

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 8:10–12; 1 Timothy 4:2

Code: B120713

Your conscience is like the nerve endings in your fingertips. Its sensitivity to external stimuli can be damaged by the buildup of callouses or even wounded so badly that it loses feeling altogether. Paul wrote repeatedly about the grave dangers of a calloused conscience (1 Corinthians 8:10), a wounded conscience (1 Corinthians 8:12), and a seared conscience (1 Timothy 4:2).

Psychopaths, serial killers, pathological liars, and other people who seem to lack any moral sense are extreme examples of people who have ruined or desensitized their consciences. But can such people really sin without remorse or scruples? If so, it's only because they have ravaged their own consciences through immorality and lawlessness. They certainly weren't born devoid of any conscience. The conscience is an inextricable part of the human soul. Though it may be hardened, cauterized, or numbed into apparent dormancy, the conscience continues to store up evidence that will one day be used as testimony to condemn the guilty soul.

Richard Sibbes pictured the conscience as a court in the council of the human heart. In Sibbes's imagery, the conscience itself assumes every role in the courtroom drama. It's a *register* to record what we have done in exact detail (Jeremiah 17:1). It's the *accuser* that lodges a complaint against us when we are guilty, and a *defender* to side with us in our innocence (Romans 2:15). It acts as a *witness*, giving testimony for or against us (2 Corinthians 1:12). It's the *judge*, condemning or vindicating us (1 John 3:20-21). And it is the *executioner*, smiting us with grief when our guilt is discovered (1 Samuel 24:5). Sibbes compared the chastisement of a violated conscience to "*a flash of hell*."¹ Richard Sibbes, Commentary on 2 Corinthians Chapter 1, in Alexander B. Grosart, ed., Works of Richard Sibbes, 7 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1981 reprint), 3:210-211.

The conscience is privy to all our secret thoughts and motives. It is therefore a more accurate and more formidable witness in the soul's courtroom than any external observer. Those who gloss over an accusing conscience in favor of a human counselor's reassurances are playing a deadly game. Ill thoughts and motives may escape the eye of a human counselor, but they cannot escape the eye of conscience. Nor will they escape the eye of an all-knowing God. When such people are summoned to final judgment, their own conscience will be fully aware of every violation and will step forward as a witness against them.

Rampant, unchecked sin can temporarily numb and quiet the witness of your guilt. But only true, biblical justification can permanently quiet the condemnation of your conscience.

Christ's atonement fully satisfied the demands of God's righteousness, so forgiveness and mercy are guaranteed to those who receive Christ in humble, repentant faith. We accept the responsibility for our sin and believe that in the death of Christ our sin is forgiven.

But we continue to confess our sin so that the Lord can cleanse our conscience and give us joy. That is how "the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God,

cleanse[s] your conscience from dead works to serve the living God” (Hebrews 9:14). In other words, our faith communicates to our conscience that we are pardoned through the precious blood of Christ.

A sound conscience therefore goes hand in hand with assurance of salvation (Hebrews 10:22). The steadfast believer must maintain the proper focus of faith in order to have a conscience that is perpetually being cleansed from guilt: “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

What a gift it is to be cleansed from a defiled conscience! In the same way that a grieved conscience is a flash of hell, so a pure conscience is a foretaste of glory.

It’s the Christian’s high and holy duty to guard the purity of his regenerated conscience. Don’t let unchecked sin silence, stifle, or desensitize your conscience. Keep it soft and effective through faithful confession and careful self-examination.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John MacArthur". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

(Adapted from [*The Vanishing Conscience*](#).)

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