

Strengthen Your Conscience

Scripture: Romans 14:1–23

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The smoke detectors in your home or office are there to make you aware of a specific, imminent threat to your safety. But what good is a fire alarm that constantly misfires, sending you false warnings of nonexistent danger? A malfunctioning warning system can be as bad as having no alarms at all—*worse* if you get in the habit of ignoring it altogether.

In the same way, a weak conscience can do more harm than good.

A weak conscience is not the same as a seared conscience. A seared conscience becomes inactive, silent, rarely accusing, and insensitive to sin. By comparison, the weak conscience is *hypersensitive* and *overactive*.

Ironically, a weak conscience is more likely to accuse than a strong conscience. Scripture calls this a weak conscience because it is *too easily wounded*. People with weak consciences tend to fret about things that should not provoke guilt in a mature Christian.

A weak conscience results from an immature or fragile faith not yet weaned from worldly influences and not yet saturated in the Word of God. Weak believers are to be accepted with love and not judged because their consciences are too tender. Paul instructed the Romans, “Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions. One person has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only” (Romans 14:1-2). Paul makes it clear that the weak believer is likely to be overscrupulous, legalistic, troubled by his conscience in an unhealthy way. In fact, a weak conscience is *often* the companion of legalism.

Paul repeatedly admonished the early church that those with strong consciences were not to be judgmental (Romans 14:3), and above all they must not encourage those who are weak to violate their consciences. Weak believers must not learn to overrule their consciences. If that becomes a habit—if they condition themselves to reject all the promptings of conscience—they will thus forfeit one of the most important means of sanctification.

In fact, Paul instructed those who were strong to defer whenever possible to the qualms of the weaker brother's conscience. To encourage an immature believer to wound his own conscience is to lead him into sin: “He who doubts [on account of a weak conscience] is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin” (Romans 14:23).

Paul devoted several chapters of 1 Corinthians to dealing with issues of Christian liberty—in particular, the problem of eating meat that had been offered to idols. Christians in the early church were saved out of various forms of idolatry, and their consciences were sensitive—even hypersensitive—to any behavior that reminded them of their former sinful practices. While the mature believers in the Corinthian church knew there was no spiritual harm in eating meat offered to idols, Paul urged them to abstain for the sake of their weaker, less mature brothers and sisters.

His point was simple: If your faith is strong and your conscience healthy, you may enjoy your own freedom in Christ without making any effort to arouse more intense scrutiny from your own conscience: “Eat anything that is sold in the meat market, without asking questions for conscience’s sake” (1 Corinthians 10:25). But if you have reason to think that someone watching you might be wounded in conscience by your exercise of freedom, abstain. Guard the other person’s tender conscience.

The church today ought to pay more attention to Paul’s exhortation. Rather than exercising—and parading—all our freedoms, we should be mindful of how the example of our life impacts others. Whether in word or deed, we can’t afford to put stumbling blocks or occasions to fall in someone else’s way (Romans 14:13).

After all, a weak and constantly accusing conscience is a spiritual liability, not a strength. Many people with especially tender consciences tend to display their overscrupulousness as if it were proof of deep spirituality. It is precisely the opposite. Those with weak consciences tend to be too easily offended and stumble frequently (cf. 1 Corinthians 8:13). They are often overly critical of others (Romans 14:3-4). They are too susceptible to the lure of legalism (Romans 14:20; cf. Galatians 3:2-5). Their thoughts and hearts are soon defiled (Titus 1:15).

Throughout Paul’s discussion of those with weak consciences (Romans 14; 1 Corinthians 8-10), he treats the condition as a state of spiritual immaturity—a lack of knowledge (1 Corinthians 8:7) and a lack of faith (Romans 14:1, 23).

Paul clearly expected that those with weak consciences would grow out of that immature state, like children inevitably outgrow their fear of the dark. Those who choose instead to live in such a state—particularly those who point to a too-tender conscience as something to boast about—have a warped sense of what it means to be mature in the faith.

True spiritual growth enlightens the mind and strengthens the heart in faith. It is ultimately the only way to overcome a weak conscience.



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

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