

BOLD Course: Making Wise Decisions
Class 3: Considering the Conscience

1. Introduction: “Here I Stand” – The *Conscientious* Decision that Sparked a Worldwide Reformation

We often think of Martin Luther as “big and brash and full of swagger” – and indeed as he became an influential theologian that was sometimes the case – but when he came to the Diet of Worms in 1521 and had to stand before the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V to defend his teachings, he was so intimidated, being under the threat of excommunication and banishment, that his defense could hardly be understood on the first day of his trial.

The authorities expected him to recant for his teachings – his protestation of indulgences, his criticisms of papal power, and his instance that justification was by grace through faith alone. While he may have begun the interrogation quite fearful and timid, by the end, he gathered the courage to say the words that continue to echo today, “My conscience is captive to the Word of God. Thus I cannot and will not recant, for going against conscience is neither safe nor salutary. I can do no other. Here I stand. God help me. Amen.”

Luther was excommunicated and had to run for his life at one point, but his courageous stand started the movement we know today as the Protestant Reformation. Kevin DeYoung says, “In a very real sense, you could say that the history of the Reformation, the history of Europe, and the history of the entire world was, in God’s providence, altered because one man refused to violate his conscience.”

2. The Need for a Biblical Understanding of the Conscience
a. The lack of teaching on the subject

The Puritans were famous for talking a lot about the conscience, but others have noted a lack of teaching on it today.

Richard Sibbes said that a good conscience is “a continual feast,” because knowing that God is pleased with us, has forgiven our sins, and delights in our obedience, enables us to suffer and even to die with comfort, freedom, and joy.

The Westminster divines wrote, “God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are in any thing contrary to His Word; or beside it, if matters of faith and worship.”

Joel Beeke, writing on the Puritan understanding of conscience said, “The conscience is an echo in the human mind of the verdict of the righteous Judge . . . Conscience impresses a man’s mind with the moral authority of God, and as a result produces a sense of anxiety and misery, or peace and joy, that anticipates eternity.”

The Puritans paid careful attention to how the conscience works, the role it plays in bringing people to Christ, and how it is indispensable in leading us to holiness.

Andy Naselli and JD Crowley ask good questions:

- When was the last sermon you heard on the conscience?
- Have you ever mentioned a clean conscience in your testimony, as Paul did?
- Did those who discipled you talk much about keeping a clean conscience?
- How many ministry books emphasize the unbreakable link, as Paul did, between getting your conscience under the Lordship of Christ and achieving success in church ministry and missions?
- Did you know that a proper understanding of conscience is a key to church unity?

Today, we often *assume* a conscience, but do we really know what it is?

b. Misunderstandings about the conscience

Shoulder angel and demon

Follow your heart

Using it as an excuse to sin (my conscience has no problem with it, it must be right)

Using it as an excuse to be legalistic (my conscience won’t allow it, but it’s misinformed)

Using it to bind others (I just feel it’s wrong, and if it’s wrong for me it’s wrong for you)

Making truth subjective (your conscience, my conscience, doesn’t matter)

c. The ability to make wise decisions with a clear conscience

The point of this class.

So much behind conscience and so-called gray areas, etc but the focus here is more about you *acting* on it and *making wise decisions*. We want your conscience to be free in Christ. Clear. At peace.

3. Defining the Conscience

a. Key scriptures

30 times in Greek NT. No OT equivalent in Hebrew, but in OT English:

Afterward, David was conscience-stricken for having cut off a corner of his robe (1 Samuel 24:5 NIV)

my lord shall have no cause of grief or pangs of conscience for having shed blood without cause or for my lord working salvation himself. And when the Lord has dealt well with my lord, then remember your servant.” (1 Samuel 25:31)

Sometimes “heart” in the OT captures the same concept:

Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. (Psalm 51:10)

Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life. (Proverbs 4:23)

Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him (1 John 3:21-22)

Greek word *suneidesis*. “With knowing” NAS NT Greek Lexicon defines the Greek word *suneidesis* as, “the soul as distinguishing between what is morally good and bad, prompting to do the former and shun the latter, commending one, condemning the other”

18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. 19 For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. 20 For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. (Romans 1:18-20)

(concept, not word.) All humans know God intuitively, and this knowledge is connected to judgment:

Other scriptures:

And looking intently at the council, Paul said, “Brothers, I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day.” (Acts 23:1)

I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit (Romans 9:1)

Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. (Romans 13:5)

But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. (2 Corinthians 4:2)

holding faith and a good conscience. By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith (1 Timothy 1:19)

According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper . . . how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God. (Hebrews 9:9, 14)

The conscience can be blameless, clear, clean, pure, cleansed, perfected, purified, and washed; it can also be weak, wounded, defiled, emboldened to sin, evil, and seared.

b. Helpful quotes

John Flavel, Puritan – “God’s spy, man’s overseer.”

John MacArthur describes conscience as “a built-in warning system that signals us when something we have done is wrong. The conscience is to our souls what pain sensors are to our bodies: it inflicts distress, in the form of guilt, whenever we violate what our hearts tell us is right.”

“Conscience serves as a witness to what we already know” Joe Carter

“Conscience cannot make a wrong thing right, but it can make a right thing wrong.”
Dever

“The torture of a bad conscience is the hell of a living soul.” Calvin

“Happy is that man, that can be acquitted by himself in private, by others in public, and by God in both.” Joseph Hall

c. Definition

“The conscience is the moral faculty within human beings that assesses what is good and what is bad.” (De Young)

“The conscience is your consciousness of what you believe is right and wrong.”
(Naselli and Crowley)

Having a conscience is a mark of being human. The story of Pinnochio illustrates this well. Jiminy Cricket is assigned to Pinnochio as his conscience, as the puppet seeks to become a real boy. But as the story goes on, Pinnochio lies and his nose grows; but not only that, he begins to turn into a donkey, and his donkey-like features become more pronounced the more he ignores his conscience: donkey ears sprout from his head, a tail sprouts from his backside, the would-be boy is becoming an animal. The moral, for us, is clear: ignore your conscience, become a beast.

4. Describing the Conscience

a. The functions and purpose of the conscience

Bear witness/affirm

Judge/try to determine another's freedom

Lead you to accuse or defend yourself; submit to authorities

For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience, that we behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God, and supremely so toward you. (2 Corinthians 1:12)

Paul's conscience bore testimony *because* it was God-honoring, *not* because he felt good or just followed his heart/gut/instinct.

Paul appeals to his conscience's testimony more than a dozen times:

I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit (Romans 9:1)

I thank God whom I serve, as did my ancestors, with a clear conscience, as I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. (2 Timothy 1:3)

The conscience can be a defense attorney or a prosecuting attorney:

For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. 15 They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them 16 on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus. (Romans 2:14-16)

Sometimes it feels independent. Imagine a judge trying his own case; seems awkward, but we do that every day.

5 features (Ash)

1. It speaks independent of me
2. Looks forward and backwards
3. Others can appeal to it
4. God appeals to it
5. You don't need a Bible to hear its voice

The conscience can change. And it ought to change.

b. Types of conscience in scripture

i. Clean/clear conscience

Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honorably in all things. (Hebrews 13:18)

So I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man. (Acts 24:16)

The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith (1 Timothy 1:5)

They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience (1 Timothy 3:9)

having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame (1 Peter 3:16)

It starts with salvation. To from sin. Turn to Christ.

ii. Evil conscience

let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. (Hebrews 10:22)

Unconverted, ignoring conviction.

iii. Defiled conscience

To the pure, all things are pure, but to the defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure; but both their minds and their consciences are defiled. (Titus 1:15)

Calling good evil and evil good. (Society – advocating for the unborn is seen as evil; waiting before marriage brings *shame* to young people; flaunting sexually deviant behavior is seen as *good, liberating, loving, tolerant*; preaching against sin is seen as *hateful, wicked, bigoted, intolerant*)

iv. Seared conscience

through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared (1 Timothy 4:2)

Cannot feel anymore. Fingertips. “Spiritual frostbite” (The bad/dangerous stuff doesn’t feel bad or dangerous anymore.) You grow calloused.

v. Weak conscience

However, not all possess this knowledge. But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. (1 Corinthians 8:7)

Accuses us of things that are not in and of themselves wrong.

1 Corinthians 8 and 10 (food offered to idols)

According to Paul, we put up a stumblingblock when we encourage others, by our freedom, to do something against their conscience.

Macarthur on weak/seared distinction:

“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.”

5. Interacting with Your Conscience

Your conscience is a gift. Guilt can be a good thing. Second thoughts, hesitation; as well as peace and a clear conscience.

Your conscience changes, and should, but it can change for the worse. 3 ways it changes:

1. Hardened through sin
2. Influenced by culture or tradition
3. Conform more to God's word

a. Responding properly to your conscience in union with the Spirit of God

The Spirit convicts. The Spirit is divine. The conscience appropriates the work of the Spirit in our lives and bears witness to that work.

When convicted, repent. When given truth, obey. Do not sin against conscience.

b. Abusing or neglecting your conscience

Reasons we reject it (Ash)

1. Rejected disciple early on (think Proverbs)
2. Influence of ungodly culture
3. Fear of consequences
4. Love of money
5. Gradual hardening

When your conscience condemns you . . .

People try to soothe, ignore, or numb it; but it's a gift!

God offers clean conscience to the lost through salvation!

For the believer, the conscience becomes alive - charged - when we are saved through the Spirit. We discover sins. Our tastes change. We have new doubts, new guilts. The law is written on our hearts.

“Only the cross can fill that widening gap between your consciousness of what you ought to be and your actual obedience.”

c. Training and maturing your conscience

Your conscience can *wrongly* condemn you. It is a measurement tool that must be calibrated.

We must be prepared to give up much for the sake of conscience. Are you prepared to lose your job, your standing, your credibility? Suffer for righteousness' sake? Stand up for truth? Are you able to say “here I stand?”

But, imagine going to jail because of a misinformed conscience. The check engine light can be very helpful, but not when it's malfunctioning!

Don't sin against your conscience, but make sure it's reliable!

But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin. (Romans 14:23)

It is wrong to violate your conscience *when it is held captive by the word of God.*

When God tells you to change your conscience, change!

9 The next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. 10 And he became hungry and wanted something to eat, but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance 11 and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. 12 In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. 13 And there came a voice to him: "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." 14 But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean." 15 And the voice came to him again a second time, "What God has made clean, do not call common." 16 This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven. (Acts 10:9-10)

How to train it: grow in biblical wisdom. Doctrine, sharpen, counsel, prayer. Obey the truth you hear. MacArthur: the conscience is more like a skylight than a lightbulb - it's not producing its own light, but letting the light in.

Also, in matters that are not directly addressed by the Bible, we have an obligation to make *informed* decisions. While we may have freedom in how we apply these areas to ourselves, because sometimes the topics get charged among the brethren - types of schooling, political views, medical decisions, entertainment choices - then it is necessary to do diligent research. Time fails to dive into all that entails but I would remind you of things you may have learned in high school when doing a persuasive essay wherein you had to *reach a conclusion through using evidence properly* - consult multiple sources, consult trustworthy sources, corroborate, apply wisdom, and be sure your conclusion stems from your premise.

For example, you may feel a certain type of birth control is permissive, until you do the research and find out it actually induces abortion.

You may think a certain movie is appropriate, until you look up a review and find how blasphemous or sexually inappropriate it is.

On the other hand, you may refrain from certain holiday traditions like Christmas because a source *outside the Bible* told you those traditions were pagan, until better research shows that those traditions may actually be *Christian* in origin, so you adapt your conscience on the issue.

d. Dealing with different consciences

One person says that she had two college roommates in a previous generation (before all this technology) - one's conscience allowed her to play with playing cards but not dominoes while the other's conscience allowed her to play with dominoes but not playing cards. Needless to say it was a dull year in the dorm.

Romans 14/15 - meats, drink, holidays. "Strong" "weak."

"Strong implies better." Why wouldn't the weak want to be made strong? Their weakness comes from being theologically uninformed. (2 Tim 3:16 - all scripture)

We must calibrate the scales - accuracy matters. To do so you need a standard. For the conscience, the standard is the Word of God.

Theological triage. (1 Cor 15 "first importance"; "strain out gnat to swallow a camel"; "weightier matters of the law"; "elementary principles")

Disclaimer: not everything is a Romans 14 issue.

But the principle is there - bear with one another, love one another. Do not pass judgment.

Paul doesn't tell the weak to get their act together. The strong, on the other hand, must bear with them.

Do not flaunt freedom.

Do not bind the conscience. Only God is the Lord of conscience.

Love. Love. Love.

If they ignore their conscience, they will sin. That's why you instruct. Instead of, "Just have a beer." Instruct. Do not force someone to do something until they can be fully persuaded in their own mind.

No one's conscience is perfectly aligned with God's will. (Fair trade coffee? Alcohol? Halloween? How you vote? Eschatology?) There's always someone to the right of you/left of you; it's a spectrum.

25 Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience. 26 For "the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof." 27 If one of the unbelievers invites you to dinner and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience. 28 But if someone says to you, "This has been offered in sacrifice," then do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience— 29 I do not mean your conscience, but his. For why should my liberty be determined by someone else's conscience? (1 Corinthians 10:25-29)

Unity and love must be *first*. Sharpening one another can only happen in this context.

No binding:

Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, 2 through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, 3 who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. 4 For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, 5 for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer. (1 Timothy 4:1-4)

12 principles for dealing with different consciences in the church (from Naselli/Crowley) *note: these cannot all apply to matters of clear biblical truth/error but to "disputable matters"

1. Welcome those who disagree with you (Rom. 14:1-2).
2. Those who have freedom of conscience must not look down on those who don't (Rom. 14:3-4).
3. Those whose conscience restricts them must not be judgmental toward those who have freedom (Rom. 14:3-4).
4. Each believer must be fully convinced of their position in their own conscience (Rom. 14:5).
5. Assume that others are partaking or refraining for the glory of God (Rom. 14:6-9).
6. Do not judge each other in these matters because we will all someday stand before the judgment seat of God (Rom. 14:10-12).
7. Your freedom to eat meat is correct, but don't let your freedom destroy the faith of a weak brother or sister (Rom. 14:13-15).
8. Disagreements about eating and drinking are not important in the kingdom of God; building each other up in righteousness, peace, and joy is the important thing (Rom. 14:16-21).
9. If you have freedom, don't flaunt it; if you are strict, don't expect others to be strict like you (Rom. 14:22a).
10. A person who lives according to their conscience is blessed (Rom. 14:22b-23).

11. We must follow the example of Christ, who put others first (Rom. 15:1-6).
12. We bring glory to God when we welcome one another as Christ has welcomed us (Rom. 15:7).

e. Making wise decisions with a clear conscience

The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. (Romans 14:22)

Happy!

Our conscience helps us face the accusations of the devil, our enemies, and other slanderers.

We tend to be either too hard or too easy on ourselves. The goal is liberty in Christ!

Questions to ask:

Can this decision be biblically justified? (my story)

How can this decision affect those with a weaker conscience?

Sometimes when we are making personal decisions, more than one choice is acceptable to the Lord. Now what?

A good father raises his kids with true principles but does not make every choice for them. His principles protect them, guide them, give them ability to weigh decisions carefully, and teach them how to interact with the decisions they make.

Perhaps a well-trained, biblically-informed conscience is designed for us to interact well with the decisions we make, rather than agonize over making those decisions!

Our decisions may not impact the world like Martin Luther's - we might be dealing with jobs, choices of schools, medical decisions, joining a church, what we eat, drink, or watch, relationships, politics or doctrine - these might rock our world but not *the* world, but big or small, we should be able to say with Luther, that our conscience is captive to the word of God.

At the end of the day, as we determine to make wise decisions for God's glory, let us consider our conscience. Let us not ignore its warning lights. Let us learn to live with those who differ. Let us train it that it may be more aligned with God's word. Let us walk in the freedom that Christ purchased for us, so we can say of ourselves,

“Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves”

Bibliography

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